

Daria FARAFONOVA
 Università di Urbino

Dostoevsky and Pascal: the paradox of two abysses

Il n'y a rien de si conforme à la raison que ce désaveu de la raison.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

There are, in Fyodor Dostoevsky's work, evident signs of his interest in Blaise Pascal's paradoxical thought, especially regarding the cognitive effort of the reason defeating itself, which is synthetised in Pascal's formula *désaveu de la raison* and is so consonant with Dostoevsky's spiritual research. The 'spiritual affinity' between the two great writers was acknowledged by Lev Shestov, Nicolaj Berdjaev, Vasilij Rozanov, Leonid Grossman; it became the object of several studies which shed light upon some important aspects of this dialogue,¹ mostly focusing on ideological substrate of their similarities. Konstantin Barsht dedicated a rich and illuminating chapter of his book *Достоевский. Этимология повествования* (*Dostoevsky: Etymology of Narration*, 2019)² to Pascal's influence on Dostoevsky. In addition to providing cogent evidence of intertextuality, mostly

- 1 In his short and incisive article, I. Lapshin examines the presence of Pascal's *Thoughts* in Dostoevsky's work in the light of the "continuous tormented struggle" for faith, which represents a core of the spiritual research of both writers: Иван И. ЛАПШИН, "Достоевский и Паскаль", in *Научные труды Русского народного университета* (Прага, 1928), с. 55-63. More recent studies focus on the impressive typological affinity between their philosophical positions on the level of the motive "roll calls", though without offering a textual analysis of the dense network of Pascalian allusions which abound in Dostoevsky's texts. Cf. Галина Я. СТРЕЛЬЦОВА, "Паскаль и Достоевский", in Г.Я. СТРЕЛЬЦОВА, *Паскаль и европейская культура* (Москва: Республика, 1994), с. 330-355; Борис Н. ТАРАСОВ, "Достоевский и Паскаль (творческие параллели)", *Вопросы литературы*, 1999, № 5, с. 75-92; Б.Н. ТАРАСОВ, *Мыслящий тростник: жизнь и творчество Паскаля в восприятии русских философов и писателей* (Москва, 2005).
- 2 Константин А. БАРШТ, "Мысли Блезза Паскаля в романе *Преступление и наказание*", in К.А. БАРШТ, *Достоевский: Этимология повествования* (Санкт-Петербург: Нестор-История, 2019), с. 115-151.

on material from *Crime and Punishment*, he provides a solid historical base to this relationship, tracing Dostoevsky's acquaintance with Pascal in Russian translations and making some plausible suggestions about the French edition with which the Russian writer could have been familiar.

Nevertheless, there is a need for a systematic and accurate textual analysis of the numerous allusions to Pascal's conceptual horizon, which can be individuated in some of the crucial points of Dostoevsky's prose, especially those pertaining to the criticism of reason based on revealing its abyssal contradictory nature. In the present article, I will try to fill this gap at least partly, demonstrating how some of the French philosopher's central ideas and especially the form of his argumentation were contemplated in depth and reframed in Dostoevsky's creative 'laboratory'.

There are some surprising consonances between the positions of the two thinkers at different levels of discourse, starting with their aversion to Jesuitism, which for Dostoevsky represented the apotheosis of the Catholic worldview (for Pascal, Jesuitism constituted the object of his brilliant polemic attack in *Provincial Letters*), and ending with the Jansenist concept of *grace* and *hidden God* (*Deus absconditus, Dieu caché*). Both authors claim that reason cannot elucidate the complexity of reality. Undoubtedly, these positions originate from different ideological grounds. However, there are numerous signs that Dostoevsky takes Pascal as a model for productive paradoxical thinking, which is the only way to embrace the *aporiai* of reality and of *Ratio*, insolvable on the level of the *Ratio*, which still, paradoxically, intuitively grasps them profoundly, becoming itself the source of this *désaveu de la raison*.

Dostoevsky passed through the school of Pascal's *Thoughts* with regard to the rejection of the rationalistic grounds of faith and religion,³ as well as pure rationality as a cognitive and ontological ideal, which is expressed in the image of the "crystal palace" in the *Notes from Underground*. This allegorical image was originally inspired by a polemic with Nicolay Chernyshevsky, whose social illuminist and utopian ideal becomes an object of parody for Dostoevsky. On a deeper and more complex level of thought, I suggest that Dostoevsky redeems Pascal's figure of the "tower" (tower) as a metaphor for the human predisposition to fix in steady forms that which is naturally fluid and fugitive, and sooner or later explodes, crushing the constructions of Reason: "Nous brûlons du désir de trouver une assiette ferme, et une dernière base constante pour y édifier une tour qui s'élève à l'infini, mais tout notre fondement craque et la terre s'ouvre

3 Cf. СТРЕЛЬЦОВА, с. 332.

jusqu'aux abîmes".⁴ The underground "paradoxist" redeems the irreducible ambiguity of being, appealing to the "palace" as a monument to human pride, and reveals the abyssal vacuum on which it is erected. This palace can only be profaned, which is perfectly in keeping with Pascal's intention to always show the opposite of appearances, correcting what is deformed by human perception:

А покамест я еще живу и желаю – да отсохни у меня рука, коль я хоть один кирпичик на такой капитальный дом принесу! Не смотрите на то, что я давеча сам хрустальное здание отверг, единственно по той причине, что его нельзя будет языком подразнить. Я это говорил вовсе не потому, что уж так люблю мой язык выставлять. Я, может быть, на то только и сердился, что такого здания, которому бы можно было и не выставлять языка, из всех ваших зданий до сих пор не находится (ПСС 5; 120).⁵

The image of the "tower" (башня) will appear on the pages of the "Grand Inquisitor", and before, in *Demons* (I mean the ironical description of the "poem" by Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky in the beginning of the novel, where the Tower of Babel is presented as finally completed by a kind of superhumans, who substitute the divinity and takes over the government of the world),⁶ as a symbol of the human presumption to "regiment" existence on a purely rational basis and adapt the complexity of reality to the categories of the 'Euclidian mind' in order to take absolute control of it. Here, the Tower of Babel is also used in the Pascalian sense, i.e., as a figure of the presumptuous

4 Blaise PASCAL, *Pensées*, éd. Ph. Sellier, in B. PASCAL, *Les Provinciales, Pensées et opuscules divers* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2004), pp. 755-1373 (fr. 230, p. 947). "We burn with desire to find a steadfast place and ultimate fixed basis whereon we can build a tower to reach the infinite. But our whole foundation breaks up, and earth opens to the abysses" (the online edition I use is based on the English translation by C. Kegan Paul of *The Thoughts of Pascal* (London: Bell and Sons, 1901): https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2407/Pascal_1409_EBk_v6.o.pdf).

