

*Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except  
a corn of wheat fall into the ground  
and die, it abideth alone: but if it  
die, it bringeth forth much fruit.*

John 12:24

Dostoevsky's last final three novels - *Demons* (1875), *The Adolescent* (1877) and *Brothers Karamazov* (1879) are very different both in terms of their form and in their content matter. However, in all these three novels one can identify a common effect in the construction of the central character that I will try to outline in this essay. This feature manifests itself at various levels of the text, as part of a wider narrative of postponement, but can be most fruitfully analyzed in the construction of the hero: Stavrogin, Alyosha and Arkady Dolgoruky within different contexts but with the same effects, are explicitly or implicitly declared at the beginning of the novel to be the focal point of their respective accounts. This setup is in many ways contradicted by further development in the story: instead of a hero possessing a clearly defined position, interior unity, and control of events in the story, Dostoevsky presents us with characters, nominally heroes - the narrators employ precisely this romantic label - but in a strong way emasculated and incoherent. This effacement of the main heroes is far from being of secondary importance in the narrative economy since it affects the novels in their entirety.

In *Demons* Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin emerges for the reader as the central character since all the other characters appear to be his satellites: his mother, Varvara Petrovna trembles before him, Kirillov, Shatov<sup>1</sup>, Lebjadkin, and Petr Verkhovenskij describe Stavrogin as their 'light', their 'sun' and their 'Ivan-Tsarevich.' He is the figure who has an 'irresistible influence'<sup>2</sup> upon Varvara Petrovna, before whom Mar'ja Timofeevna asks to kneel down and worship, and to whom Piotr Verkhovensky confesses that he feels like a 'worm'<sup>3</sup> in comparison. Also at the level of the plot Stavrogin appears to be the ultimate originator of the events and the novel ends with his death.

That said, one could readily find that Stavrogin's character or his position as the hero in *Demons* is rather problematic. He makes his first appearance in the novel very late, first in the novel's past and then, after four years of novelistic time, in the novel's present, in a context that, instead of clarifying anything about the character as expected, creates more confusion. Stavrogin appears in the novel with huge gaps: out of a total of twenty three chapters in the novel Stavrogin appears in less than ten and in some of these he is only mentioned by other character.<sup>4</sup> In pure numerical terms Stavrogin's name is mentioned 291 times compared to even Kirillov's – 248 and, Shatov's significantly more – 434 times. At the level of the plot the hero's effacement is performed in the sinuous path that the story takes to introduce Stavrogin. The first name mentioned in *Demons*, Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, appears here allegedly only because of 'want of skill' rather than because of his importance to the story. The second character to be introduced is Varvara Petrovna in her double role as Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky's friend and benefactress. Only after the relationship between Varvara Petrovna and

---

1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Everyman's Library (182), 2000, see Part Two Chapter Night, III – VII in which Stavrogin meets consequently Kirillov and Shatov

2 Ibid., p. 183

3 Ibid., p. 419

4 In part one Stavrogin does not appear in the 'Introduction', appears in "Prince Harry" and is only referred to in "Someone Else's Sins", Shatov mentions him in 'The Lame Girl' and he appears in the present in the last chapter of part one 'The wise Serpent'; in Part Two Stavrogin is missing completely from four chapters – four, five, nine and ten, and is mentioned briefly at the end of chapter six. In Part, three he is present only in chapter three and eight out of eight chapters.

Stepan Trofimovich is established as Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin introduced as Varvara Petrovna's son and Stepan Trofimovich's student.

No sooner is the hero introduced than his *effacement* begins with his exterior presentation. On the one hand, Stavrogin's physical appearance is already alienating: in the narrator's words: 'I was also struck by his face: his hair was somehow too black, his light eyes were somehow too calm and clear, his complexion was somehow too delicate and white, his color somehow too bright and clean, his teeth like pearls, his lips like coral – the very image of beauty, it would seem, and at the same time repulsive, as it were'.<sup>5</sup> In this description, Stavrogin resembles a mask, an automaton with inhuman features menacing with unforeseeable actions. Furthermore the reader's access to Stavrogin is heavily frustrated by the fact that the story never offers any access to the character's interior world; on the contrary, the narrator repeatedly stresses his 'inability' to penetrate the surface of Stavrogin's character as in the scene where the narrator observes Stavrogin's reaction after Shatov slapped him:

He said nothing, looked at Shatov, and turned pale as a shirt. But strangely, his eyes seemed to be dying out. Ten seconds later his look was cold and – I'm convinced I'm not lying – calm. Only he was very pale. Of course, I do not know what was inside the man, I only saw the outside.<sup>6</sup>

