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## Dostoevsky's 'boulevard' novel. The influence of the boulevard press on *Devils*

The final chapters of *The Idiot*, written in January 1869, ended on a note of high Gothic drama – and low approval at the hands of contemporary critics. The first references to *Devils* appear in Dostoevsky's notebooks in February 1870 and copy started to flow to Katkov's *The Russian Messenger* (*Russky Vestnik*) from the middle of that year. Provincial bickering had been overlaid on Gothic drama, small-town chicanery on high moral purpose. In the intervening year Dostoevsky had moved from Florence to Dresden, had written and published *The Eternal Husband*, and had struggled constantly to keep his growing family solvent. Elsewhere, a flourishing boulevard press in England and France had proved the existence of a mass readership; Renan and Darwin were challenging existing frameworks of faith, and revolution had again shaken France. What would work for Dostoevsky – artistically, philosophically, financially?

This paper considers the publishing context in which Dostoevsky wrote *Devils* and argues that the novel, perhaps more clearly than any of his other works, demonstrates the influence of the newly emerging boulevard press and the genre of the *faits divers*.<sup>1</sup> It suggests that the style and construction of *Devils* betray an attempt to reconcile the demands of the traditional readers of the thick journal with the evolving tastes of the readership of the boulevard papers. At its best, the novel offers some of Dostoevsky's most assured and effective writing. At the same time, it mirrors Dostoevsky's own authorial concerns about the problems of writing for a Russian readership in 1870.

1 The *fait divers* is a brief newspaper article, usually of a scandalous or sensational nature such as a murder or suicide, of ephemeral interest. The technique was extensively used by French newspapers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term is conventionally claimed to have originated from coverage of the Troppmann murders, trial and execution in 1869 (see below), but in fact it had been in use for much of the century, initially to encompass small public announcements and only gradually acquiring its current meaning. A Russian approximation might be 'смесь', which had also been used for decades in the thick journals as a rubric for miscellanies but in contexts less associated with the sensational. For a discussion of the genre, see Ambroise-Rendu, Anne-Claude, "Les Faits divers" in Dominique KALIFA, Philippe RÉGNIER, Marie-Eve THÉRENTY, Alain VAILLANT (dir.), *La Civilisation du journal* (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2011), pp. 979-997.

*Revolution in Europe... and in the press*

Life in the Dresden of 1870 must have appeared chaotic, stressful and full of contradictions. The French Second Empire was drawing to a close just as Bismarck was laying the foundations of a newly unified German Empire. War between France and Germany broke out just as Dostoevsky was beginning to write *Devils*. Revolution had reared its head closer to home, as well, in the shape of the 1869 plot organized by Sergey Nechaev and the subsequent murder of Ivan Ivanov which was to form the basis for the plot of the novel. By the time Dostoevsky had finished it in November 1871 the French had been defeated, Paris had been occupied and Nechaev was still in hiding abroad. Revolution had followed, the Second Empire collapsed, but within months the short-lived Commune had been put down in a week of bloody reprisals. Meanwhile in Germany Bismarck consolidated his victory over France with the annexation of Alsace Lorraine and on 16 April 1871 the Constitution of the new German Empire was ratified by the new Reichstag.

As the 1870s opened, the Russian economy was in the middle of a temporary boom. Finally, it seemed, the upheaval caused by the Great Reforms was resulting in urbanisation and industrial growth. Investors took heart at the improving economic conditions and poured money into Russian businesses. Between 1870 and 1873 almost 260 companies were founded, with a combined capital on just over half a billion roubles. The euphoria would not last. By 1874 the bubble had burst, investors fled and the economy collapsed, to be followed by a renewed sense of isolation as protectionist barriers were erected.<sup>2</sup>

Dostoevsky and Anna had arrived in Dresden in mid-1869. The heat of Florence might have been left behind, but Dresden did not feel like home. Anna Grigorevna was pregnant and homesick. Dostoevsky's letters reveal a sense of isolation – a 'real' Russian in a city of emigrés. He was penniless, forced at one point to pawn his overcoat for food. Turning authorship into income was a constant struggle. *The Idiot* had been poorly received by the critics and had failed to boost the circulation of Katkov's *The Russian Messenger*. Katkov remained supportive but slow to pay up, perhaps unimpressed that Dostoev-

2. For a more general discussion of the Russian economy in the 1870s see Alexander POLUNOV, *Russia in the Nineteenth Century: Autocracy, Reform and Social Change, 1814-1914*, ed. by Owen Thomas and Larissa Zakharova (Armonk: Sharpe, 2005), pp. 125-138; Михаил В. КОНОТОПОВ, Станислав И. СМЕТАНИН, *История экономики России* (Москва: КноРус, 2008), с. 166-180; and Raymond GOLDSMITH, "The Economic Growth of Tsarist Russian 1860-1913", *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 9(3), April 1961, pp. 441-475.

sky's next work, *The Eternal Husband*, had gone to Kashpîrev's newly founded *Dawn (Zarya)*. The reprint rights for *Crime and Punishment* had been sold for 3,000 roubles to Stellovsky who failed to pay up. Dostoevsky's epileptic fits had returned with increasing frequency. He even started gambling again, in January 1871. As usual, he lost.

