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Individualism and the Metaphysics of Freedom; Or, Deconstructing Dostoevsky

I waited for freedom, I cried for it to come quickly;
I wanted to put myself to the test again, to renew the struggle...
All this, of course, concerns nobody but myself.
Fyodor Dostoevsky

A mere twelve pages in to his 360-page fictionalized memoir, *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky previews the slipperiness of the work's overarching motif, human freedom:

> There were some rugged and unyielding characters who found it difficult and had to force themselves, but they did submit. Some who came to the prison had burst all bounds, broken through every restraint, when they were free, so that in the end their very crimes were committed, as it were, not of their own volition but as though they did not know why they had acted so, as though they were delirious or possessed [...]. "We are a lost people", they said, "we did not know how to live in freedom".[1]

Even in this short piece of exposition, we have "unyielding characters" *submitting* before the next sentence can even commence. We see them, these Russian commoners, bursting "all bounds", and breaking through "every restraint", *prior* to being imprisoned, not after. And none of this, our narrator claims, is "of their own volition", but as though they were "delirious or possessed". Not in control of their faculties (and hence not free). To round out these metaphorical restraints which seemingly exist independently of incarceration, we get a chorus of sorts, an implied pleading for leniency reminiscent of Luke 23:34: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do...": *they did not know how to live in freedom*.

1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, transl. by Jessie Coulson (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 12.

Freedom is the ideal, made possible only by its supplement, *originary* unfreedom. I want to argue that Dostoevsky's text shows that even when the peasant is "free", he still feels an absence, an incompleteness in need of supplementation. Freedom becomes the 'absent presence' (or the presence of an absence) which gives Dostoevsky's narrator the idealization of a *full* freedom, which, in its fleeting absence, he can barely imagine and never actually articulate. The mere concept of 'freedom', I argue, continually slips away from the narrator like so much sand through one's fingers; with this specific opposition or difference – freedom/unfreedom – the 'exterior', deprivileged term (unfreedom) continues to sneak back into any attempt to fortify or secure the privileged term (freedom). In short, both terms are always already at work as an opposition, with the hierarchized term depending on the other for its identity. What our narrator is in effect chasing is the primary source or 'origin' of freedom, that which imbues it with meaning – the *supplement*. "The 'unmotivatedness' of the sign", Jacques Derrida argues, "requires a synthesis in which the completely other is announced as such – without any simplicity, any identity, any resemblance of continuity – within what is not it".[2]

In Derridean terms, the "supplement" refers to that which provides the metaphysical concept of 'freedom' with the illusion of *presence*, the idea that it exists prior *to* and independently *of* its opposite. Clearly, as our excerpt demonstrates, this cannot be the case. There is no pure 'freedom' prior to or independent of (literal or metaphorical) prison, regardless of how doggedly our narrator attempts to capture it, to solidify it, to make it whole. I'll attempt to demonstrate how Dostoevsky's text repeatedly deconstructs itself on this point; this feedback loop of freedom, the attempt to harness what clearly doesn't exist in any containable form, serves as the basis for the aporia at the heart of the work, linked, inextricably, to its individualist ideology.

Memoirs from the House of the Dead[3] consists of a series of 'sketches', a fictionalized form resembling loose autobiography, inspired by Dostoevsky's stint in a prison camp in Omsk – a period during which, biographers of the author claim, Dostoevsky, a "noble" by birth, abandoned the idealism of his youth for a more conservative brand of individualism, an ethos described by Joseph Frank as "autonomy of personality": "His prison solitude had proven to him that the autonomy of the human personality could be a living reality [...]. It was only when he arrived at the prison camp, and was forced to live cheek-by-jowl with the peasant-convicts, that some of his earlier opinions were directly

2 Jacques J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 47.

3 Otherwise translated as *Notes from the house of the Dead* or simply *Notes from a Dead House*.

challenged; only then did he begin to realize to what extent he had been a dupe of illusions about the Russian peasant and the nature of Russian social-political reality".[4] Geoffrey Kabat, author of *Ideology and Imagination: The Image of Society in Dostoevsky*, argues that Dostoevsky had, as a result of his imprisonment, developed "a new sense of the density of the society within which the individual life is lived", and that he had "learned a lesson in class consciousness at the hands of the peasant convicts".[5]