The reader's hope for gaining access to Stavrogin could be raised by a chapter that was originally cut by the Russian censorship as too violent. In *At Tikhon*, included nowadays as an Appendix to the book, Stavrogin visits a monk in a local monastery for what appears, at first sight, a first person 'confession' narrative that promises direct access to Stavrogin's inner life through a key biographical episode that would 'explain' him. However, at a closer look, the narrative employs a number of techniques that question the authenticity of the confession. Right at the beginning of the chapter a note from the narrator casts a doubt over the origin of the document:

I introduce this document into my chronicle verbatim. [...] I have allowed

---

5 Ibid., p. 43

6 Ibid., p. 205

myself only to correct the spelling errors, rather numerous, which even surprised me somewhat, since the author was after all an educated man, and even a well-read one.[...] In any case, it is apparent that the author is above all not a writer.<sup>7</sup>

These remarks that in another context might be read as a signs of authenticity only raise the reader's suspicion, since on the one hand the document is not 'verbatim' because rather numerous spelling errors are corrected, and on the other hand, the narrator's surprise about the spelling mistakes looks justified as Stavrogin is set up as an educated man. Another textual strategy that sabotages the reader's access to Stavrogin's 'soul' consists the way obstacles, markers of distancing, are interposed between the reader and the 'confession'. The reader experiences Stavrogin's confession through the eyes narrator's eyes observing the silent monk reading a printed copy of the document which 'will equally appear in the translation abroad'.<sup>8</sup> What is supposedly a heart-felt confession ends up being almost an official document, a publication, that the reader can only experience mediated several times. The confession is further undermined by its exaggerated tone. The document itself hyperbolizes one of Stavrogin's crimes as this is retold in feverish detail, insisting over the exact hour of every move or the tedious observation of a red spider by the window. The whole visit to Tikhon is full of tensions as a result of which the dialog is utterly dysfunctional. Stavrogin is always on the verge of leaving and everything ends on an over the top note: 'Stavrogin even trembled with wrath and almost fear. "Cursed psychologist!" he broke off suddenly in a rage and, without looking back, left the cell.'<sup>9</sup> What is supposed to be an act of total sincerity and self-denunciation becomes a mediated and melodramatic confession which further subverts the reader's access to the character.

The role that Stavrogin plays in *Demons* is best represented, and further undermined, in one of the central scenes in *Demons*, when he returns home after a four-year trip abroad.<sup>10</sup> At the moment of

---

7 Ibid., p. 690-691

8 Ibid., p. 705

9 Ibid., p.714

10 Ibid., see Part one, Chapter 5, *The wise serpent*

his arrival Stavrogin is announced in the drawing room that hosts almost all of the novel's main characters including Varvara Petrovna, Shatov, Marya Timofeevna, Lizaveta Nikolaevna, Stephan Verkhovensky. Everybody is 'astounded' by the news yet, in the complete silence that ensues someone else enters the room - 'suddenly into the drawing room flew – not Nikolai Vsevolodovich at all, but a young man totally unknown to anyone.'<sup>11</sup> - Piotr Verkhovensky. The tension that suffuses the scene after the announcement generates in the reader the expectations of a dramatic climax which are deferred by Piotr's entrance. Nobody realizes, when Stavrogin finally enters the room, thus the relief of the dramatic tension is further postponed. Even when everybody's attention focuses on him, Stavrogin's actions are puzzling rather than clarifying: He enters unseen (p. 181), does not answer any questions and accompanies Marya Timofeevna out of the room. After his departure Piotr assumes the role of answering the questions that everybody directed at Stavrogin. When Nikolai finally returns to the room astonishes everybody with his avoidance and passivity: even after Shatov slaps him Nikolai Vsevolodovich stops short of reacting to the violent gesture.

This scene exposes in fact no less than three strategies of 'effacement'. First, the hero avoids any direct confrontation – the passivity displayed in response to Shatov's physical violence is mirrored by the reaction to the direct and violent question that Varvara Petrovna asks him. Instead of answering, Stavrogin 'without a word of reply, quietly went up to his mother, took her hand, brought it reverently to his lips, and kisses it.'<sup>12</sup> Stavrogin passivity is obvious in many points of the novel most notably in the way he does not prevent his Maria Timofeevna's and Shatov's deaths in two separate events, in spite of the fact that he both had knowledge of their planing, power to stop them and declared several times that he does not want them to happen. Stavrogin's position as the decisive character in the novel is, thus, undermined as various characters in the story have more influence on the course of the events. Secondly, the way in which Piotr effectively replaces Stavrogin as the source of answers questions

---

11 Ibid., p. 179

12 Ibid., p. 183

straightforwardly the hero's centrality in the events. Indeed, Stavrogin does not seem to make any strong decision throughout the story – instead, the other characters enact what they declare to be his ideas. This 'replacement' is further mirrored at the level of the plot by the way in which the hero does not fulfill the novel's dramatic rhythm. As a stark example of Stavrogin's non-centrality his love-story and suicide do not constitute the novel's climatic episode. In the case of his suicide, Stavrogin death looks more like an accidental result of his actions rather than his strong decision. In fact he might be characterized by his own words from the letter: 'I am capable now as ever before of wishing to do a good deed, and I take pleasure in that; along with it, I wish for evil and also feel pleasure. But both, the one and the other, as always, are too shallow, and are never very much.'<sup>13</sup> In this respect Stavrogin's death is as the narrator suggest of the beginning about the book – a very strange event, 'hitherto not remarkable for anything' since his energy as a main hero is dissipated towards other character such as the killing of Shatov looks more like the culminating point of the story.