5 "But while I am alive and have desires I would rather my hand were withered off than bring one brick to such a building! Don't remind me that I have just rejected the palace of crystal for the sole reason that one cannot put out one's tongue at it. I did not say because I am so fond of putting my tongue out. Perhaps the thing I resented was, that of all your edifices there has not been one at which one could not put out one's tongue".

6 "Finally, in the very last scene, the Tower of Babel suddenly appears and some athletes finally finish building it with a song of new hope, and when they have built to the very top, the proprietor of, shall we say, Olympus flees in comical fashion, and quickwitted mankind takes over his place and at once begins a new life with a new perception of things".

human inclination to distort the truth in order to reach the state in which “everything will be so clearly calculated and explained that there will be no more incidents or adventures in the world” (*Notes from Underground*).

Dostoevsky opposed rigid rationality with “fluid” logics, which could catch contrasting perspectives and contradictions inherent to human nature. These are very close to Pascal’s paradoxical “*raisons du cœur que la raison ne connaît point*”⁷ (later, we will follow the developments which the idea, quoted almost literally in some of his texts, receives in Dostoevsky’s work). Both thinkers consider the human being in terms of the *coincidence of opposites*, which in Dostoevsky’s novels is expressed (in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin’s great discovery) in the coexistence of “unmerged voices”, often opposed to one other even in, and irreducible to the harmonic unity. This corresponds to the polyphonic principal. In Dostoevsky’s creative thinking, this strategy takes the shape of “bifurcation”, as Bakhtin argues:

Where others saw a single thought, he was able to find and feel out two thoughts, a bifurcation; where others saw a single quality, he discovered in it the presence of a second and contradictory quality. Everything that seemed simple became, in his world, complex and multi-structured. In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack, and the readiness to go over immediately to another contradictory expression.⁸

Dostoevsky, who was utterly conscious of contradictions and dualities permeating reality and who made this consciousness a fulcrum of his poetics, was fascinated by Pascal’s peculiar dialectics, which do not lead to a Hegelian synthesis but rather imply a suspension between thesis and antithesis, which are equally valid. The *paradox* constitutes the prevailing method to explore the abyss that the human being represents to himself, as it is consistent with the object of the research: “S’il se vante, je l’abaisse / S’il s’abaisse, je le vante / Et je le contredis toujours / Jusques à ce qu’il comprenne / Qu’il est un monstre incompréhensible”⁹. Pascal’s project, inter alia, hinges on evidencing the inadequacy of human reason – which still vaguely perceives its involvement in another, invisible order – when dealing with the ultimate questions of being,

7 PASCAL, fr. 680, p. 1217: “reasons of the heart which the reason knows not of”.

8 Mikhail M. BAKHTIN, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. C. Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 30.

9 PASCAL, fr. 163, p. 898. “If he exalt himself I humble him, if he humble himself I exalt him, and ever contradict him, till he comprehend that he is an incomprehensible monster”.

and can be described (as an important scholar like Benedetta Papàsogli did) in terms of the continuous “dialectic rhythm of a thought that passes through overturnings from *pro* into *against*, where the truth is never affirmed without taking into account the opposite, where the reason keeps in check the reason”.¹⁰ This judgment can be fully applied to the dynamics determining Dostoevsky’s artistic thought. Moreover, the fact that both scholars differed in their opinions and interests, as did Mikhail Bakhtin in the 1920s and Benedetta Papàsogli in the 1990s, but arrived at convergent conclusions regarding these two authors, Pascal and Dostoevsky, seems to me to be solid methodological evidence.

Dostoevsky was definitely aware of the first adequate Russian translation of the *Thoughts*, which was produced by Ivan G. Butovsky in 1843 and which he appreciated highly.¹¹ However, he was already very familiar with Pascal’s *opera magna* in French as early as 1838, as letters to his brother Mikhail attest. In the letter dated 9 August he explicitly quotes Pascal’s name and his paradoxical thought upon the real essence of *philosophising* which is nothing but “mockery on philosophy itself” (ПСЦ 28; 50), aligning himself with paradoxical critique of rationality which discerns Pascal’s philosophising.¹²

In the same letter, he approaches closely to one of Pascal’s central ideas related to the urgency to show man his multiplicitous and contradictory nature, the irreducible coexistence of the contrasts in him, and the lacerating condition of being caught between nothingness and the Absolute:

Одно только состоянье и дано в удел человеку: атмосфера души его состоит из слиянья неба с землею; какое же противузаконное дитя человек; закон духовной природы нарушен... Мне кажется, что мир наш – чистилище духов небесных, отуманенных грешною мыслию (ПСЦ 28; 50).¹³

10 Benedetta PAPÀSOGLI, “Introduzione”, in Blaise PASCAL, *Pensées*, nuova ed. a cura di Ph. Sellier secondo l’“ordine” pascaliano, trad. di B. Papàsogli (Roma: Città Nuova, 2003), pp. 5-27: 16 (my translation).