But this lesson seems to have resulted, at least initially, in a somewhat cynical, elitist attitude toward the Russian peasantry, one that the younger Dostoevsky – author of *Poor Folk*, member of the Petrashevsky Circle – hadn't harbored. One of his earliest realizations upon entering the prison was that his preconceived notion of 'rank' seemed to operate in reverse: "It was just as if the status of convict, of condemned man, constituted some kind of rank, and that an honorable one. Not a sign of shame or remorse!"[6] The tone here is somewhere between bemused and astonished (assuming the faithfulness of the translation, which is more salient: the "as if" or the exclamation point?). *The idea that being a criminal could be a badge of honor – unthinkable!* If this weren't a running theme throughout the book, perhaps we could write it off as an aside, a musing. But it's a leitmotif: "The hatred which I, as a gentleman, constantly experienced from the convicts during my first years in prison became unbearable and my whole life was poisoned with venom" (*Ibid.*, p. 272). Even in the final pages the narrator is still lamenting "the changes in habits, the mode of life, food, and other things, which are of course harder to bear for a man from the higher strata of society than for a peasant, who *when he was free not infrequently went hungry and who in prison at least eats his fill*" (*Ibid.*, p. 307 – my emphasis). A peasant is free, that is, to "not infrequently" go hungry.

This notion of 'rank' becomes a prism through which we can interrogate the theme proper: freedom. The interconnectedness of these binaries (serf/nobleman, free/unfree) is as old as prison literature itself, making its first appearance in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, generally regarded as being the original prison memoir. Much of Books II and III of the *Consolation* are concerned primarily with the argument that rank itself is an illusion, which "when conferred upon unrighteous men, not only does not make them honorable, but more than this, it betrays them and shows them up as dishonorable".[7] True repression

4 Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859* (London: Robson, 2002), p. 88.

5 Geoffrey C. Kabat, *Ideology and Imagination: The Image of Society in Dostoevsky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 54-55.

6 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, p. 13.

7 A. M. Severinus Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), p. 41.

cannot be implemented, Boethius argues, over a "spirit that is free" because the power of the tyrant is both unjust and ephemeral. As for the binaries themselves, Boethius is unequivocal:

> For it is not in the habit of opposites to join themselves together; Nature distains the conjunction of pairs of opposites. Therefore, since there can be no doubt that the most despicable people are commonly installed in positions of power, then this is clear: Those things are not good in their own nature that allow themselves to attach to despicable people.[8]

Dostoevsky, when describing these same "despicable people", retains the binary in all its materiality while simultaneously complicating his own metaphysics of freedom: "Officer's rank seems to turn their inner selves, and their heads as well, upside down [yet] with their superiors they display a servility which is completely unnecessary and even distasteful to many superior officers... But in relation to inferior ranks they are almost absolute dictators".[9] The question here, as always, is the utility of the supplement; if this display of servility – which implies a lack of freedom – were "completely unnecessary", adding nothing, then it would be truly superfluous; yet we still toil with these fools, watch them squirm as they "live this almost impossible experience, that is almost alien to the constraints of supplementarity, already as a supplement, as a *compensation*".[10]

As Boethius so coolheadedly points out, "political rank and power are externally conferred upon a person and are not anything other than an arbitrary and transitory gift of Fortune".[11] The compulsion to compensate for a lack – an "externally conferred upon" rank – creates, according to French theorists Deleuze and Guattari, a subject who is "fantasy-produced". It's not the object that's missing, but the subject who latches onto desire, and desire "does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression".[12] Thus, these subjects, these 'men of rank', are (like us all, perhaps) the mere residuum of repression (From this we might deduce the syllogism: repression inhibits freedom/we are all repressed/therefore, we are not free subjects).

8 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
9 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, p. 133.
10 Derrida, p. 250.
11 Boethius, p. 165.
12 Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 26.

Material rank, like (metaphysical) freedom, is a fantasy, externally conferred, a compensation, a supplement. Such oppositional logic (superior/inferior, free/unfree) becomes entirely unsustainable: titles conferred upon officers reveal a *trace* of mediations and differences, each opening up the possibility of the other while simultaneously closing them off. Every attempt at representation is undermined by a surreptitious appeal to that which is unrepresentable; servile one minute, dictatorial the next: who among these fools was ever 'free' to begin with? "In this play of representation", Derrida reminds us, "the point of origin becomes ungraspable".[13]