*Demons* thus presents us with a story where the alleged hero is marginal to the dramatic development and to the plot, whose 'inner life' remains inaccessible to the reader and who is characterized above all by his insistent passivity. All he seems to contribute to the evolution of the story is that he serves as a reference point that other characters, who obstinately maintain that he is 'central' to their lives, use to form their own ideas and position but since the reader has no access to his inner life, Stavrogin is effectively created by the others and thus, in a way absolutely absent.

We find a similar dynamic of “effacement” when we turn to Dostoevsky's final novel, *Brothers Karamazov*. The announced hero, Alyosha Karamazov undergoes in the development of the story various strategies of effacement of which the most important render him insignificant for the plot

The first lines of the novel already expose a technique, pervasive throughout the novel, which undermines the role of the declared hero:

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 675

Starting out on the biography of my hero, Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov, I find myself in some perplexity. Namely, that while I do call Alexei Fyodorovich my hero, still, I myself know that he is by no means a great man.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that Alyosha is 'by no means a great man' appears to contradict his quality of being a hero and, indeed, one can find even at the level of the plot evidence for the fact that Alyosha is not the determining factor for the events in the story. The events are largely driven by Dmitry's need for money, whereas Alyosha's character is introduced late and is literally pushed around by other characters. His father tells him to leave the monastery after the meeting there, Katerina Ivanovna calls on him to talk about Dmitry, later Dmitry sends him to Katerina Ivanovna, Alyosha goes to the Kholkhlov's, meets Ivan, runs to Grushenka and back to the monastery, to mention only very few instances. In fact, Alyosha tends to play the role of messenger running back and forth between various parties involved, reporting to the next person what he learned in the previous meeting or transmitting messages around. Thus, the purported hero of the *Brothers Karamazov's* often appears as a little more than a structural device that allows the narrator to connect distinct scenes in which other characters express at length their ideologies.

Indeed Alyosha's main function is to listen to other characters while they develop complex arguments. Throughout the story Alyosha is the confidant of his brothers: he listens patiently to their words but he does not formulate an appropriate answer. The discussion between him and Ivan, where Ivan develops his argument against God is a good example of this especially since Alyosha is directly interested in the topic: all Alyosha does while Ivan builds complex arguments is to interrupt him with remarks that do not engage with the content of what is being said and which are ignored by Ivan: "You have a strange look as you speak," Alyosha observed anxiously' while Ivan continues his speech 'as if he were not listening to his brother'.<sup>15</sup> In comparison with his brothers, Alyosha exhibits relatively poor

<sup>14</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2002, p. 3

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238



language patterns being mainly monosyllabic in his contributions to the dialog or asking clarification questions which allow his dialog partners to further develop their ideas.

Not only does Alyosha not seem to have an intellectual position that would rival his interlocutors' but even when he does formulate ideas, these seem to be directly borrowed from Zosima. Their close connection is clearly exposed by the fact that the narrator gives the reader access to the story about Zosima's life<sup>16</sup> through Alyosha's perspective: 'Here I must note that this last talk of the elder with those who visited him on the last day of his life has been partly preserved in writing. Alexey Fyodorovich Karamazov wrote it down from memory some time after the elder's death'.<sup>17</sup> Their connection has an even deeper effect since Zosima's ideas appear to be simply assumed by Alyosha: for example, when he answers Ivan, Alyosha refers always to Zosima: 'The elder Zosima has spoken of that more than once [...] He also says [...]'<sup>18</sup> Furthermore in one of the few times when Alyosha does seem to speak at length and express a definite position, in the last chapter of the book at Ilyushechka's funeral, Zosima's ideas are recognizable even under the sentimentalist distortion that contaminates Alyosha's speech. The assumed position is thus undercut by the melodramatic mode which Alyosha uses to express his ideas: 'Gentlemen, we shall be parting soon. [...] And so we shall part, gentlemen [...] we will never forget. My little doves – let me call you that – little doves, because you are very much like those pretty gray blue birds, now, at this moment, as I look at your kind, dear faces – my dear children, perhaps you will not understand what I am going to say to you, because I often speak very incomprehensibly, [...]'<sup>19</sup> Like in the case of Stavrogin's confession, the display of exaggerated emotions has an alienating effect for the reader.