11 Cf. БАРИШТ, с. 116.

12 Cf. “Se moquer de la philosophie, c’est vraiment philosopher”.

13 “Only one condition of things is it given to man to know: the atmosphere of his soul consists of a fusion of heaven and earth; what a disobedient child is man; the law of spiritual nature is broken... It seems to me that this world of ours is a purgatory of heavenly spirits, darkened by sinful thought”. Also the continuation of this passage recalls Pascal’s insistence on the torment of the mind which comes to know its actual condition, preferring the state of unconsciousness: “Но видеть одну жесткую оболочку, под которой томится вселенная, знать, что одного взрыва воли достаточно разбить ее и слиться с

In these words, one can clearly hear the echo of Pascal's reflection upon the ambiguous nature of man, "un milieu entre Dieu et le néant", "un néant à l'égard de l'infini, un tout à l'égard du néant".¹⁴ A fragile and impossible balance between nothing and infinity is the measure of the human condition: "*Entre nous et l'enfer ou le ciel, il n'y a que la vie entre deux, qui est la chose du monde la plus fragile*".¹⁵ One of Pascal's central intentions is to highlight the fundamental ambiguity of man as his blessing and his damnation at the same time. He is open to the transcendental (the divine in him), while the abyss of his presumption and egoism makes a beast of him: "L'homme n'est ni ange ni bête, et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête".¹⁶

Pascal discusses the *fusion* of the two incompatible opposite principles in the human soul and, as we saw, Dostoevsky grasps this point with an admirable premature artistic penetration. "Car enfin qu'est-ce que l'homme dans la nature? Un néant à l'égard de l'infini, un tout à l'égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout, infiniment éloigné de comprendre les extrêmes".¹⁷ This medial position of man between misery and greatness, and also between "Nature" and "Grace", a distinction which originates from Saint Augustine's meditation on the divine origin of any good of which man is capable, will be deeply considered by Dostoevsky. This constitutes one of crucial points of the dialectic tension that characterises his artistic and philosophical research.

Radical critique of speculative rationalism penetrates *Thoughts*: according to Pascal, it eliminates the metaphysical depths of human nature, reducing its complexity to the mere object of an abstract analysis, which claims to be exhaustive. It undermines the emotional and vivid experience of the Divine, which is only possible through the ways extraneous to reason. Ivan, the upholder of "geometric spirit" in Dostoevsky's work, admits this. Faithful to Pascal's lecture, this "eccentric and paradoxist" radically questions the basis of rational

вечностию, знать и быть, как последнее из созданий... [...] Душа так подавлена горем, что боится понять его, чтоб не растерзать себя" (ПСС 28; 50).

14 Cf. "A nothing in regard to the infinite, a whole in regard to nothing, a mean between nothing and the whole".

15 PASCAL, fr. 185, p. 926. "Between us and hell or heaven, there is nought but life, the frailest thing in all the world".

16 PASCAL, fr. 557, p. 1129. "Man is neither angel nor brute, and the misfortune is that whoever would play the angel plays the brute".

17 PASCAL, fr. 230, p. 944. "For after all what is man in nature? A nothing in regard to the infinite, a whole in regard to nothing, a mean between nothing and the whole; infinitely removed from understanding either extreme".

thinking with regard to existence's ultimate questions, recognising its failure. If man cannot even conceive of how two parallel lines could cross, how dare he speculate about what infinitely transcends him:

Я, голубчик, решил так, что если я даже этого не могу понять, то где ж мне про Бога понять. Я смиренно сознаюсь, что у меня нет никаких способностей разрешать такие вопросы, у меня ум эвклидовский, земной, а потому где нам решать о том, что не от мира сего. Да и тебе советую об этом никогда не думать, друг Алеша, а пуще всего насчет Бога: есть он или нет? Все это вопросы совершенно несвойственные уму, созданному с понятием лишь о трех измерениях (ПСС 14; 214).¹⁸

In fact, for Pascal (and for Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*), Descartes is a perfect adept of rationalism venerating the *God of the philosophers*:¹⁹ the God created in man's image and likeness, who does not lead him to real knowledge but rather down a labyrinth of deceptive appearances. In his last novel, perhaps the most 'pascalian' in terms of posing problems, Dostoevsky makes the devil say the famous cartesian formula; the devil appears during Ivan Karamazov's delirium and verbalises the ideas on which the character has meditated for a long time:

То есть, если хочешь, я одной с тобой философии, вот это будет справедливо. *Je pense, donc je suis*, это я знаю наверно, остальное же всё, что кругом меня, все эти миры, бог и даже сам сатана – всё это для меня не доказано, существует ли оно само по себе или есть одна только моя эманация, последовательное развитие моего я, существующего до временно и единолично... (ПСС 15; 77).²⁰

18 "If I cannot understand even that, then it is not for me to understand about God. I humbly confess that I do not have the ability to resolve such questions, I have a Euclidean mind, an earthly mind, and therefore it is not for us to resolve things that are not of this world. And I advise you never to think about it, Alyosha my friend, and most especially about whether God exists or not. All such questions are completely unsuitable to a mind created with a concept of only three dimensions".

19 Cf. PASCAL, fr. 742, p. 1300.

20 "Well, if you like, I have the same philosophy as you, that would be true. *Je pense, donc je suis*, I know that for a fact; all the rest, all these worlds, God and even Satan - all that is not proved, to my mind. Does all that exist of itself, or is it only an emanation of myself, a logical development of my ego which alone has existed for ever".

The absolutisation of a rational capacity, which is represented here ironically and grotesquely, is indissolubly related to the affirmation of the Ego and its will as an ultimate criterion and measure of reality. In both Dostoevsky's and Pascal's reflections, it is opposed to the "order of the heart", which has its supreme expression in the Christian ideal of *pietas*, or love. It alone is capable of embracing opposites and accepting the paradoxical nature of being and of reason itself: "En Jésus-Christ toutes les contradictions sont accordées"²¹ (Dmitry in *The Brothers Karamazov* seems to follow the similar logics, applying a polyphonic vision, which accepts the coexistence of contraries, to earthly reality: "God sets us nothing but riddles. Here the boundaries meet and all contradictions exist side by side" (*ИСС* 14; 100). The devil takes the cartesian logic of rationalistic solipsism to the extreme, a great temptation for reason and one that has a truly diabolic appeal. It causes the individual to affirm his egoistic will beyond God and thus against God, depart from the ideal of *charitas* (which can only be achieved through the *grace*), and therefore totally abandon God.