In short, Dostoevsky had formulated what he perceived to be a more *refined* concept of freedom, away from his youthful idealisms of Russian brotherhood and comradeship, and towards something that, years later, the "underground man" would describe as the "most advantageous advantage", or "what is most precious and most important – that is, our personality, our individuality".[14] Yet this concept of individual liberty is repeatedly undermined by the logic of the supplement, the *trace*: that which reveals an inherent lack within what postulates as a moment of pure presence. "The peasant in freedom works", Dostoevsky[15] claims, "incomparably harder and sometimes even far into the night [...] but he works for himself and for reasonable ends, and it is infinitely easier for him than for the convict doing forced labor without any advantage to himself" (*ibid.*, p. 24). From a temporal standpoint, there are two ways of situating this argument: from the viewpoint of Dostoevsky during the mid-1850s, when he would have been mixing with these peasants, or from his writer's desk in the early 1860s, at which point the serfs had finally been emancipated, a "landmark in Russian history" during which, "in order to modernize, the country had to go through a period of 'primitive accumulation'".[16] Either way, it's difficult to interpret Dostoevsky's description of the 'free peasant' as anything but an oxymoron. Kabat himself alludes to the implications of this "eruption" in terms of crime: "If crime has its origin in the eruption of the repressed craving

13 Derrida, p. 36.

14 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, transl. by Kyril Zinovieff and Jenny Hughes (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), p. 20.

15 "The accepted view" according to Frank, "is that Dostoevsky introduced Goryanchikov primarily as a means of avoiding trouble with the censorship, and that he did not expect his readers to take him as more than a convenient device". Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865* (London: Robson, 2002), p. 219. That the book is "universally accepted as more or less a faithful account of Dostoevsky's own past as a political prisoner" (*ibid.*) is evidenced further by Dostoevsky's return to the narrative, without the pretense of a fictional narrator, years later in *The Peasant Marey* (which we'll be looking at later).

16 Kabat, p. 5.

for self-expression on the part of the peasants, by implication the world outside prison is not very different from the world inside from their point of view".[17] Kabat's insight here seems unintentionally tautological; what he refers to here and elsewhere as a "repressed craving for self-expression" could easily be rewritten as an "unrepressed realization of unfreedom". The peasants *know* they're not free – they're fully aware that "the world outside prison is not very different from the world inside".

Yet this is precisely the problem that Dostoevsky and others had been wrestling with at the time. Marx, who had been working on his own 'sketches' from a garret somewhere in Paris, had described wage labor in Europe as "not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*".[18] And as with Europe years earlier, Russian peasants were being "forced off the land and into factories, where they were reduced to wage slaves earning barely enough to keep them alive and working".[19] Thus, Dostoevsky's depiction of the peasant working "for himself and for reasonable ends" while reserving "forced labor" for the convict strikes us as tone deaf at best, even by nineteenth century standards.

Of course, we needn't venture outside of Dostoevsky's text to deconstruct; the nearest about-face occurs at the end of the very next chapter:

> There were even men who deliberately commit a crime simply in order to be sent to penal servitude and thus escape the incomparably harsher servitude of freedom. 'Outside' this man existed in the last stages of destitution, he never ate his fill, he toiled for his employer from morning till night; in prison, work is easier, he can eat to his heart's content; the food is better than he has ever known; there is beef on holidays...[20]

How to square this with the earlier account? It betrays what Derrida calls the "originary lack" or *arche-freedom*, "the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance".[21] Freedom is proving to be much more elusive, more malleable, more in need of supplementation, than the earlier chapter had led us to believe.

Earlier still, Dostoevsky had attempted to reify freedom by equating it with

17 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

18 Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2009), p. 74.

19 Kabat, p. 6.

20 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, p. 60.

21 Derrida, p. 112.

cash: "Money is coined freedom, and thus is ten times as dear to a man deprived of all other freedom".[22] One wonders how to begin the process of delineation: how to separate the *money* freedom from "all other" forms (whatever they might consist of, and however they might be quantified). We get a kind of clarification at the opening of the next chapter: "[T]he prisoner delights in money and esteems it more than anything else, almost equally with freedom" (*ibid.*, p. 43). And later, "What is it that ranks higher than money for the convict? Freedom, or at any rate, some illusion of freedom" (*ibid.*, p. 95).

Two things, according to the text, should be clear by now: while some *illusionary* version can be purchased inside, the only *true* and present freedom exists outside of prison walls, for the "whole idea of the word prisoner postulates a man without free will; but when he flings away money the prisoner is acting *of his own free will"* (*ibid.*). For the prisoner on a binge, flinging copecks about and downing adulterated vodka, the idea is to "pretend to his fellows (and even to convince himself, *for however short a time*) that he has more will-power and authority than he appears to have" (*ibid.*).[23] One wonders who enjoys more freedom: the average Russian citizen living in destitution or the convict flush with cash. Either way, our definition is getting increasingly knotty, steeped as it is in "the suppression of contradiction and difference".[24] Could it be that the prisoner is, for his money, buying an illusion of a nonexistent commodity? An illusion of an illusion? Might freedom have no stable meaning? Could the entire concept be simply and forever caught up in the endless play of signification? And, to that point, suppose that the prison merely emerges from a gap – an "originary lack" – at the core of freedom itself. What if the call is coming from *inside* the house?