The narrative performs the undermining of the declared hero also by integrating him into a network of phenomena of doubling and mirroring. Alyosha counterbalances Ivan's atheistic convictions

---

16 Ibid., Book six: *The Russian Monk*

17 Ibid., p. 286

18 Ibid., p. 237

19 Ibid., p. 774

and Dmitry's sensual life. Moreover, it can be said that the three brothers are part of a “trinity” representing a fragmented whole. In this set-up, Ivan represents the mind because his strong intellectual endowment – he 'began very early, almost in infancy, to show some sort of unusual and brilliant aptitude for learning,'<sup>20</sup> while Dmitry represents the sensuality as he takes most after his father since he is 'frivolous, wild, passionate, impatient'.<sup>21</sup> The narrator insists on the passionate and instinctual part of Dmitry's who is given to debauchery to the extent that even his body expresses it:

He was muscular and one could tell that he possessed considerable physical strength; nonetheless something sickly, as it were, showed in this face. His face was lean, his cheeks hollow, their color tinged with a sort of unhealthy sallowness.<sup>22</sup>

In the above mentioned 'trinity' Alyosha represents the soul as he is 'an early lover of mankind'<sup>23</sup> and his physical description similarly reflects this quality: ‘Alyosha was [...] well-built, red-cheeked, nineteen-year-old youth, clear-eyed and bursting with health.’<sup>24</sup> Thus, the role of a hero appears to be fulfilled better by the three brothers together than by any separate one. Alyosha character, who lacks both Ivan's sharp mind and Dmitry's sensuality, appears in this perspective to be an incomplete hero. Adding to this lack the fact that Alyosha's character is subject to an intense internal struggle, all that is left is an emasculated figure incapable of effectively influencing the events in the story.

Even though the reader has some access to Alyosha's inner life, the way appears to be an incomplete hero, with limited intellectual capacities reflected in his poor verbal abilities, used mainly as a structural device to connect other elements in the narrative seems to be consistent with the “effacement” that Stavrogin suffered in *Demons*. However, a completely new narrative strategy appears to be articulated in *The Adolescent*.

---

20 Ibid., p. 15

21 Ibid., p. 12

22 Ibid., p. 67

23 Ibid., p. 18

24 Ibid., p. 25

The biographer-like character that *Demons* and *Brothers Karamazov* employ to tell the story conveys Alyosha's character very differently than Stavrogin's but both heroes are severely corroded by the narrative which breaks their interior unity and disperses their functions towards other characters. *The Adolescent* employs a completely different narrative technique since the story is told in the first person. In *Demons* and *Brothers Karamazov* the narrator who is a marginal observer enters events only occasionally, thus most of the two stories are effectively rendered in third person. In *The Adolescent* there is no such interposed consciousness such that the narrator coincides with the main character. Therefore, at least in theory, the readers have complete access to the 'I'-hero of the story since all events are narrated through his eyes. If in the other two novels one of the features was that the hero is introduced late or appeared rarely here it could not be the case. In fact, all the readers actually have access to is the hero's consciousness – effacing the hero seems impossible. However, even in *The Adolescent* the narrative positively undermines the narrator/hero.

One way the narrator/hero's position in *The Adolescent* is undermined lies in his own insistence that the main character of his story is someone else, namely his biological father, Andrei Petrovich Versilov:

It's curious that this man, who impressed me so much ever since my childhood, who had such a capital influence on my entire cast of mind and has maybe even infected my whole future with himself for a long time to come – this man even now remains in a great many ways a complete riddle to me. [...] My whole notebook will be filled with this man as it is.<sup>25</sup>

Two problems are raised here. On the one hand, if the reader takes Versilov as the main character as recommended by the narrator, the reader is (as in Stavrogin's case) totally cut off from his inner life. In this case the narrator is quite right when he complains that it is impossible to learn anything definite about the man and he remains a 'riddle also for the reader. On the other hand, the narrator/hero subverts

---

25 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Adolescent*, Everyman's Library (270), 2003, p. 6

explicitly his own status by trying to abjure the role of hero.