Dostoevsky had been living in Europe since 1867: his second extended stay. He can hardly have failed to notice what was happening in the contemporary press. Industrialisation across Europe had created the beginnings of a mass market of increasingly urban consumers. Reader demographics had changed: literacy was beginning to spread into urban factory workers, shopkeepers and merchants; women were becoming important consumers of fiction and fashion, and the provincial market for books and periodicals was becoming increasingly important as distribution improved.

As demographics changed, so did the product. In most markets economic forces drove the shift from the book format to subscription-based periodicals and, consequently, to the serialisation of prose fiction. These proliferated, to cover specific market segments as they emerged – from stock exchange news to family life. The 1860s saw the introduction of a new format which was to revolutionise not just the shape of the product but its content as well – the boulevard newspaper. Launched in France in 1863 with *Le Petit Journal*, the format had been copied almost immediately in the Russian market by *The Petersburg Flysheet (Petersburgsky listok)*, followed three years later by Arsenyev's slightly more upmarket *The Petersburg Gazette (Petersburgskaya gazeta)*.<sup>3</sup>

The format was targeted at the emerging mass readership and within a remarkably short period of time had established its own content and style. It focussed on the tastes of its new readership for the voyeuristic, the ephemeral and the exotic – stories of crime, court cases, sex, and in particular how other sections of society lived. It developed its own taxonomy, daring to categorise, analyse and publicise the previously unpublishable. It evolved its own style of compressed, sensationalist and technicolour reportage. It borrowed formats and genres from the established press and made them its own – the detective novel, the courtroom drama, the crime novel. And publishers saw it as a way of monetising the lowbrow tastes of a huge and growing new readership. An 1868 journalist in a French magazine sums up the recipe nicely:

3 Louise McREYNOLDS, *The News under Russia's Old Regime. The Development of a Mass-circulation Press* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), ch. 5 "The Newspaper from the Boulevard, 1864-1876," pp. 52-73.

Take 25 duels, 12 poisonings, 1 lost child, 1 policeman, 2 convicts, 4 spies, 1 mysterious good-looking male, 3 assassinations and 2 suicides. Place in a beaker and heat till white hot, then spread on paper with a goose quill, cut into strips and serve sequentially, referring each time to 'the next instalment', and open your cash register with confidence.<sup>4</sup>

Dostoevsky witnessed at first hand the impact of this revolution during his time in Dresden, just before starting work on *Devils*. A French serial killer, Jean-Baptiste Troppmann, had finally been caught after a killing spree which lasted from August to September 1869. His arrest, trial and eventual execution by guillotine on 16 January 1870 were reported in sensational terms across the entire European press. Even the dusty German press covered the story. Turgenev himself attended the execution and wrote about in *The Messenger of Europe* (*Vestnik Evropy*), and we know from his letters that Dostoevsky read Turgenev's article (see *IICC* 29; 127-129). What may not have been quite so obvious at the time was the commercial impact of the coverage. The circulation of *Le Petit Journal* jumped, from 30-40,000 before the discovery of Troppmann's first six bodies, to 300,000 as the news broke, then to 594,000 at his execution.<sup>5</sup> Publishers across Europe took note. A new readership had been created, a new way of communicating with it had been proven, and a new means of monetising the result had been demonstrated.

The emergence of the *faits divers* as a journalistic genre is conventionally dated to the reportage of the Troppmann murders. In fact, columns with this title had appeared several decades earlier, usually as a convenient way to group miscellaneous ephemera. The Troppmann affair seems to have created a specific association of the rubric with the genre of crime reporting and with a literary style based on sensationalism, drama and compression.<sup>6</sup> It found its home predominantly in the pages of the new boulevard newspapers and shared with them an obsession with the four cultural constants cited above – the voyeuristic, the ephemeral, the exotic and the taxonomic. The reason for the obsession is not hard to find: these were topics which could be relied on to create specific read-

4 « Mettez dans votre cornue 25 duels, 12 empoisonnements, 1 enfant perdu, 1 agent de police, 2 forçats, 4 mouchards, 1 beau jeune homme mystérieux, 3 assassinats et 2 suicides : faites chauffer à blanc et étendez sur le papier avec une plume d'oie, coupez par tranches que vous servirez une à une, en renvoyant chaque "fois au prochain numéro", et ouvrez avec confiance votre coffre-fort ». *Satan*, 29 Jan. 1868, cited by Roger BELLET in *Presse et journalisme sous le Second Empire*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967), p. 200.

5 *La Civilisation du journal*, p. 984.

6 See note 1.

er responses, emotionally and, by extension for the publisher, financially as the readership grew. To these it adds a further stylistic element in that it creates no expectation of continuity: the stories it reports are by and large self-contained and the reader is conditioned to expect that the next *fait divers* will have little or no link to others. "Take an assassination: if it's political, then it's a news item, if not, it's a *faits divers*" is how Roland Barthes illustrates this in a 1964 essay.<sup>7</sup>

In Russia the print market was also changing. Although, as usual, developments in the French press had been copied immediately, no comparable readership existed. The Russian readership lagged that of France by almost half a century, that of England by even more. Abram Reitblat estimates a total 'real' book readership in the early 1860s of no more than a million, compared to some 18 million in France in 1871. Literacy had reached the merchant classes, some of the military, and some of the lower civil service ranks, but not beyond.<sup>8</sup> Industrialisation had not yet created an urban readership and would not do so for another 20-30 years. And Reitblat's estimate includes all readers of all types of books including the chapbooks, *лубки*, popular among the less literate. Dostoevsky himself guessed that no more than one in 500 Russians would read his works or those of his contemporaries – equivalent to a total readership of 100,000. No mass readership existed – and yet publishers still imported formats and styles derived from, and designed for, this market. Unsurprisingly, the street sales of *The Petersburg Flysheet* took 16 years to reach 2,200,<sup>9</sup> while *Le Petit Journal* routinely exceeded half a million.