We suspect that the precarity of the freedom/unfreedom binary is itself embedded within a larger conception – an overarching duality that Dostoevsky seemed to have struggled with throughout this period and beyond: that of society versus the individual. At times, the author of the *Memoirs* digresses into the virtues of personal responsibility, the likes of which wouldn't be out of place on any right-leaning reddit thread: "It is high time for us to stop our apathetic complaining that our environment has ruined us [...]. [A] clever and accomplished rogue will often use the influence of his environment to cover and excuse not only his weakness but his evil doing as well, especially if he has the gift of fine

22 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, p. 19.

23 I'm tempted to blame the clunky verbiage here on the translation; it should probably read: "that he *appears* to have more will-power and authority than he *actually does"*.

24 Derrida, p. 115.

speech or writing".[25] But how to square this, then, with another digression in the very next chapter, one that indicts the 'contagions of power' on an almost Foucauldian level: "[This] despotism is a temptation. A society which contemplates such manifestations calmly is already corrupted at the roots".[26] Whether or not Dostoevsky experienced corporal punishment at the hands of these 'tyrants' is a matter of some debate, but it can't be ignored that these 'ulcers of society' are being described during the same period that the author was wrestling with dialectical materialism, somewhat ham-handedly, in his journalism:

> This very rebellious and demanding individual [...] must above all sacrifice all of his *I*, his entire self, to society, and not only without demanding his rights, but, on the contrary, giving them up to society unconditionally. But the Western personality is not used to such rights; it wants to be *separate* – and so brotherhood does not come. Of course, it may be regenerated. But it takes thousands of years to accomplish this regeneration, for such ideas must first enter into the flesh and blood in order to become a reality.[27]

There's a subtle sleight of hand at play here; notice how the sovereign *'I'* – the "Western personality" – becomes susceptible to a 'demanding' society hell-bent on usurping individual liberty. But then this vague goal of "brotherhood", which may or may not be accomplished, seems contingent upon the amount of time allocated toward "regeneration". Whether or not the "thousands of years" strikes us as arbitrarily quantified, the implication is that nature is vulnerable to corruption by time. Seemingly, nature plus time *equals* culture.

Here, also, we glimpse the germ of the underground man, whose monologue on the "theory of the regeneration of mankind" occupies its own digression in the novella: "What man wants is simply *independent* choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead".[28] It is our assertion that Dostoevsky, like so great philosophers before him, struggled to reconcile society with the individual – what Freud described as the "reality principle" –

25 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, p. 218. Again, even if we grant that this is a 'novel' and that the author and narrator should not be collapsed into one, it bears repeating that both were members of the nineteenth-century Russian noble class and hence pampered, educated, and basically exempted from poverty. Thus, we find these libertarian rantings to be rather fitting, if not entirely compelling.

26 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, p. 237.

27 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, transl. by David Patterson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), pp. 48-49.

28 Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, p. 18.

and that his largely psychological approach to the problem accounts for what he calls the "hair in the mechanism": that which finds its way into the gap and threatens to "crack and destroy everything".[29] What had obsessed the likes of Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss – and hence so much of what succumbs to deconstruction in the texts of Derrida – is this idea that culture corrupts nature from the outside. But how could this be? How could the state of nature – so Edenic and *full* as a 'being-in-itself' – even be susceptible to such an intrusion? Why would culture have manifested in the first place if it weren't already endemic to nature? Likewise, why is it that whenever we encounter 'freedom' with Dostoevsky does he always mean "more, less, or something other than he *would mean*" if freedom existed in a pure state?[30]

This brings us to the centerpiece of my argument, the point at which even the pretense of an 'original' freedom can no longer be maintained. What follows is Dostoevsky's depiction of a peasant run amok, a 'free' citizen caught up in the metaphysical feedback loop:

> It is as if the man were intoxicated or in the grip of a raging fever. As if, having once transgressed the boundary that has been sacred for him, he begins to revel in the fact that for him there is no longer anything sacred; as if he had been carried away by overleaping at one bound all the restrictions of legality and authority, tasting the sweets of the most unbridled and infinite liberty, and knowing the pleasure of those pangs of terror of himself which it is impossible for him not to feel. He knows, in addition, that a terrible punishment awaits him.[31]