In fact Ivan acknowledges the misery of the human mind, especially in front of the "future universal harmony" which will rein in the eternity when the illusion of temporary existence will be over and supreme justice will triumph:

Я убежден, как младенец, что страдания заживут и сладятся, что весь обидный комизм человеческих противоречий исчезнет, как жалкий мираж, как гнусенькое измышление малосильного и маленького, как атом, человеческого эвклидовского ума (*ИСС* 14; 214-215).²²

Nevertheless, in the end, Ivan affirms the supremacy of the mind over the heart, illustrating the paradox that constitutes the whole of Pascal's philosophising: "Il n'y a rien de si conforme à la raison que ce désaveu de la raison".²³ The microscopic, invisible but fundamental part of the human interiority, in which the infinity is contained. This image of the mind as infinitely small as an atom recalls Pascal's "raccourci d'atom", to which one of the most powerful and fascinating passages of the *Thoughts* is dedicated:

21 PASCAL, fr. 289, p. 970. "In Jesus Christ all the contradictions are reconciled".

22 "I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man".

23 PASCAL, fr. 213, p. 933. "There is nothing so conformable to reason as this disavowal of reason".

Je veux lui faire voir là-dedans un abîme nouveau, je lui veux peindre non seulement l'univers visible, mais l'immensité qu'on peut concevoir de la nature dans l'enceinte de *ce raccourci d'atome*. Qu'il y voie une infinité d'univers, dont chacun a son firmament, ses planètes, sa terre, en la même proportion que le monde visible. [...] Qui se considérera de la sorte s'effraiera de soi-même et se considérant soutenu dans la masse que la nature lui a donnée entre ces deux abîmes de l'infini et du néant, il tremblera dans la vue de ses merveilles. [...] Car enfin qu'est-ce que l'homme dans la nature? Un néant à l'égard de l'infini, un tout à l'égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout, infiniment éloigné de comprendre les extrêmes, la fin des choses et leur principe sont pour lui invinciblement cachés dans un secret impénétrable.²⁴

Thus, in Dostoevsky, as in Pascal, the weakness and inadequacy of the 'Euclidean' mind, which is still capable of embracing the universe by thought, is continuously brought to light through its claim to reach the essence of all things, while detaching itself from the solid etic and spiritual base – in other words, according to limpid reformulation by a young Dostoevsky of Pascal's idea, out of touch with the "thought of the heart": "Познать природу, бога, душу, любовь... Это познается сердцем, а не умом. [...] Ум – способность материальная... душа же, или дух, живет мыслию, которую нашептывает ей сердце" (ПСС 28; 54).²⁵

These are the words that the seventeen-year-old Dostoevsky addresses to his brother in another letter. The redemption of the "order of the heart" is symptomatic and will somehow become the *Leitmotiv* of the whole of his work. It is quite close to Pascal's perspective, which summarises a millenary tradition (from St. Paul, St. Augustine to St. Francis and Nicholas of Cusa): "C'est le

24 PASCAL, fr. 230, p. 944. "Then I will open before him therein a new abyss. I will paint for him not only the visible universe, but all that he can conceive of nature's immensity in the enclosure of this diminished atom. Let him therein see an infinity of universes of which each has its firmament, its planets, its earth, in the same proportion as in the visible world [...] Whoso takes this survey of himself will be terrified at the thought that he is upheld in the material being, given him by nature, between these two abysses of the infinite and nothing, he will tremble at the sight of these marvels [...]. For after all what is man in nature? A nothing in regard to the infinite, a whole in regard to nothing, a mean between nothing and the whole; infinitely removed from understanding either extreme. The end of things and their beginnings are invincibly hidden from him in impenetrable secrecy".

25 "Nature, the soul, love, and God, one recognizes through the heart, and not through the reason. [...] Now, Reason is a material capacity, while the soul or spirit lives on the thoughts which are whispered by the heart".

cœur qui sent Dieu, et non la raison: voilà ce que c'est que la foi. Dieu sensible au cœur, non à la raison. (...) *Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point*".²⁶ Similarly to Pascal and St. Augustine, Dostoevsky seems to solve the problem of human freedom, which for many years constituted the object of his mental torment, founding it in God: it is only by dissolving the individual in Him that one can achieve integrity, as St. Augustine claims.²⁷ At the same time, God for Dostoevsky, according to Luigi Pareyson,

is not the object of affirmation that can be peacefully ascertained; approaching Him involves a continuous and tormented search [...]: God waits for the man behind the corner, ready to strike him at the most unexpected moment, and He is certainly closer to the ones who are desperate for having denied Him, than to the ones who believe to have always affirmed him.²⁸

From Pascal's perspective, which is perfectly in line with St. Augustine's theological thought²⁹ ("Inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te": *Conf.*, I 1), anxiety, unrest and torment are marks of the spiritual search; the absence of profound peace is vital for man and ensures he has the energy to seek God. The "crucible of doubt", through which Dostoevsky's "hosanna had passed", as he declared on different occasions, is the essence of an authentic religious feeling: "the thirst alone of spiritual revelation is already a spiritual revelation".³⁰ As Pascal asserts, he who seeks God already possesses him ("Tu ne me chercherais pas, si tu ne me possédais"³¹). The obstacles in man's spiritual way lead to a deeper, more vivid and authentic "understanding" *with the heart* of the essence of religion. It is this unrest which is a means of spiritual transfiguration:

26 PASCAL, fr. 680, p. 1217 (the italics are mine). "It is the heart which is conscious of God, not the reason. This then is faith; God sensible to the heart, not to the reason". "The heart has its reasons, which reason knows not".

27 Some of the aspects of St. Augustine's influence on Dostoevsky have been studied by Vladimir КАНТОР in "Исповедь и теодицея в творчестве Достоевского (рецепция Аврелия Августина)", in Stefano ALOE (a cura di), *Su Fëdor Dostoevskij. Visione filosofica e sguardo di scrittore* (Napoli: La scuola di Pitagora editrice, 2012), c. 279-294.