Nevertheless, it must have been obvious that change was coming. Over the decade from 1860 to 1870 the overall number of periodical publications in Russia rose from 170 to 335. Daily papers grew faster, from 16 to 79. 61 new publi-

7 « Voici un assassinat : s'il est politique, c'est une information, s'il ne l'est pas, c'est un fait divers ». Roland BARTHES, "Structure du fait divers" in Roland BARTHES, *Essais critiques*, (Paris: Seuil, 1964), accessed 14 September 2023 at <https://victorianpersistence.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/barthes-structure-du-fait-divers1.pdf>

8 For a more detailed analysis of the growth of the Russian readership in Dostoevsky's time, see Абрам РЕЙТБЛАТ, *От Бовы к Бальмонту. Очерки по истории чтения в России во второй половине XIX века* (Москва: МПИ, 1991); ID., *Как Пушкин вышел в гении: историко-социологические очерки о книжной культуре пушкинской эпохи* (Москва: НЛО, 2001) and for a useful summary in English, "The Reading Audience of the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century" in Damiano REBECCHINI and Raffaella VASSENÀ (ed.), *Reading Russia. A History of Reading in Modern Russia* (Milano: Ledizioni, 2020), vol. 2, pp. 171-209, as well as Jeffrey BROOKS, *When Russia Learned to Read. Literacy and Popular Literature 1861-1917* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) and Louise McREYNOLDS, *The News under Russia's Old Regime*, cit.

9 McREYNOLDS, appendix A, table 4.

cations were founded in the three years Dostoevsky spent in Dresden, including *Dawn* (January 1869) and *Grainfield* (*Niva*, December 1869).<sup>10</sup> The new boulevard newspapers and thin journals targeted the emerging readership of urban artisans and tradesmen, but soon found another within the traditional ranks of the readers of thick journals in the shape of the aristocracy surreptitiously trying to find out what the lower classes actually thought. They borrowed the tricks of the French press to excite their readers, from Krestovsky's 1864 sensationalist sketches of the Petersburg lower classes<sup>11</sup> to the *The Petersburg Flysheet's* first serialisation of a novel, fittingly Gaboriau's *Inspector Lecog* borrowed or stolen from *Le Petit Journal*. Outside Russia Dostoevsky might also have been distantly aware of the new fashion for illustrated periodicals – *Harper's Bazaar*, the forerunner of *Vogue*, founded in 1867, *Vanity Fair* in 1868 – based on new lithographic technology for colour plates. The publishing industry and its readers were changing fast.

Writers, too, had to adapt. Dostoevsky, writing for a Russian audience in 1870, would have known that his contemporary readership, and thus the readership that paid the bills, consisted of a few thousand individuals mostly from the cosmopolitan, educated elites of Petersburg and Moscow, with the addition of a growing but still tiny market among educated women and a diaspora among provincial landowners and merchants. But it would equally have been obvious that a mass market did exist, must grow and within a few decades could dominate. Who were you writing for and what would they want? And, if you wanted to be taken as a serious literary writer, how could you simultaneously address serious topics and attract a new readership more attuned to murder and sensation than philosophical essays?

*The Devils' parents – the boulevard newspaper  
and the faits divers?*

*The Idiot* had been marred by a failure to think through the full plot before putting pen to paper and the resulting criticism had clearly stung. *The Eternal Husband*, called by Joseph Frank the “most perfect and polished of all Dostoevsky's shorter works” heralded a resumption of authorial control.<sup>12</sup> *Devils*,

<sup>10</sup> BROOKS, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> *The Slums of St. Petersburg* (*Петербургские Трущобы*), first published in *Notes from the Fatherland* (*Отечественные записки*) 1864–1866, with excerpts also appearing in *Epoch* (*Эпоха*) in 1864, and in book form in 1867.

<sup>12</sup> JOSEPH FRANK, *Dostoevsky*, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976–2002), vol. 4, p. 394.

by contrast, uses a technique of fragmentation or discontinuity, – *obosoble-nie* as Dostoevsky would later call it in *Diary of a Writer* – as its narrative emblem. And yet this is a novel which had been long planned, even if in a different shape, and written with a clear perspective of how the plot was to unfold – in a letter to Katkov in October 1870 Dostoevsky describes himself as “writing from the end”.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that this chaotic appearance is a quite deliberate technique to create a narrative which resonated with multiple different audiences by borrowing boulevard newspaper techniques, and in particular those of the *faits divers*.