This of course echoes our opening excerpt, the depiction of the 'free' peasant in a state of "delirium" or "possession", bursting "all bounds" and breaking "through every restraint". This has been the problem all along, hasn't it? How, even outside of prison, can there be true freedom if our conscious lives are essentially epiphenomenal? If what rises to the level of consciousness is simply an effect of our deterministic instincts? The fact that Dostoevsky repeatedly resorts to confinement metaphors in order to harness, linguistically, the metaphysical "sweets of the most unbridled and infinite liberty" – what could be more indicative of the emperor's nakedness? Even Nietzsche (who we know was smitten with Dostoevsky) would be at pains to disentangle this incoherent muddling of forces: human, all too human, yet caught up in the infinite

29 Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes*, p. 49.
30 Derrida, p. 158.
31 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, p. 129.

play of signification. "It is *we* alone", Nietzsche says, "who have devised cause, sequence, reciprocity, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose; and when we interpret and intermix this symbol-world as 'being-in-itself,' with things, we act once more as we have always acted – *mythologically*".[32]

It isn't merely *precarious*, this concept of freedom; it never existed pristinely on one side of a wall and then, for a price, as an illusion on the other. It is and always was *mythological*. And this was something that Dostoevsky struggled with throughout this entire 'transition period' between the early novels (*Poor Folk*, *The Double*) of the 1840s and the 'great novels' (*Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*) of the 1860s. Frank, his biographer, alludes to this without quite putting his finger on the problem:

> Always preoccupied with the deformations of character caused by lack of freedom, Dostoevsky had explored this theme in his early stories; but there he had barely scratched the surface. Life in [the] prison camp gave him a unique vantage point from which to study human beings living under extreme psychic pressure, and responding to such pressure with the most frenzied behavior.[33]

But we need only to look at the text to see that this "extreme psychic pressure" and "frenzied behavior" *antedated* the prison experience. This idea of freedom as a 'being-in-itself', pure and uncorrupted by cultural forces – is a myth. Derrida could be talking about his very thing when he argues that "the *thing itself* is thus undermined, in its act and in its essence, by frustration. One cannot therefore say that it has an essence or an act [...]. Something promises itself as it escapes, called presence. Such is the constraint of the supplement, such, exceeding all the language of metaphysics, is this structure 'almost inconceivable to reason'".[34] During this same period, Dostoevsky was arguing, both in his journalism and his fiction, that reason (utilitarianism, rational egoism) taken to its logical conclusion would result in a *lack* of personal freedom. He devoted a great deal of space in his relatively short travelogue, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, to the argument that Russian flirtation with European rationalist/socialist ideology was foolhardy:

> Of course, there is a great attraction in living, if not on a brotherly basis, then on a purely rational basis, that is, in living well, when they guarantee everything

32 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Essential Nietzsche: Beyond Good and Evil and the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Chartwell Books, 2017), p. 28.

33 Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal*, p. 146.

34 Derrida, p. 154.

> and demand only your labor and your consent [...]. But no, a man does not want to live even according to these calculations, for even a little drop is hard for him to give up. In his foolishness it seems to him that this is a prison and that he is better off all by himself, because that way he is free. And in his freedom, you know, he is beaten, he is offered no work, he dies of hunger, *and he has no freedom at all; and yet, it seems to this odd fellow that he is better off with his freedom* (emphasis added).[35]

The contemporary reader is of course familiar with this well-worn, hyperbolic argument: anything short of unfettered free market capitalism amounts to prison, and 'the people' will never stand for it. Yet here again – as the italicized portion attests – a precise conception of freedom cannot even survive the duration of a sentence, let alone a body of work. Soon after, Dostoevsky would take this thesis to satirical heights with his underground man persona:

> Shower upon him every earthly blessing [...] give him economic prosperity, such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes, and busy himself with the continuation of his species, and then even out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick [...] It is just his fantastic dreams, his vulgar folly that he will desire to retain, simply in order to prove to himself – as though that were so necessary – that men are still men and not the keys of a piano...[36]

Tempted as we may be to dismiss these as the rantings of a fictional misanthrope, scholars agree that his was essentially the author's basic philosophy: "Faced with the choice of preserving the full autonomy of personality or surrendering part of it in order to obtain some self-advantage, mankind, Dostoevsky firmly believed, would instinctively choose suffering and hardship for the sake of freedom".[37] We can see the seeds of this philosophy taking shape in the *Memoirs* as he describes the desperate peasants' state of mind:

> The more subdued they were previously, the more strongly they are moved to swagger and try to inspire terror now. They relish the terror and enjoy even the disgust they arouse in others. They affect a kind of *desperation*, and a man so 'desperate' is sometimes eager for punishment, eager to have *his fate decided*,

35 Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes*, p. 51.
36 Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, p. 21.
37 Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation*, p. 246.