28 Luigi PAREYSON, "Le dimensioni della libertà in Dostoevskij", in Sante GRACIOTTI (a cura di), *Dostoevskij nella coscienza d'oggi* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1981), pp. 107-121, p. 119 (my translation).

29 Cf. Philippe SELLIER, *Port-Royal et la littérature. Pascal* (Paris: Champion, 2010).

30 Lucio DAL SANTO (a cura di), *Dostoevskij inedito. Quaderni e taccuini 1860-1881* (Firenze: Valecchi, 1980), p. 408 (my translation).

31 PASCAL, fr. 756, p. 1323. "You would not seek Me if you did not possess Me".

“Toutes ces contrariétés qui semblaient le plus m’écarter de la connaissance d’une religion est ce qui m’a le plus tôt conduit à la véritable”.³²

Even as a youth, Dostoevsky accompanied his reflection on the destiny of man, his real nature and the greatest mystery of existence with an often polemical dialogue with Pascal. But the awareness that Dostoevsky had about this affinity progressively intensified in his later work. The unrest to which man is condemned is a sign of his ambiguous and fatal incapacity “to know certainly and to ignore absolutely”. His inability to solve these crucial problems – particularly the problem of God’s existence – still being profoundly appealed by them, is fundamental to human nature, and this “knowing ignorance” is constitutive to it. The inquietude is a synonym of spiritual depth, but also a damnation. In his long speech, the Grand Inquisitor defines the human condition as full of unrest and misery, and the formula he uses is almost a literal translation of Pascal’s “Condition de l’homme: inconstance, ennui, inquietude”:³³ “Неспокойство, смятение и несчастье – вот теперешний удел людей”³⁴ (*ПС* 14; 234), The quote appears right after the Grand Inquisitor accuses the prisoner of leading mankind to the painful awareness of its state.

According to Jean Deprun’s striking formula in the part of his research which is dedicated to Pascal’s thought, the inquietude constitutes an “apologetic fact par excellence”,³⁵ and Dostoevsky seems to have assimilated these optics in his paradoxical affirmation of faith through the torment of doubt. For Pascal, he who follows the heart and its reasons is “reasonable”, especially with regard to the search for God: “Il n’y a que deux sortes de personnes qu’on puisse appeler raisonnables: ou ceux qui servent Dieu *de tout leur cœur* parce qu’ils le connaissent, ou ceux qui le cherchent *de tout leur cœur* parce qu’ils ne le connaissent pas”.³⁶

The aporias of reason preclude access to the complex, ‘polyphonic’ comprehension of reality, associated with the ideal of love, which is expressed by God’s incarnation in Christ, and which is realised through compassion, which Dostoevsky in the *Idiot* and in a letter defines as the most important and perhaps the sole law of human existence. In other words, there exists a logic of the *heart*: it

32 PASCAL, fr. 23, p. 838. “All these contradictions which seemed to have taken me further from the knowledge of religion, are what most rapidly lead me into truth”.

33 PASCAL, fr. 58, p. 849. “The condition of man; inconstancy, weariness, unrest”.

34 “Unrest, confusion and unhappiness – that is the present lot of man”.

35 Jean DEPRUN, *La Philosophie de l’Inquiétude en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1979).

36 PASCAL, fr. 681, p. 1225 (the italics are mine). “There are but two classes of men who can be called reasonable; those who serve God with their whole heart because they know him, or those who seek him with their whole heart because they know him not”.

nourishes a dialogical, opened “rationalism”, which is opposed to the autocratic, monological and total one. This mental attitude can partly be summarised in a paradoxical formula, which radically questions the legitimacy of the “crystal palace” as an existential ideal in the Underground Man’s speculation: “two times two makes five is sometimes a most charming thing as well” (*ИСС* 5; 119).

In *Demons*, Dostoevsky illustrates the destructive, devastating potential of pure Reason in its tendency to measure and to prove what cannot be approached in terms of the ‘Euclidian mind’, the potential that can give rise to the most horrid and inhumane brutality. However, the part in this novel where the words attributed to Pascal are explicitly quoted in French and repeated twice by Stepan Trofimovich is full of irony: “On trouve toujours plus de moines que de raisons”.

For Dostoevsky and Pascal, the heart is superior to Reason, and the highest form of expression of the latter is Justice interpreted in a human perspective (formed and determined by the *esprit géométrique* or, in Dostoevsky’s categories, by the Euclidian mind): “If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth” (*ИСС* 28; 176), as he claims in a letter to Natalia Fonvizina from late January – early February 1854. In fact, Christ is presented here as a haven of supreme Justice, which in its authentic nature, i.e. when it is not deformed by human rationality, is unthinkable without love. The French philosopher’s presence on the horizon of Dostoevsky’s reflection is tangible here, as it is in other passages of his texts where the central ideas of Pascal’s Christology are echoed: “on se fait une idole de la vérité même, car *la vérité hors de la charité n’est pas Dieu*”.³⁷ Truth deprived of charity is abstract, rational, potentially tyrannic and inhumane, as Aglaya suggests to Myshkin regarding his judgment of the young anarchist Ippolit Terentyev. She literally summarises Pascal’s impressive assumption: “As for you, I think you are behaving very badly, because it is not right to judge a man’s soul as you are judging Hippolyte’s. *You have no gentleness, but only truth – so you are unjust*”.³⁸ In the same dialogue, Aglaya accuses the prince of *heartlessness* in response to his promise to prevent Nastasya Filippovna from writing her any more letters.

37 PASCAL, fr. 755, p. 1322 (the italics are mine). “We make an idol of truth itself, for truth apart from charity is not God”.

38 А с вашей стороны я нахожу, что все это очень дурно, потому что очень грубо так смотреть и судить душу человека, как вы судите Ипполита. У вас нежности нет: одна правда, стало быть, – несправедливо. (*ИСС* 8; 354).