Discontinuity and sensationalism are characteristics of the society Dostoevsky describes and hallmarks of the way in which he constructs the text. This is, at its most obvious level, a tale of crime, sex and rumour. Sensation and philosophy collide: this is a novel with six murders, four suicides, three deaths from illness or childbirth, and four, possibly five, seductions – Dostoevsky seems to have read the recipe quoted earlier.<sup>14</sup> Even in the novel's most serious moments the whiff of the 'tabloid' is never far away: the story of child molestation in Stavrogin's confession, the gun on the table in Kirillov's thick journal essay on free will.

The sequencing of the text itself seems to follow the rules of the *faits divers*, shifting from topic to topic without warning or apparent logic. Thirty-three separate named characters – and even more unnamed – appear and disappear, some within less than a full chapter. The narrative juxtaposes half a dozen separate plots set against the society life of the provincial town which acts, like the pages of a periodical, as the mechanism for bringing all these strands to the reader's eyes. The plots – think of them as articles in a newspaper – intersect but do not necessarily interact, just as the in-story characters often talk at each other but not to each other. And, just like articles in a newspaper, any interaction will appear to be caused as much by reader inference as by editorial design. The impression of sensationalism is caused as much by an accumulation of mini-scandals as by one big one – compare the auction for Nastasya Filippovna at the end of the first part of *The Idiot* with the series of sensations – essentially social misbehaviours – by which the reader's impression of scandal in the first part of *Devils* is built.

13 «Я ... писал с конца» (ПСС 29; 140).

14 Six murders: Lebyadkin, Marya Timofeevna, their servant girl, Lizaveta Nikolaevna, Fedka, Shatov. Four suicides: the unnamed young man in the inn, Kirillov, Matryosha, Stavrogin. Three deaths from illness/childbirth: Marya Ignatevna Shatova, her infant son, Stepan Trofimovich. Four, possibly five, seductions, all by Stavrogin: Darya Pavlovna, Marya Timofeevna, Lizaveta Nikolaevna, Matryosha, possibly Marie Shatova.

Reader inference is, conveniently, another tool of the *faits divers*, using multiple trivial incidents to satirise or to deliver social commentary. Just as a series of such snippets on crime conveys the impression of social breakdown or supervisory incompetence, so Dostoevsky uses the apparent incoherence of his plot as a satirical tool used to trivialise. This is no heroic battle between grand forces of destiny. It is the story of bickering small-town malcontents. There are no heroes: Stavrogin may trace his heritage to Pugachev and Don Juan but is, as narrated, more a con-man who seduces vulnerable girls then runs away: only his victims think him extraordinary. Petr Stepanovich's hallmark is incompetence, a man who can literally not organise a plot. Even narrative itself is trivialised – a mere pamphlet has the power to terrorise the local authorities and to act as motive for murder. The ambivalence of the Russian title suggests more a swarm of demonlets, an outbreak of swine fever, rather than the spawn of Satan.

The impression that we are reading a series of separate newspaper *faits divers* is reinforced by Dostoevsky's use of genre. Like any periodical, this is text which switches genre relentlessly and for many different reasons. The light-hearted provincial comedy of manners with which the novel begins is spiked with moments of farce, of romance, of satire and of impending tragedy. Some characters come with genre markers as an integral part of their characterisation, most obviously Stepan Trofimovich and romanticism. Some genres have specific functions, again most obviously the gothic which is used both to sensationalise, as in the Stavrogin/Fedka plot, or to intensify, as in the scenes at Kirillov's or at Tikhon's.

And finally, Dostoevsky's narrator fulfils the function of newspaper leader writer of this collection of *faits divers*. He shares the anticipated reader's taste for anecdote, for gossip, for scandal. He is excited by crime and the new genre of crime reporting and has his own theories of psychological investigation. He is not particularly bothered by plot continuity. He has his own personality, just like the early leader writers of the boulevard newspapers. And, conveniently, he can be summarily replaced by the editor, or omniscient author, when his meandering style becomes too slow and the plot, finally, needs to be moved on.

*The fait divers in action:*  
 "Mein lieber Augustin" from "Before the fête"

Perhaps it is easier to demonstrate how this works with an example.

The central section of the novel (Part II of three) is where Dostoevsky sets the scene for the series of climaxes which will dominate the final part. His chal-



lenge is to advance four plot strands simultaneously – the psychological drama of Stavrogin's mental state which will culminate in his suicide, the literary fete which will lead to Stepan Trofimovich's humiliation and death, the revolutionary plot incited by Petr Stepanovich which will end in Shatov's murder, and the background context of the industrial unrest which will unravel in strikes, arson and a temporary collapse of law and order. Each contains multiple plot threads: our understanding of Stavrogin, for example, comes through his philosophical debates with Kirillov and Shatov, his duel with Gaganov, his encounter with the convict Fedka, his marriage to Marya Timofeevna Lebyadkina, his relationship with Lizaveta Nikolaevna Tushina, and originally his confession to Tikhon.

The level of overall complexity would seem to recommend simplicity in the detail. Instead, the narrator leads us into an ever-expanding rabbit warren of inconsequential and irrelevant dead ends. The fifth chapter of Part II sees him switch focus to Yulia Mikhailovna von Lembke's preparations for her literary fête (*IICC* 8; 248-266). She gathers a group of townfolk around to help. The narrator tells a series of louche anecdotes about members of the group – a nasty prank played on a flighty but abused wife; a bible pedlar into whose bag Lyamshin stuffs obscene photographs; how his rendering of the *Marseillaise* is cleverly subverted to become a popular Viennese waltz; how the desecration of a local icon led to Lizaveta Nikolaevna donating her diamond earrings in a fit of emotional extravagance.