> because at last it becomes difficult for him to bear the weight of this assumed *desperation*.[38]

Yet, we notice, this "desperation" has nothing to do with the peasant being unfree. On the contrary, this is Dostoevsky's depiction of the peasant who "could not live in freedom".

Now we're getting to the core of the problem, the "performative contradiction", as Derrida would say. It would seem that, for the peasant, it is unfettered freedom that induces "delirium", "possession", and "grips of raging fever". But for the nobleman, it's precisely the opposite. Whether it's the thinly-veiled 'narrator' of his prison memoirs, his journalistic persona, or his 'educated' underground man, Dostoevsky envisages the same sort of spiteful outrage as the logical consequence of an encroaching *lack* of freedom. *Freedom for me, but not for thee!*

It is the inherent instability of the peasant/nobleman binary that drives the entire mythology – a precarity of hierarchy that runs all through Dostoevsky's writings from this period. Commenting on the sadistic behavior of the one of the higher-ranking prison officers, Dostoevsky says, "A man like the major must always have someone to oppress, something to take away from somebody, somebody to deprive of his rights, in short, an opportunity of wreak havoc" (*ibid.*, p. 176). And in the following chapter, this bit of (confessional) narration:

> I always wanted to do everything for myself and was particularly anxious not even to seem to put myself forward as a soft-handed and womanish creature playing the fine gentleman. In fact, to be honest, some part of my self-esteem depended on this attitude. But – and I decidedly do not understand why this always happened – I could never shake off the various servitors and hangers-on who attached themselves to me and finally got me completely in their power, so that in reality they were my masters and I was their servant... (*ibid.*, p. 205)

And then we have this curious bit of narration from the *Winter Notes*: "Not long ago I heard that a certain landowner of our day has also begun to wear the *Russian costume* in order to blend in with the people and to attend local meetings in it: as soon as they see him, they say to each other, 'Who is that mummer hanging around here?"[39] It would seem that the nobleman, whether he is oppressing the peasant, endeavoring to ingratiate himself to him, or merely trying

38 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, p. 129.
39 Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes*, p. 14.

to blend in – he is never 'present'. Neither the serf nor the nobleman, we see, has fallen from a state of freedom into unfreedom, a state of mastery into servitude or vice versa. All of this stems from a crisis within 'freedom' itself.

We could speculate that Dostoevsky's muddled relationship with freedom is rooted in his ideological ambivalence upon emerging from Siberia. Four years in Omsk, another five in the Russian army – reacclimating to St. Petersburg's high(er) society was bound to be precarious, and the struggling writer immediately found himself in another kind of prison: that of his editors. Feeling besmirched both creatively and culturally,[40] Dostoevsky decided to start his own journal, *Vremya*, with his brother, Mikhail (who, because of Fyodor's status as an ex-con, assumed primacy on the masthead). The journal's mission statement championed 'pochvennichestvo': a sort of blended ideology that basically embraced the Petrine reforms while eschewing encroaching Westernism. Slavophilism was fine, so long as it emerged naturally through the writing, avoiding didacticism and clichés. Contributors' texts would be subject to an "organic criticism" that would keep them as pure as possible, unhindered by the pedantry of traditional editing.[41] Literature should shoot for some sort of ideological sweet spot: avoiding both utilitarianism and the vacuousness of 'art for art's sake'. Dostoevsky envisioned his fledgling journal as a vehicle for a 'new form' for the Russian people: "taken from our soil, taken from our national spirit and our national origins".[42]

Simply put, the writing should reflect the world of the commoner, the 'man of the soil', and thus the nobleman (the traditional audience) will come to develop a deeper understanding of the peasant's plight. Meanwhile the common man (the new target audience), through his identification with the material, will come to develop a taste for the arts: both sides meet in the middle and everyone wins. However well-intentioned Dostoevsky and his team may have

40 According to Susan Fusso, Dostoevsky complained that he'd been reduced to a "'proletarian', dependent on the good will of editors". Susan Fusso, "Prelude to a collaboration: Dostoevsky's Aesthetic Polemic with Mikhail Katkov", in Svetlana Evdokimova, Vladimir Golstein, *Dostoevsky Beyond Dostoevsky: Science, Religion, Philosophy* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), p. 196, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781644690291-012.