In these episodes, Myshkin seems to embody the logic of “absolute good” comprehended rationally, which in the long run contradicts the principle of authentic humanity based on what Bakhtin would define as a ‘polyphonic’ acceptance of reality – or the infinity of realities composed by different people’s visions:

It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature *full of event potential* and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses.³⁹

The “entirely positive” personage, the “extremest incarnation of the Christian ideal of love that humanity can reach in its present form”⁴⁰ (Dostoevsky himself defines its realisation through the character of Myshkin as a failure) ends up paradoxically annihilating this ideal by fetishising it and subordinating it to rational thinking mechanisms. In the background, there is the Enlightenment idea of rational good, already embodied in the image of the “crystal palace”, which is grotesquely rethought here. That is what gives rise to Vittorio Strada’s original affirmation that the *Idiot* can be interpreted also as a kind of anti-Candid:

Voltaire’s novel is an ironical profanation of the optimistic providentialism, an illuministic *Don Quixote* which parodies Leibniz’s *Theodicy*, while *The Idiot*, through that Quixote-like Christ who is Myshkin, reconsecrates a tragic and paradoxical Christianity, substituting with the “Euclidean” rationalism the faith which is tempered in the crucible of doubt. Against Voltaire Pascal is being asserted.⁴¹

It is emblematic that Strada puts together the names of these two thinkers here, especially in light of the fact that the Condorcet edition of Pascal’s *Thoughts* with Voltaire’s decisive participation (1776) was the first significant attempt to order, from the point of view the Enlightenment philosophy, the (intentionally) diffuse fragments of Pascal’s discourse about spiritual research. In this edition, “Pascal-scientist and moralist overshadows Pascal-mystic and

39 BAKHTIN, p. 81.

40 Joseph FRANK, *Dostoevsky a Writer in His Time* (Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 577.

41 Vittorio STRADA, *Le veglie della ragione. Miti e figure della letteratura russa da Dostoevskij a Pasternak* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), p. 34 (my translation).

theologian".⁴² It is probably through this edition that the young Dostoevsky, who names Pascal in the letters to his brother, was first acquainted with the *Thoughts*. This edition predates the publication of Butovsky's translation. Dostoevsky could even have become fascinated by the rationalistic focus in which this Apology of Christianity was presented (i.e. in Voltaire's Preface, since we know that the young writer went through a phase of Voltairean scepticism⁴³). He might have understood that it contradicted the intimate intention of Pascal's project and its organising principle, which the author himself defined as *l'ordre du cœur* (the *order of the heart*).⁴⁴

Admitting that something in the human being is beyond rational comprehension and it greatly influences human nature is a mark of a mystical approach. Valerian Maykov, one of the most eminent critics of the nineteenth century, comments on this artistic attitude, which Dostoevsky defines later in his short story *The Meek One* (1876) as a "fantastic realism". Maykov states that the *mystical vision* unexpectedly results from the writer's capacity to penetrate "to the chemical structure of matter".⁴⁵ According to his incisive observation, Dostoevsky delved so deeply into "human things", that he shone a light on the "mystical reflex" of the depicted reality.

If we accept Strada's suggestion, Voltaire's *Candide* is also recognisable among the archetypes which could have inspired the image of Myshkin, especially regarding his candour and genuine faith in the rational nature of supreme good. Myshkin is so profoundly open to other people's realities, so altruistic and selfless, that one could suspect him of being an "abstraction", an impossible idealisation, "an earthly simulacrum of the purely spiritual entity".⁴⁶ At the same time in the narration this ideal is being continuously opposed to the reality of human contradictions, which Myshkin himself tends to embrace through his accepting attitude. That is how the comic often results in *tragic humanism*, and Pascal is properly "being affirmed against Voltaire".

The sense of mystery, derived from the unsolvable contradictions and aporias of human nature, orients Pascal's project and permeates its textual form, making his argumentation conformable with its object, and thus paradoxical and profoundly contradictory. The openness of man, his being incomplete and never equal to himself is a sign of his multiplicitous nature transcending itself:

42 PAPÀSOGLI, p. II.

43 Cf. Robert L. JACKSON, *Dostoevsky's quest for form. A study of his Philosophy of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

44 Cf. SELIER, *Port-Royal et la littérature. Pascal*.

45 Валериан Н. МАЙКОВ, *Сочинения*, т. I (Киев, 1901), с. 208-209.

46 STRADA, p. 33.

“L’homme passe infiniment l’homme”,⁴⁷ or, according to Dmitry’s ironical re-framing, “Yes, man is broad, too broad, indeed. I’d have him narrower” (ПСС 14; 100). It is evidenced by man’s aspiration to the sublime, which is combined with its opposite, the “animal” part in him. The implicit dialogue between Pascal and Voltaire, whose famous idea of the necessity for humanity to invent God is quoted literally in the novel, is powerfully perceptible as a substrate of Ivan’s ambiguous reasoning in this, as in some other significant passages of the novel:

...был один старый грешник в восемнадцатом столетии, который изрек, что если бы не было бога, то следовало бы его выдумать, *s’il n’existait pas Dieu il faudrait l’inventer*. И действительно, человек выдумал Бога. И не то странно, не то было бы дивно, что Бог в самом деле существует, но то дивно, что такая мысль – мысль о необходимости Бога – могла залезть в голову такому дикому и злому животному, как человек, до того она свята, до того она трогательна, до того премудра и до того она делает честь человеку (ПСС 14; 213-214).⁴⁸

Here, there is clearly an intention to demonstrate the contradictions within “the atmosphere of the human soul”, which is equally open to divinity and beastliness and which is suspended between two abysses. This “atmosphere” makes man an “incomprehensible, monstrous miracle”. Dmitry, the most vivid and tragic character of the novel, confesses his own beastly nature, declaring himself an *insect*, thus achieving a tragic grandeur in a lucid and painful awareness of his smallness, which is in keeping with Pascal’s paradox of man who “is great in that he knows himself to be miserable”. Man infinitely transcends man, as Dmitry’s passionate confession suggests – a head-spinning speech, where “incomprehensible, monstrous” human nature is affirmed: “Тут берега сходятся, тут все противоречия вместе живут. [...] Нет, широк человек, слишком даже широк, я бы сузил. [...] Тут дьявол с богом борется, а поле битвы – сердце людей” (ПСС 14; 100).⁴⁹ Stupor in the face of the immense mystery that the human be-

47 PASCAL, fr. 164, p. 901. “Man infinitely transcends man”.

48 “There was an old sinner in the eighteenth century who declared that, if there were no God, he would have to be invented. *S’il n’existait pas Dieu, il faudrait l’inventer*. And man has actually invented God. And what’s strange, what would be marvellous, is not that God should really exist; the marvel is that such an idea, the idea of the necessity of God, could enter the head of such a savage, vicious beast as man. So holy it is, so touching, so wise and so great a credit it does to man”.