As a part of the process of effacing the hero, in *The Adolescent* we can find yet another variation of a narrative trope that we also find in the other two novels: the narrator undercuts the story itself by setting it up as useless, aimless and accidental:

Unable to restrain myself, I have sat down to record this history of my first steps on life's career, though I could have done as well without it. One thing I know for certain: never again will I sit down to write my autobiography, even if I live to be a hundred. You have to be all too basely in love with yourself to write about yourself without shame.[...] I am not a literary man, do not want to be a literary man, and would consider it base and indecent to drag the insides of my soul and a beautiful description of my feelings to their literary marketplace. I anticipate with vexation, however, that it seems impossible to do entirely without the description of feelings and without reflections (maybe even banal ones): so corrupting is the effect of literary occupation on a man, even if it is undertaken only for oneself.<sup>26</sup>

This time, the first-person narrator trivializes first the undertaking of writing a story – 'I could have done as well without it' and then the literary effort that covers rather than reveals what he wants to convey. Both his concerns are contradicted implicitly on the spot since he actually continues writing. This authorial indecision lingers in the rest of the story as the narrator complains constantly about the difficulties of expressing himself since 'it seems that no European language is so difficult to write in as Russian'.<sup>27</sup>

Even if, in *The Adolescent* the readers have access to the events only from the hero's perspective, it is remarkable how, at the level of the plot Arkady is moved around by the events and other characters much in the same way that Alyosha is moved in *Brothers Karamazov*. Although he holds, for much of the book, control of the 'document' that serves as the novel's key plot device, Arkady's perpetual indecision regarding what to do with this document turns him into the object moved between the interested parties. He always has to run to meet someone and, following most of the

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 5

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 6

meetings, he makes the 'irrevocable' decision to do the right thing about the document only to prove time and time again that he is not able to fulfill his decision: every time Arkady decides to destroy or give the document back to the rightful owner his in-built passivity stops him without fail. In comparison to the way in which Stavrogin's and Alyosha's passiveness is created, Arkady's passivity can be considered another level of the strategy of effacing the hero which is achieved in spite of the direct access to the hero's inner life.

The trajectory of 'the document', a confidential letter that threatens to unsettle the social order by damaging Katerina Akhmakova's status, is another blow dealt to Arkady Dolgoruky as a "hero". Arkady is in fact robbed of his letter fact that explicitly and completely emasculates him – if while having possession of the document Arkady keeps the illusion that he can influence the events, after its loss the character itself acknowledges his impotence. In this respect Arkady reminds one of Stavrogin and Alyosha who are both unable to influence the events in the story even if everyone appears to place their hopes onto them. Like in the case of Stavrogin, the hero is not able to have the final word in the conflict since their personal story runs parallel to the main events – structurally any development in the plot originates always from other points than the narrator/hero.

Although in *The Adolescent* the coincidence of the narrator with the hero produces to a certain degree a more stable character, his passivity and the marginal role he plays in the development of the plot, as well as the displacement of the focus onto the 'riddle' of Versilov, all resonate with the "effaced" heroes of *Brothers Karamazov* and *Demons* who are constructed and therefore undermined by different means, albeit largely with the same effects. However the features of the heroes as described above actually turns them into structural devices that need to be further analyzed.

In *Demons* Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin is brought into the foreground by his relationships. Stavrogin might not be in control of the story *per se*, but all the other characters assert decidedly his former and current influence upon them. In a scene at his place, Shatov gives a long

monologue in which he acknowledges Stavrogin's influence and quotes and enforces ideas that Stavrogin allegedly passed onto him two years earlier, in a form that Stavrogin feebly and incompletely denies now. Shatov shouts at Stavrogin 'as for your thoughts and even your very words, I haven't changed anything, not a word.'<sup>28</sup> as though perfect quotations would add to the authenticity of the position. Moreover, it appears that Kirillov is overwhelmed now by an opposite idea to Shatov's, an idea springing from the same source: 'In America I was lying for three months on straw beside a hapless creature, and I learned from him that at the very time when you were sowing the seed of God and the Fatherland in my heart, at that very time, perhaps during those very days, you were infecting the heart of that helpless creature, that maniac Kirillov, with poison ...'.<sup>29</sup> Another important character, Piotr Verkhovensky, who looks down on all other characters in *Demons* praises Stavrogin as 'a leader' and a sun' while Piotr himself is his 'worm'.<sup>30</sup> Stavrogin's indirect power is located not in the way he controls the other characters but in the way the other characters, defining themselves relative to him, act as a result of his mere and passive presence. Everybody sees something different in Stavrogin but they define themselves always in comparison to him, and this is exactly what holds the story together. Stavrogin is not only passive i.e. not reacting but he is *actively passive*, meaning that his insistent passivity provides the invisible glue that creates the context for all other characters to act and for all the developing events. It is as if Stavrogin *active absence* creates the whirlpool of which the rest of the characters are the matter.