41 Ellen Chances, "Literary Criticism and the Ideology of Pochvennichestvo in Dostoevsky's Thick Journals *Vremia* and *Epokha*", *Russian Review*, 34(2), 1975, p. 154, *passim*, https://doi.org/10.2307/127714.

42 *ПСС* 13; 498, quoted in Chances, p. 152. While in prison, Dostoevsky had reembraced Christianity (his only reading material was the *New Testament*), the importance of which, in terms of his oeuvre, need not be reiterated here. Basically, Dostoevsky believed that literature should embody "the ideal of a particular epoch", and that ideal was "narodnost" – the fidelity to Russian heritage tinged with Christian values (Chances, pp. 160, 162).

been, though, an inevitable contradiction emerged: an increasing emphasis on morality engendered an (inorganic) dip into didacticism: unbridled art opened the door and utility crept back in.[43] Freedom, it seems, was *binding*: the unshakable aporia at the heart of one too many Dostoevskian projects.

Of all of the binaries (nature/culture, good/evil, speech/writing), Derrida argues that "one in particular requires our special notice [...]. Among all these representations, the exteriority of liberty and nonliberty is perhaps privileged. More clearly than others, it brings together the historical (political, economic, technological) and the metaphysical".[44] Or, as Rousseau routinely argued, the natural and the cultural: "Our inner conflicts are caused by these contradictions. Drawn this way by nature and that way by man, compelled to yield, to both forces, we make a compromise and reach neither goal".[45] Destined to fall between the proverbial barstools of liberty and nonliberty, we "go through life, struggling and hesitating, and die before we have found peace, useless to ourselves and to others".[46]

All through the *Memoirs*, the concept of freedom is chimerical, fetishized with a dreamlike quality: "From the very first day of my life in prison I had begun to dream of freedom. Calculating when my term would come to an end became my favorite occupation [...]. I am sure that everyone deprived of liberty for a fixed term must behave in the same way".[47] Towards the end, however, we do get something new, something along the lines of that *refined* concept, that freedom is indeed ungraspable – that Dostoevsky's fetishization of it may have been little more than a dream: "I will mention here in passing that, in consequence of our daydreams and our long divorce from it, freedom somehow seemed to us freer than freedom, the freedom, that is, that exists in fact, in real life. The prisoners exaggerated the idea of real freedom, and that is very natural and characteristic of all prisoners".[48]

We might consider this to be a foreshadowing of sorts, a conversion-in-process that appears to have taken place in Dostoevsky's heart, even if it took him two decades to finally document it. *The Peasant Marey* appears amidst a series of sketches compiled in *A Writers Diary*, many of them autobiographical. In this particular sketch, Dostoevsky essentially reprises his narratorial role from the *Memoirs*. The setup is a typically raucous Easter week at the prison camp,

43 Chances, p. 163.
44 Derrida, p. 168.
45 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (London: Everyman, 1993), p. 9.
46 *Ibid.*
47 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, pp. 114-115.
48 *Ibid.*, p. 359.

during which the prisoners were particularly rowdy and drunk and violent, annoying Dostoevsky to no end. Disgusted with the riffraff, the twenty-nine-year-old nobleman flees the barracks, only to return fifteen minutes later, intent on feigning sleep and hopefully escaping molestation. The essence of the story is embedded in the framing: one of many soul-crushing experiences at Omsk catalyzes a Proustian 'madeleine moment' in which Dostoevsky retreats, subconsciously, into the safe haven of his childhood: "These memories arose in my mind; rarely did I summon them up consciously. They would begin from a certain point, some little thing that was often barely perceptible, and then bit by bit they would grow into a finished picture, some strong and complete impression".[49] The complete impression in this case materializes into the vivid memory of an excursion into the woods near his childhood home. "Summer was on the wane", Dostoevsky writes, "and soon I would have to go back to Moscow to spend the whole winter in boredom over my French lessons" (*ibid.*, p. 3).

Thus, the setup to the memory proper mirrors the circumstance under which it was catalyzed: lack of freedom. The crux of the story involves a hallucination: the young Dostoevsky imagines a wolf coming for him through the woods, a potentially traumatic experience from which he's 'rescued' by one of the family serfs, Marey. At this point the narrative slows down and the exposition gives way to scenic detail:

> [Marey] stretched out his hand and stroked my cheek. "Never mind, now, there's nothing to be afraid of. Christ be with you. Cross yourself, lad". But I couldn't cross myself; the corners of my mouth were trembling, and I think this particularly struck him. He quietly stretched out a thick, earth-soiled finger with a black nail and gently touched it to my trembling lips" (*ibid.*).