The same group then goes on an expedition to visit a local elder and *iurodivy*, Semyon Yakovlevich. On the way the group is diverted by news of a recent suicide, which they visit and treat as a tourist attraction with Lyamshin, buffoon again, snacking off the victim's last meal. When they eventually reach the monastery, they find Semyon Yakovlevich holding court and treating his supplicants with alarming irrationality. Lizaveta Nikolaevna again closes the section with a mini-'skandal' as she hysterically humiliates her fiancée in front of the crowd then, on the way out, collides with Stavrogin. Throughout the entire passage the narrator is front and centre, evidently enjoying the chance to dwell on local gossip and scandal.

This ten-page section, from a relatively unimportant part of the novel, illustrates the pervasiveness of this scattergun narrative strategy. In a sense, all of this is superfluous. It does not particularly advance any major line of plot. It does not materially add to what we know about any of the significant characters other, perhaps, than Lizaveta Nikolaevna's relationship with Stavrogin. It contains little or no information which we as readers need for our subsequent understanding of the work. And yet it stands out as an extraordinary and revealing piece of writing. Why?

This is, I would argue, the closest a writer can get to the style of the *faits divers* in the context of the novel. At the mimetic level the series of anecdotes told to us by the narrator share all the characteristics of this genre of reportage. They are vivid, short, and fascinating because they voyeuristically show us the underbelly of human misbehaviour, from sex to suicide. The narrator piles on anecdote after anecdote about how society norms have disintegrated – from sexual abuse through blasphemy to suicide and the very behaviour of the civil and religious authorities themselves. They prompt the reader to expect the worst of human behaviour: both chapters begin with anecdotes illustrating how herd mentality encourages excess, then end with scenes in which the excesses demonstrated by both Semyon Yakovlevich and Lizaveta Nikolaevna, which are ambiguously religious or egocentric, are made to seem suspect by their context. They dwell on irrationality, on how groups behave in ways individuals would not; on buffoonery, Lyamshin's in particular, which drives individuals to excess; on the humour of the absurd, in which a little Viennese waltz captures the *Marseillaise*. And above all, they exploit precisely the series of cultural constants which dominate the boulevard newspaper – voyeurism, or the urge to gawp at a suicide; the thrill of the exotic, or the opportunity to visit a neighbouring holy fool; the convenience of the ephemeral, which allows Yulia Mikhailovna swiftly to forget the behaviour which had so annoyed her, and the drive of the taxonomic, which prompts our narrator to record all of these goings-on in the first place.

At the diegetic level even the narrator's style is co-opted to the cause of the *faits divers*. Anecdote follows anecdote with no connection other than the narrator's prurience, just like articles in an early boulevard newspaper. Minor characters – the victim of the prank, the monks – appear and disappear from the text within a few pages. The in-story narrator, whose very name suggests rumour and gossip,<sup>15</sup> parades his own bewilderment at the range of behaviours it reveals, just as the editor of the boulevard newspaper uses the volume of evidence of human transgression he himself is revealing to paint a picture of the society he is reporting on. In doing so the narrator both provides a commentary on social disintegration and trivialises its subject. This is petty misbehaviour in a small pool. Its ripples go no further than its own edge. Lyamshin's subversion of the *Marseillaise* into *Mein lieber Augustin* becomes at once the emblem of this process of randomisation and a commentary on its irrelevance.

15 We know him as Anton Lavrentievich G...v, his surname suggesting the Russian *govor* (chatter, rumour, conversation).

The narratorial point of view is that of a compiler and editor of multiple sources, just like the publisher of a local newspaper. He evidently relishes gossip and hides his own interest behind the reported reactions of the in-story characters. "Everyone in our group looked on with avid curiosity",<sup>16</sup> he reports as the cavalcade examines the suicide, and goes on to retail a series of inapposite comments made by members of the group in just the same way as a group of readers might react to a gruesome or melodramatic illustration in a newspaper. Nor is he afraid of pure hearsay "I'll admit I didn't see anything myself, but everyone swore they saw it even though there was no way anybody except maybe one or two could see anything in all the commotion"<sup>17</sup> is his excuse for reporting the altercation between Lizaveta Nikolaevna and Stavrogin as established fact. And, like every newspaper editor in Russia, he exercises his own version of censorship, deleting the expletives used by Semyon Yakovlevich to the departing group of women behind the tongue-in-cheek label of an "extremely unprintable epithet".<sup>18</sup>

The passage also reveals how Dostoevsky is able to use the format of the *faits divers* to address his own readership. Its apparent scattergun content enabled him to address multiple actual and potential audiences. Dostoevsky's traditional market of educated upper-class readers of thick journals could justify their voyeuristic pleasure at this spectacle of provincial manners by the narrator's own veneer of disapproval. More serious readers of thick journals would find both a political commentary on recent events, implicit in Lyamshin's piano piece, as well as a moral and religious dimension as provincial manners are confronted by monastic judgement in Semyon Yakovlevich's eccentric reactions. The group's curiosity about the suicide reflects a theme which Dostoevsky himself would return to in his *Diary of a Writer*. Readers seeking the new genre of the psychological thriller are offered a tantalising glimpse of the secrets of Lisa's relationship with Stavrogin. And for the new mass market reader the succession of spicy anecdotes replicates the *faits divers* of the boulevard newspaper, incorporating sex, scandal and a fascination for the misdemeanours of others, related by a narrator who clearly revels in gossip.