If Stavrogin acts like a glue for *Demons* all the more could the same thing be said about Alyosha in *Brothers Karamazov*. The way Alyosha is moved by the events in the story actually connects them. Alyosha's key importance comes from his quality as the messenger who connects both characters and their different ideologies and, at the level of the plot, supports the switch of focus

---

28 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Everyman's Library (182), 2000, p. 251 D

29 Ibid., p. 248

30 Ibid., p. 419

between the scene.<sup>31</sup> Alyosha bridges the huge 'ideological' gaps between Dmitry and his father, between Ivan and Zosima: 'everyone loved this young man wherever he appeared' and Alyosha, in his turn, 'did love people; he lived his life , it seemed, with complete faith in people [...]'<sup>32</sup> Alyosha's mere presence allows for the juxtaposition of opposing points of view and hence puts in doubt any individual position. Thus, Alyosha's poor verbal ability is instrumental in the way the narrative structurally creates the space for all 'ideologies' to come into full-fledged dialog in the reader's perspective and, in this perspective the less Alyosha says the more he, as a structural device, brings together yet, at the same time keeps separate various 'ideologies'.

The 'effacement' that Arkady Dolgoruky undergoes has a similar effect as in Alyosha's case and at the same time, is enhanced by the first-person narrative. Just like Alyosha, Arkady loves everybody, meets characters that hate each other and explicitly attempts and, at least implicitly, succeeds in bringing them together, as happens in the case of Andrei Petrovich Versilov and Katerina Nikolaevna Akhmakova. Arkady's perpetual hesitation allows him to interact with everyone and connect the events and the characters of the story.

In Dostoevsky's final three novels the "hero" does not serve as the central motor for their respective plots nor does it represent the key characterological interest (either because the hero's psychology is inaccessible or blatantly uninteresting) but rather as a structural device created by various strategies of "effacement", as triggers which produce major changes in the development of the plot which is perpetually deferred and violently displaced. This structural particularity of the 'hero' is part of a larger narrative of postponement that affects the whole world of the novel by dislocating the

---

31 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2002, '[...] he has a compelling directness, which comes from humility. He is often called an angel, and within the intrigues of the novel he has the function of an *angelos*, a messenger, in the most literal sense. He carries messages, letters, requests from one character to another. He is not much of a speaker, but he is a hearer of words, and he is almost the only one who can *hear*. That is his great gift: the word can come to life in him.', *Introduction*, p. xviii

32 *Ibid.*, p. 19 BK

dramatic energies. This phenomenon could be related to and explained as a symptom of Dostoevsky's concrete historical background in which one can identify similar processes of displacement and postponing. A closer look at the period of tsar Alexander II (1855 – 1881), a period coinciding with Dostoevsky's mature years<sup>33</sup> and approximately twenty years before the publication of the three novels offers support for such a thesis.

The period was dominated by two contradictory political trends which were continuously alternating. Reform and reaction appeared to compete during Alexander II's reign on all levels of society, from the political to the social, the economical to the juridical. Initially, Alexander's coming to power was associated with a political thaw: after the very repressive reign of Nicholas I, Alexander II initiated a series of important reforms. The boldest and the most far-reaching reforms that the new tsar put forth was the Emancipation of the serfs.<sup>34</sup> In legal terms the Emancipation was a step curtailing the arbitrary power of the landlords over the peasant. Along with the Emancipation another reform with huge impact took place in education. The University became more accessible to a wider number of students across social strata.<sup>35</sup> The universities opened towards lower classes so 'children of priests, doctors and medical functionaries, marginal landowners and lower bureaucrats' used the facile exemption from fees to enroll.<sup>36</sup> Similar reforms were prepared in the juridical and political system. At this time, i.e. in 1861, the reforms, especially the Emancipation, were expected by everybody on the entire political spectrum to revolutionize Russian society from the base up.

These reforms were seen as solutions for the many social and political problems in Russia but they did not bring the expected result. The case of Universities is emblematic of what happened in the

---

33 Dostoevsky was born on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1821 and died on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1881 while Alexander II was born on April 17, 1818 and assassinated on March 13, 1881

34 *The Emancipation of the Serfs in Retrospect*, On February 19, 1861, only six years after coming to power the tsar gave 'personal freedom to 23 million serfs, or 34.4 percent of the population of Russia, promoting them to the status as 'free rural inhabitants', p. 280,

35 Richard Pipes, *Russia under the old regime*, Penguin Books, 1995, After the death of Nicholas I, access to institutions of higher learning was eased: from around 3000 student under Nicholas I the student population grew up to 25000 students in 1893, p. 263

36 David Saunders, *Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform 1880-1881*, Longman, London and New York, 1992, p. 251



case of other reforms: what seemed a thaw after Nicholas I was restricted and changed to the extent that the reform was perceived as partial and thus frustrating. The admission fees, the student meetings and student-run libraries with access to western materials were alternatively prohibited and allowed several times during the period.<sup>37</sup> Universities provided a major source of access ideas coming from Europe that affected Russian society deeply by questioning political, social, and especially religious traditions.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the Emancipation generally precipitated discontent. On the one side, the landowners were upset because they were losing workers, some of their land and the compensation they were supposed to receive for their land was insufficient. On the other side, 'because their relations with the landlords were to remain unaltered for at least two years, they (the peasants) believed that the government had cheated them.'<sup>39</sup> The fact that the peasant would receive only half of the land he was cultivating and that he actually had to pay for it anyway generated as much discontent in the leftist circles as the loss of power and wealth generated in the conservative side.