49 “Here the boundaries meet and all contradictions exist side by side. [...] Yes, man is broad, too broad, indeed. I’d have him narrower. [...] God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man”.

ing represents permeates Ivan's and Dmitry's reflections, which seem sometimes to allude to the transcendent or even divine origin of man's torment in the fatal inconceivability of his ambiguous nature, implying coexistence of nothingness and greatness in him. As Pascal's man, Dostoevsky's characters fall into the *abyss* without taking their eyes off the sky, and some of them seem to exclaim as the great philosopher does: "Quelle chimère est-ce donc que l'homme, quelle nouveauté, quel monstre, quel chaos, quel sujet de contradiction, quel prodige, juge de toutes choses, imbécile ver de terre, dépositaire du vrai, cloaque d'incertitude et d'erreur, gloire et rebut de l'univers!"⁵⁰ All of these dimensions are present in Dostoevsky's work, in the long run without any of them prevailing over others. This vision of human nature is profoundly polyphonic.

So, what is at stake for Dostoevsky is always a man. He somehow seems to complete Pascal's project, peering into the abysses of the human soul with ruthless lucidity. The dramatic and decisive choice lies between the man-god (*čelovekobog*), a kind of a superman, and the God-Man (*Bogočelovek*), i.e. Christ, in the certainty that pure humanity will destroy itself if it is not enlightened and redeemed by Christ, the only mediator of *Deus vere absconditus* ("Nous ne connaissons Dieu que par Jésus-Christ. Sans ce médiateur est ôtée toute communication avec Dieu"⁵¹). This goes to the heart of Pascal's Christology. The extreme outcome of the "double infinity" constituting the "atmosphere of the human soul", which determines man's ambiguous nature (his being both "beast" and "angel") is reflected in Karamazov's spirit, which can be 'stratified' in three guises, or hypostases – spirit, intellect, and passion. Also, as Dmitry asserts, Alyosha is not exempt from this fundamental moral duality inherent to Karamazov, and generally to man: "All we Karamazov are such insects, and, angel as you are, that insect lives in you too, and will stir up a tempest in your blood" (*ICC* 14; 100).

In Ivan's hallucination, the devil – or his *alter ego* – reveals that it is particularly satisfying for him to succeed in tempting great souls full of generosity and doubts, such as Ivan's. These souls "can contemplate such abysses of belief and misbelief at once" (*ICC* 15; 80). Later, during the trial, in the crucial point of his discourse, the attorney uses the same terms, describing two abysses which he claims characterise Karamazov's spirit: in the context of his highfalutin and

50 PASCAL, fr. 164, p. 900. "What a chimera then is man! how strange and monstrous! a chaos, a contradiction, a prodigy. Judge of all things, yet a weak earth-worm; depository of truth, yet a cesspool of uncertainty and error; the glory and offscouring of the Universe".

51 Cf. "We know God only by Jesus Christ. Without this mediator all communion with God is taken away" (PASCAL, fr. 221, p. 936).

pathetic speech, this reference, which is insistently repeated, sounds almost mocking, like a grotesque rethinking of Pascal's motive. At the same time, his assumptions could have a universal meaning and could be extended to the whole of the human condition. Dmitry represents the extreme version of a man who is lacerated by his median nature and continuously oscillates between the heights of the spirit and the most horrendous passions: "Мы природы широкие, карамазовские, [...] способные вмещать всевозможные противоположности и разом созерцать обе бездны, бездну над нами, бездну высших идеалов, и бездну под нами, бездну самого низшего и зловонного падения" (*ПСС* 15; 129).⁵²

Dostoevsky reflects on a moral plan upon man's abyssal nature and develops one of the directions implicit in Pascal's thought, which prefigures the abysses of the subconscious. The theological dimension of his discourse implies interpreting the abominable part of human nature as a "signature" of original sin, which can only be redeemed through a constant and devoted exercise of *charitas*.

What characterises Pascal's theology is an exclusive attention to the soteriological motives of Christian dogmatics, original sin and redemption, which in Dostoevsky's world are dialectically connected. The tension which constitutes the ideological foundation of the Russian writer's work is mostly concentrated between these two poles, which in *The Brothers Karamazov* take the form of two abysses – turpitude and purity, corruption and redemption, sin and grace. The transmission of original sin is declared the key mystery of existence, and probably constitutes the *question* which Ivan is tormented by and which he feels an urge to *resolve*, even if he suspects that it is not possible for humans to understand it because human finitude constrains man's ability to understand the truth reliably. The inability to relate earthly justice to divine justice is a great source of suffering:

Если они [дети] на земле тоже ужасно страдают, то уж, конечно, за отцов своих, наказаны за отцов своих, съевших яблоко, – но ведь это рассуждение из другого мира, сердцу же человеческому здесь на земле непонятное. Нельзя страдать неповинному за другого, да еще такому неповинному!⁵³ (*ПСС* 14; 216-217).

52 We are of a broad, Karamazovian nature [...] capable of containing all possible opposites and of contemplating both abysses at once, the abyss above us, an abyss of lofty ideals, and the abyss beneath us, an abyss of the lowers and foulest degradation".

53 "If they [children], too, suffer horribly on earth, they must suffer for their fathers' sins, they must be punished for their fathers, who have eaten the apple; but that reasoning is of the other world and is incomprehensible for the heart of man here on earth. The innocent must not suffer for another's sins, and especially such innocents!"