The result is stunningly successful. I would argue that this excerpt is a good example of how Dostoevsky develops this technique into a unique and highly recognisable authorial voice. It is characterised by a light touch, frequent simultaneous plot and genre shifts which, combined with the narrator's satirical

16 «Все наши рассматривали с жадным любопытством» (ПСС 10; 255).

17 «Признаюсь, я сам не видел ничего, но зато все уверяли, что видели, хотя все-то уж никак не могли этого увидеть за суматохой, а разве иные» (ПСС 10; 261).

18 «...крайне нецензурное слово» (ПСС 10; 260).

viewpoint, give the narrative an air of comic incoherence reminiscent of *Notes from the Underground*. It both enhances realism and give Dostoevsky his trademark ability to shift almost instantaneously from farce to high tragedy.

*The broader view: Dostoevsky's 'boulevard' novel*

Our expedition into the detail of this short passage has allowed us to see the influence of boulevard newspaper style on individual sections of text at a fairly granular level. If we allow our focus to pull back to a distance at which we can see the construction of the novel as a whole, it is surprising how much of the detail observed at close quarters remains relevant.

Part I introduces the reader immediately to a world defined by a generational shift in reader reception. The established, hierarchical values of Stepan Trofimovich, whose biography forms the novel's opening chapter, have been replaced by those of a modern generation represented through the narrator who, as the preceding analysis has shown, prefers anecdote, craves titillation and scandal, and cares not a fig for continuity.<sup>19</sup> The part is dominated by the techniques of the *faits divers*. Key characters and plot developments are revealed by anecdote. The liaisons between Stavrogin and the three women reportedly in his life, Lizaveta Nikolaeva, Darya Pavlovna and Marya Timofeevna all reach us through the narrator's reporting of hearsay gossip circulating in the town. Speed is of more importance than accuracy – as soon as the narrator has filled in the necessary historical background and moves into 'real time' in section 6 of the second chapter (*IICC* 10; 267) we get a clear sense that he is bringing us events as they happen. Most are reported as personal experiences of the narrator and derive their authority and immediacy from this source. We gradually discover that this may not be the whole truth – many of the reports are beyond the knowledge of a single narrator, some rely on direct authorial knowledge of a character's inner feelings, and some are later proved wrong. All combine to produce a credible sense that we are being told a story – part fiction, part fact, – by a professional and competent storyteller who has a keen sense of what his audience want to hear about and the stylistic register in which they prefer to read about it. From an authorial perspective this proves to be a useful novelistic trick to misdirect readers, but it also adds to our sense of journalistic immediacy.

19 We assume that the narrator is of an age with Stepan Trofimovich as they share a long-dated friendship, but his attitude, as represented by his narrative, is noticeably more contemporary than that of Stepan Trofimovich.

The genre of these anecdotes also belongs to the same journalistic register. Most play on layers of voyeurism: the desire of the in-story characters to uncover the behaviour behind closed doors of their peers, like Stavrogin's various liaisons, or of social groups to which they do not belong. On top of this in-story avidity for gossip comes our own desire, as readers, to delve further into the murky shallows of this provincial town which seems to contain more intrigue than any reasonable reader could have guessed. It is the same compulsion which drives the rise of the boulevard newspaper, with its focus on gossip, on the morals of other social groups, on the louche and titillating details of sexual misdemeanour, on the financial manipulations of those with money and the physical responses of those without.

The very construction of the narrative itself also shows the influence of popular journalism. The narrator reports a stream of events as they reach him with an apparent confidence that the random accretion of anecdotes around a series of characters will allow jigsaw-like pictures of individuals and of an entire society to emerge once enough pieces have been assembled – and that the reader, accustomed to the style of the *faits divers*, will demand no more. The technique even promotes its own form of suspense through the reader's anticipation of the next isolated vignette.

Within the sub-sections of each chapter, the readers is confronted with a bewildering combination of direct narratorial reportage, conversations between the narrator and third parties, anecdotes retailed by the narrator, and scenes at which the narrator could not possibly have been present. For example, as soon as the narrator launches into the contemporary action, he tells the story of Darya Pavlovna's liaison with Stavrogin. He starts with the report of a conversation in which Praskovya Ivanovna reveals the supposed relationship to Varvara Petrovna – an exchange in which he himself never participated, but which is retailed as though he had recorded the entire conversation (*IICC* 10; 54-55). He jumps immediately to Varvara Petrovna's follow-up discussions with Darya Pavlovna in which she suggests marriage to Stepan Trofimovich, and the obverse conversation with Stepan Trofimovich – both inventions of an absentee narrator presented as first-hand reportage (*IICC* 10; 55-61). He then launches into an anecdote about Stepan Trofimovich's financial dependence on Varvara Petrovna and his dubious management of Petr Stepanovich's legacy (*IICC* 10; 62-65). The narrator then switches to focus on his own position as the news of Stepan Trofimovich's enforced engagement begins to leak out into the town society (*IICC* 10; 66-68): this leads, in turn, to a digression on a chance meeting with Karmazinov (*IICC* 10; 69-71), to Stepan Trofimovich's reaction, and so on... In less than twenty pages Dostoevsky has created a kind of narrative skim-

ming-stone in which a single (and uncorroborated) report creates an ever-widening series of intersecting ripples which appear traceable at first but which quickly become lost in a storm of conflicting signals.