For about twenty years before the publication of *Brothers Karamazov* (1879) Russian society vacillated violently between reform and conservation of the status quo: every reform was expected to be the final answer to the problems Russia was facing but each of them proved unsatisfying and deferred everybody's hopes to the future. The situation generated dissatisfaction across the political spectrum since the initial reforms were amended to the point of uselessness, and the anticipated final remedy was perpetually postponed. At the same time the reforms generated large social unrest since their initial effects deeply destabilized Russian society. The reform – reaction fluctuation allowed and

---

37 Ibid., In 1861 'The new minister, Admiral Putiatin, [...] abolished the remission of fees, prohibiting student meetings, taking over student loan banks and closing student-run libraries alienated not only the students but also their professors.' in 1863 the rules were relaxed again only so that in 1866 they would be reinstated. , p. 253

38 Michael Karpovich, *Church and State in Russian History*, in *Russian Review*, Vol. 3, Nr. 2, After Peter's the Great reforms which were designed to reduce the influence of the church in the Russian state, the Church underwent a period of complete decline. In Dostoevsky's time especially, 'the rapid westernization of the upper groups of society and the corresponding secularization of Russian culture led to the loss by the Church of its former exclusive influence in the intellectual life of the country' to such an extent that soon 'an indifferent, if not hostile, attitude to religion became a common phenomenon among the educated class., p. 16

39 David Saunders, *Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform 1880-1881*, ed. Longman, p. 239

encouraged social interaction for people across the social strata, generating an unprecedented social mobility.

Nobody would deny that Dostoevsky's novels reflect his historical time: the characters are former serfs or former owners of serfs, liberal students, impoverished aristocracy and aspirant bourgeoisie. Similarly, the novels' themes correspond to the social, religious and economical issues that dominated Russia at the time. A cursory look at the three novels is enough to find plenty of examples. For example *Demons* has as a starting point a historical event resembling the assassination of Shatov and Dostoevsky's intention of writing a political pamphlet that would rehearse his objections to nihilism. Furthermore all three novels, even if stressing different problems, have a strong focus on the family the unit where the conflict of generation is most intense: in *Demons* Stavrogin's biological father is replaced by his tutor, in *The Adolescent* one of Arkady's main motives is to learn more about his biological father. In both these novels the main father figure is fragmented in a manner that two characters take its place resulting in dysfunctional parenthood. In *Brothers Karamazov* the father figure is hideously distorted: Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, himself described as a repugnant man whom only Alyosha probably loves, shares the parental role with his servant, Grigory. Moreover, Fyodor Pavlovich is assassinated by one of his sons which further intensifies the father – son conflict.

The description of the heroes themselves points to historical conditions. Stavrogin is an aristocrat whose family went through some economical uneasiness as a result of the emancipation. His own life is very unstable: first welcomed by high society, then some sort of 'unbridledness' culminates in his 'being broken to the ranks, stripped of his rights, and exiled to service in one of the infantry regiments.<sup>140</sup> Not long after his downfall Nikolai 'managed to distinguish himself, he was awarded a little cross' and eventually promoted to officer but he 'suddenly retired'. Stavrogin's remarkable social mobility is epitomized most strongly by his romantic relationships: Nikolai Stavrogin married a lame

---

40 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Everyman's Library (182) , 2000, p. 42

girl of doubtful background, Maria Timofeevna while, at the same time entertaining a relationship with Lizaveta Nikolaevna Tushin, a young girl of noble origin and with a strong connection to Dasha, a former serf girl who is employed as Varvara Petrovna's personal servant.

Arkady Dolgoruky's mother is a former serf but his biological father is a man of some nobility. Arkady is caught between the high nobility represented by the old prince Sokolsky and his rather humble origin as a nobleman's illegitimate son. As an example of social mobility, Arkady is in contact with various circles some of relatively poor condition, some of noble origin like prince Serghey Petrovich Sokolsky or, commoners as the young students, to relatively rich like the old prince Nikolai Ivanovich Sokolsky or Stelbekov. Furthermore the dream that animates Arkady illustrates in the highest degree the clash between the new capitalist and the noble ideals: Arkady wants to get rich like a Rothschild and only then act modestly and show unlimited magnanimity.

In stark contrast to Arkady, Alyosha is said to ignore any economic context, 'he seemed not to know the value of money at all' and Pyotr Alexandrovich Miusov says about Alyosha that

he is the only man in the whole world who, were you to leave him alone and without money on the square of some unknown city with a population of a million, would not perish, would not die of cold and hunger, for he would immediately be fed and immediately be taken care of...<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, Alyosha appears not to be entangled in any financial problems. Alyosha's main interest reside in questions of spiritual nature best observed in the interior struggle generated by Zosima's fast decaying body over Alyosha's religious convictions.