Reassured, the somewhat embarrassed boy slinks away, carful to look over his shoulder every few steps to engage with Marey and his 'maternal smile'. He reiterates the image of the "finger soiled with dirt" and the "trembling lips." The scene itself covers barely a page, but so engrossed are we by now that that we've nearly forgotten about the frame: that the whole point of this story – written by Dostoevsky when he was in his mid-fifties – was that the involuntary memory had been triggered, initially, by the twenty-nine-year-old prisoner's attempt at escape, if only for a moment, into the comfort of his childhood. But why *this* memory at *this* particular moment? And, more importantly, why had he left

49 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Peasant Marey*, transl. by Kenneth Lantz (Blackmask Online, 2001), http://public-library.uk/ebooks/74/9.pdf, p. 2.

such a salient memory out of the *Memoirs of the House of the Dead?* He'd covered the same time period, Easter week, with some similar narration, even hinting at one point that fonder memories had in fact been percolating:

> I did not see the good people, the people who were capable of both thinking and feeling, in spite of the repulsive crust that covered them on the surface. Among all the wounding words I never noticed the affectionate kind word, which was all the dearer because it was spoken without any ulterior motive, and not infrequently from a heart that had borne and suffered more than mine. But why enlarge upon this?[50]

To reframe that question: why *not* enlarge upon it? For in *The Peasant Marey* he does just that: "And so when I climbed down from my bunk and looked around, I remember I suddenly felt I could regard these unfortunates in an entirely different way and that suddenly, through some sort of miracle, the former hatred and anger in my heart had vanished".[51] Thus, the question isn't why the sudden change of heart, but why the reluctance to report it years earlier, when the anecdote might have jelled, chronologically at least, with the project at hand? When the inclusion of such a salient anecdote might have provided a nice balance – softened, perhaps, a rather aloof and unsympathetic 'noble' narrator.

The answer, I suggest, may be located near the end of the vignette, when Dostoevsky revisits his concept of freedom, this time in the context of an empathic peasant: "Our encounter was solitary, in an open field, and only God, perhaps, looking down saw what deep and enlightened human feeling and what delicate, almost feminine tenderness could fill the heart of a coarse, bestially ignorant Russian serf who at the time did not expect or even dream of his freedom" (*ibid.*). When we juxtapose Marey with his opposite – those "despicable people" (men of 'rank') whom we referenced earlier in this essay, we can see that the logic of the supplement is at work in both cases: "Officer's rank seems to turn their inner selves, and their heads as well, upside down [...] they display a servility which is completely unnecessary". In the case of Marey, it's the empathy that he displays "without any ulterior motive" and with "only God, perhaps, looking down" – that would seem unnecessary. But we can see that these *needlessnesses* "relate to each other according to the structure of supplementarity" in that both cases "are metaphysical determinations – and there-

50 Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the dead*, p. 276.
51 Dostoyevsky, *The Peasant Marey*, p. 4.

fore inherited, arranged with a laborious and interrelating coherence – of *supplementary differance*".[52] The empathy and humanity of a supposedly 'coarse' and 'beastial' peasant, the servility and slavishness of a 'ranking' officer – these representations are always and already caught up in the play of signification, spreading out into a network of traces, mediations, and ambiguations – so on down the endless chain of signifiers.

Who, then, is *freer* in Dostoevsky's oeuvre: the sniveling and obsequious officers, or the 'enlightened humans', the serfs? Perhaps Dostoevsky's texts are operating according to the same subconscious mechanism that produced the memory of Marey to begin with, the "thing that was often barely perceptible, and then bit by bit [...] would grow into a finished picture". Perhaps the wiser Dostoevsky had begun to sense that the 'finished picture' is just that: a picture that is always already *un*finished, seeming only to be present by virtue of the absence that makes it possible in the first place; that these opposites (serf/noble, free/unfree) cannot exist in isolation from each other, that we cannot even contemplate the officer's slavishness without the serf's benevolence, that these are but links in "an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception".[53] Perhaps that apocryphal quote, the one so often misattributed to Dostoevsky, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons" – is more resonant than we could have imagined, no matter who wrote it.

52 Derrida, p. 183.
53 *Ibid.*, p. 157.