The technique is, precisely, that of the boulevard newspaper, where brief, highly coloured snapshots of single events or characters succeed each other with extreme rapidity and without any expectation on the reader's part of sustained thematic continuity. At the detailed level it leaves an impression of confusion, multiplicity, and fragmentation, as individual snapshots prove difficult to relate to each other until sufficient have been collated for an overall theme to be revealed. The many critics who have found the multiple plots confusing and difficult to follow are reflecting precisely this complexity. Russell Scott Valentino recognises it as a basic tool of the novel's construction: "Muddle is realised thematically in the novel's narrative strategy, which suggest its own unreliability while claiming a kind of fundamental truth (as chronicle)."<sup>20</sup>

Taken as a whole, indeed, both plot and a kind of authorial commentary do begin to emerge as the reader pieces together the different fragments of information. The technique creates a clear overall perspective through the 'harvesting' operation, as Gary Saul Morson might term it, carried out by the reader's skittish gaze.<sup>21</sup> We begin to realise that the narrative medium by which the story reaches us is itself a satirical reflection on the object of its description. Its tabloid focus – on trivial anecdote, on sex, on money – mirrors that of the society it depicts. Its inability to stay focussed on anything for long parodies the equally brief attention span of the town's inhabitants. In the character of the chief literary influencer, Yulia Mikhailovna, Dostoevsky may even be offering us a pen portrait of the new generation of readers. In this, she takes her place in a Dostoevskian dynasty which had begun with Mme Epanchina in *The Idiot* and would continue with the younger Mme Khokhlakova in *Bratya Karamazovy*. She is represented by the narrator as the centre of the organising committee for the literary fête. Her views and tastes are influential because of her social position, but not decisive – partly because she is easily swayed by prevailing trends, partly because she is inconsistent in applying her judgements. She is educated to a point but remains comically gullible and simplistic in her judgement. She is status-conscious and a social climber. She is alert to fashion and

20 Russell Scott VALENTINO, *Vicissitudes of Genre in the Russian Novel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 123.

21 Gary Saul MORSON, *Introduction to Fedor DOSTOEVSKY, A Writer's Diary*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2009), pp. xix-lxxii. The description of the reader's selection of which parts of the text to read as a 'harvesting' operation appears at pp. xxv, xlv-xlv, xlix-l.

aware of her gender and sexuality. Perhaps most importantly she is an avid consumer of gossip and scandal – perhaps just the type of new reader this passage is aimed at. As the narrator observes somewhat acidly a bit later, “as a rule, Russians take an inordinate pleasure in any juicy society scandal”.<sup>22</sup>

From plot to narrator to narrative construction and style, Dostoevsky seems to assume that we, his external readers, respond to similar stimuli. He even describes the technique within the narrative itself, in the shape of Lizaveta Nikolaevna's proposal for a 'slice of life' work of literature in which she proposed to record every published event in the whole of Russia for an entire year (*ПСС* 10; 103): enough fragmentation, it seems, if properly recorded, would produce a composite picture more intelligible in the round than in the detail. The first part of the novel can, perhaps, be seen as an extended exploration of whether this would work in practice.

### *The authorial dilemma: staying in control of the narrative*

If fragmentation or discontinuity is not just a description of society but also a tool which the novelist must use to reach multiple audiences, how is an author to stay in control of his text? He writes about the unpredictability of his narrative in an 1871 letter to Strakhov: “So far I've been completely incapable of learning how to control my material. A whole host of separate novels and short stories get mixed up into one, so there's no balance, no harmony”.<sup>23</sup> He complains that characters get out of hand – Petr Stepanovich, he says, has turned out a comic character, not a serious revolutionary.<sup>24</sup>

The issue seems to be that the boulevard style with which Dostoevsky experiments in *Devils* proves surprisingly difficult to combine with other genres. Dostoevsky had previously tried to blend multiple genres in *The Idiot*, primarily through the stories told by and about Myshkin, but had found it difficult to create a convincing character out of these clashing voices. In *Devils* he changes tack, attributing the responsibility for switching genre to the narrator rather than to a central character. But, as my analysis of the first part of the novel has shown, the comic incoherence this produces is difficult to combine with any

22 «...но, вообще говоря, непомерно веселит русского человека всякая общественная скандальная суматоха» (*ПСС* 10; 354).

23 «...я совершенно не умею, до сих пор, (не научился) совладать с моими средствами. Множество отдельных романов и повестей разом втискиваются у меня в один, так что ни меры, ни гармонии». Letter to Strakhov, 5 May 1871 (*ПСС* 29; 208).