Thus Stavrogin, Alyosha and Arkady could be “real” Russian citizens of the time since they appear to be in the same medium of political and social unrest and they appear to have economical and spiritual problems that a real inhabitant of the period might have. However, even more interesting

---

41 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2002, p. 2

might be the fact that not only do they appear to be part of the age because of their characteriological features but they could be a symptom of the age as narrative devices, a fact which deserves to be further explored.

One historical problem that permeates the book could be identified in the hero's explicit and continuous search for identity at the content level. This search is mirrored and further developed at the narrative level by all the means employed to effectively undermine the role of the 'hero'. The Dostoevskyan 'hero' is not only in search of a self but he is *structurally* impossible in the given context. This structural impossibility of even having a 'hero' in the world of the novel, comments on a structural feature that makes a hero impossible in the historical world, namely the impossibility of achieving epistemological stability. The radical passivity of the three heroes springs not only from their indecision as characters but from the narrative context itself: Stavrogin is constructed only as a knot of the other character's impressions, Alyosha is justifiably yet simply ignored by his interlocutors and becomes passive in this narrative context, Arkady's presence in the plot is rendered inconsequential by the apparently overwhelming social interactions that use him as a device.

Thus the passivity that characterizes the hero amounts here to creating not only an inaccessible but a positively empty self that is constructed by others in the interstices of the narrative elements representing the social fabric. As structural devices, Stavrogin, Alyosha and Arkady are rather over-imposed on the plot and thus their characters appear merely accepted and not decisive. By their existence as structural devices though, the three "heroes" expose at the level of the entire narrative a shift from hard-built entities to fractured and discontinued elements in a perpetual dynamic, thereby creating a world with no recognizable central point, a world devoid of answers regarding interior unity and self. The effect of disrupted-self is intensified by the fact that at the center of the novels are "heroes" who are explicitly and insistently looking for a principle that would breathe meaning into their self and their world.

This search, however, is structurally doomed to failure since the empty self directs it to the world of exterior expression; here bodies, faces and especially language attempt to give an account of the inner self. Just as Piotr replaces Stavrogin in the scene described above, language replaces and distorts expression of self. Piotr's words hide rather than reveal, give fake clues rather than authentic answers commenting on the fact that the language does not have real access to the inner self. Ivan's words create in Smerdyakov's mind ideas that the first does not identify with. Also in *Demons* Stavrogin's words as reported are transformed by Shatov, Kirillov and Piotr in various ways, all apparently foreign to the originator. The heroes are, in fact, structurally built to react less to words than the rest of the characters: Stavrogin, Alyosha, Arkady all listen but understand slowly or distort the other's words, which gives them an epistemological edge, since they “understand” that words give no access to reality. This apparent advantage turns the heroes into passive beings, almost only formal devices. Even more, in the rare moments when they try to articulate a clearer position their words are undermined by the exaggerated expression: Alyosha in his last speech, Stavrogin in his confession. In Arkady's case, the whole narrative is tainted by the over-the-top tone of the narrator-adolescent. In this case everything is important, every decision is final, every event is described as incredibly intense.

The melodramatic mode, also common to the three heroes, has been fruitfully analyzed in *The Melodramatic Imagination* by Peter Brooks who defines melodrama as 'the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situation, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good [...] inflated and extravagant expressions'<sup>42</sup> and poses it as 'a central fact of the modern sensibility' dominated by the search for 'meanings and symbolic systems which have no certain justification because they are backed by no theology and no universally accepted social code'.<sup>43</sup> Not only the expression of the characters is melodramatic but the narrative structure of the novel appears to actively support the melodramatic element since the passivity of the “hero” creates a

42 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, p. 11

43 Ibid., p. 21

need for overstating in the interlocutors. It can be argued that the extreme expression is characters like Shatov, Piotr Verkhovensky, Stepan Verkhovensky, Kirillov, etc. are melodramatic in essence. Therefore they utterly misrepresent reality through melodrama which, at the same time, gives itself away by its sentimentalism, its resorting to outlandish language and its inflated claims.

In conclusion, Nikolay Vsevolodovich Stavrogin, Alyosha Karamazov and Arkady not only reflect the historical specificity of the second half of the nineteenth century in Russia but are, as narrative devices, an expression of an epistemological shift. The world in Dostoevsky's final novels enacts the historical real at the level of a deep narrative structure by closely mirroring the historical instability manifested at all levels in the Russian society. The effaced "hero" could be interpreted as a symptom of a center-less world, which not only sentence to fiasco questions about identity and self but actively undermines at the structural level, their very existence.