This passage, I presume, is directly inspired by Pascal's fragment, where he posits the impossibility of truly understanding oneself without approaching the mystery of the transmission of original sin, which still remains incomprehensible:

Qu'y a-t'il de plus contraire aux règles de notre misérable justice que de damner éternellement un enfant incapable de volonté pour un péché où il paraît avoir si peu de part qu'il est commis six mille ans avant qu'il fût en être. Certainement rien ne nous heurte plus rudement de cette doctrine. Et cependant, sans ce mystère le plus incompréhensible de tous nous sommes incompréhensibles à nous-mêmes. Le nœud de notre condition prend ses replis et ses tours dans cet abîme.⁵⁴

Similarly for Pascal, whose purpose is to induce faith through the paradox, the question of theodicy is impossible to solve through the 'Euclidean mind'. There cannot be any valid theoretical evidence of God's existence. The endeavour itself of making it humanly comprehensible, reducing what is inaccessible to a purely pragmatic discourse, has something macabre in it, as the pure opportunism of Pascal's wager evidences: let us imagine that God exists and let us act as if he did; if he actually does not, we do not lose anything; if he does, we win everything. The extreme expression of Ivan's idea, which in Dmitry's reformulation sounds like a moral law, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted", can also be seen as an overturned *pari*. An Italian writer and critic Leonardo Sciascia in the novel *Todomodo* (the ideological background of which is a sort of dialogue between Pascal and Dostoevsky⁵⁵) further debunks the idea, grasping the authentic sense of the dialectics of sin and redemption which are fundamental to the Christian worldview: "If God doesn't exist nothing is permitted". If there is no God, no redemption is possible.⁵⁶

54 PASCAL, fr. 164, p. 902. "There is nothing so repugnant to the rules of our miserable justice as to damn eternally an infant incapable of will, for a sin in which he seems to have so scanty a share, that it was committed six thousand years before he was in being. Certainly nothing shocks us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves. The tangle of our condition takes its plies and folds in this abyss".

55 Cf. Daria FARAFONOVA, "E sempre lo contraddico, finché non comprenda che è un mostro incomprensibile". L'universo pascaliano di Leonardo Sciascia, *Lettere italiane*, LXVIII (2016), 1, pp. 152-172.

56 Cf. "Dio esiste, dunque tutto ci è permesso. [...] E nella sua vera essenza, questo è il cristianesimo: che tutto ci è permesso. Il delitto, il dolore, la morte: crede sarebbero

Finally, the question of ethics in a world where man cannot know his real condition but can only have a vague anguish for something he intuitively feels to have lost is brought to light in the reflection on the *immortality of the soul* as the basic question of the morality. In a note from *A Writer's Diary*, dated November-December 1876, Dostoevsky definitely has in mind Pascal's diatribe against indifferentism with regard to this problem which, according to both, should be every man's greatest concern and the object of his uninterrupted reflection.

L'immortalité de l'âme est une chose qui nous importe si fort, qui nous touche si profondément, qu'il faut avoir perdu tout sentiment pour être dans l'*indifférence de savoir ce qui en est*. Toutes nos actions et nos pensées doivent prendre des routes si différentes, selon qu'il y aura des biens éternels à espérer ou non, qu'il est impossible de faire une démarche avec sens et jugement, qu'en les réglant par la vue de ce point, qui doit être notre dernier objet.⁵⁷

Dostoevsky gives a more intransigent, radical interpretation to the question, insisting on the importance and the ethical potential of authentic and firm belief in the immortality of the soul. He also points out the disproportional *indifferentism* (индифферентизм) for this fundamental problem of human existence, rendering the concept in Russian exactly by the Latin root word, that is to say by a calque, which is a more elevated and specifically connoted analogue of «равнодушие» (this linguistic detail reveals how close his reasoning is to Pascal's one):

Основная и самая высшая идея человеческого бытия – необходимость и неизбежность убеждения в бессмертии души человеческой. [...] Без веры в свою душу и ее бессмертие бытие человека неестественно, невыносимо и невыносимо. [...] это неверие укореняется и повсеместным, странным каким-то индифферентизмом к этой высшей идее человеческого существования. [...] А высшая идея на земле *лишь одна* и именно – идея о бессмертии души человеческой, ибо все остальные высшие идеи жизни, которыми мо-

possibili, se Dio non ci fosse?» (Leonardo SCIASCIA, *Todomodo*, ed. by P. Squillaciotti, 2 voll. (Milano: Adelphi 2012), vol. I, pp. 835-935: 897).

57 PASCAL, fr. 681, p. 1219. "The immortality of the soul is a matter of so great moment to us, it touches us so deeply, that we must have lost all feeling if we are careless of the truth about it. Our every action and our every thought must take such different courses, according as there are or are not eternal blessings for which to hope, that it is impossible to take a single step with sense or judgment, save in view of that point which ought to be our end and aim".

жет быть жив человек, *лишь из нее одной вытекают* (ПСС 24; 47-48; italics are in the text).⁵⁸

Pascal drops the reader in a mass of contradictions, in which almost nothing is affirmed without being immediately retracted. This performative method of demonstrating the mystery which man represents to himself implies a spiritual route, an inner transformation. This intention defines the form, modality and content of Pascal's reasoning. Dostoevsky accomplishes a similar operation on the artistic level, using the paradox to guide his artistic thinking and the narrative structure of many of his works. His enduring and profound relation with Pascal's reflection illuminates this paradoxicality with a singular ethic force, with a profound and tormented humanity, with a paradoxical and unfailing trust in man despite overwhelming evidence, despite all of Reason's arguments, which are constantly presented in their weakness and sterility in front of the *reasons of the heart*.

58 "The fundamental and the loftest idea of human existence is the necessity and the inevitability of a conviction in the immortality of the human soul. [...] Without this belief in one's own soul and in its immortality human existence is unnatural, unthinkable, and intolerable. [...] This disbelief strikes root also thanks to some strange indifferentism towards the highest idea of human existence. [...] There is *only one* higher idea on earth, and it is the immortality of the human soul, for all the other 'higher' ideas of life by which humans might live *derive from that idea alone*".