24 Letter to Katkov, 8 October 1870 (*ПСС* 29; 141).

kind of orderly plot progression. How is an author to stay in charge of his story and how, in particular, to introduce debate on the serious topics usually addressed in the pages of the thick journal within a narrative framework which seems to have been corrupted by the influence of the *faits divers*? The two subsequent parts can be seen as a series of experiments by Dostoevsky to establish whether other genres can successfully be overlaid on the boulevard under-text to provide a level of control and, if so, which.

If this claim seems to go too far, it is worth remembering that this is a text which constantly reminds us of its links to a literary heritage and format. Dostoevsky's own notes reveal that it finds its origins in a genre-specific 'pamphlet-novel' against Nihilism.<sup>25</sup> Other early notes discuss both genre and stylistic concerns, suggesting that literary form may even have preceded plot in the evolution of the work.<sup>26</sup> All the principal characters have both literary and historical origins, well documented and analysed by critics – Joseph Frank spends two entire chapters on the subject.<sup>27</sup> One character, Karmazinov, is an outright parody of a Dostoevskian *bête noir* in the shape of Turgenev. A literary fête is at the centre of the plot. The literary quadrille which follows at Varvara Petrovna's ball features a dance of competing genres. Stepan Trofimovich and Varvara Petrovna write each other letters in an echo of the dated format of the epistolary novel. Even minor characters seem to be involved in the business of literary production in some shape or form – Shatov is a printer, his wife wants to be a bookseller, the victim of Lyamshin's prank and Stepan Trofimovich's ultimate saviour is a bible pedlar – and we have already seen that von Lembke writes novels and collects pamphlets and that Lizaveta Nikolaevna wants to produce panoramic literature. The narrator himself constantly reminds us of reader responses, actual or anticipated, comments on the narrative skills of the in-story characters, and reminds us we are being told a story by his own disappearances and reappearances as narrator.

The novel begins with the extended back-story of a man defined by genre. Stepan Trofimovich is a hero of the 1840's, explicitly linked to contemporary figures like Granovsky and Herzen, implicitly compared to literary archetypes such as Turgenev's Rudin (*IICC* 12; 226), tacitly sharing key biographical details with Rousseau.<sup>28</sup> He is constantly linked to literary genre by his tastes – "He'd been known to take a de Tocqueville with him to the garden, with a

25 FRANK, vol. 4, p. 378.

26 *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 397-399.

27 *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 435-471.

28 For a fuller discussion of the importance of Rousseau and his ideas as the object of parody and political polemic in *Devils*, see Robin FEUER MILLER, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), pp. 86-104.



hidden copy of Paul de Kock in his jacket pocket"<sup>29</sup> – by his linguistic affectations, by his dress, and most explicitly by his rather contrived opposition to the one-dimensional Karmazinov. He is referred to in terms as a quasi-literary 'invention' of Varvara Petrovna (*ИСС* 10; 12). Initially he serves as a foil to highlight the difference between the genteel resistance of the 1840s and the harsher, more discordant and disruptive protest of the 1860s epitomised by his son and the proto-revolutionary group Petr Stepanovich pretends to lead. His role in Varvara Petrovna's literary fête reinforces his positioning as the representative of an aesthetic and anti-utilitarian school so out-of-touch as to appear comic to a contemporary audience. His eventual flight, final romance with a bible pedlar and death forms a rather mawkish, saccharine coda reminiscent of Karamzin and romantic sentimentalism.

He is surrounded by critics who seem to delight in pointing out how inadequate the genres he represents are as techniques for describing the modern age. The narrator, who admits to being a close friend, continually mocks him for being affected and delights in reporting verbatim his overblown phraseology and oscillation between Russian and French. His son goads him into behaviour which simply reveals his comic inability to adapt to modern society. Dostoevsky himself as author seem to find it difficult to figure out a way of disposing of this larger than life and slightly cartoonish character once his initial purpose of contrasting revolutionaries now to revolutionaries then has been served. And yet Stepan Trofimovich remains one of Dostoevsky's most effective comic inventions. Readers – or at least this reader – find it easy to share the narrator's ambivalence, shifting between sympathy and satire. At least part of the reason, I think, is that the genres he represents – the romantic, the melodramatic, the sentimental, find an easy resting place within the genre of the boulevard newspaper, where excess and drama drive readership and sales, where a good story trumps plot, where a well-established narrative can produce a predictable reader response.

Another character defined by genre is Stavrogin. From the outset he is depicted in terms of gothic melodrama. His face is 'like a mask'. His eye 'gleams'. Before he even speaks he is asked a 'terrible question' (*ИСС* 10; 37-38). For two full chapters, serialised together in the July 1871 issue of *The Russian Messenger*, we follow Stavrogin's night-time wanderings about the town, as the genre is intensified. Events and dialogues are consciously removed from the trivialising daytime context of the town by a barrier of nocturnal gloom. At daybreak

29 «Бывало и то: возьмет с собою в сад Токевиля, а в кармашке несет спрятанного Поль де Кока» (*ИСС* 10; 19).

he fights a duel, that most type-cast of Russian literary genre settings. Literary themes and allusions abound. Marya Timofeevna compares Stavrogin to Prince Hal; the duel with Gaganov casts him as a contemporary Onegin, Silvio or Pechorin; Petr Stepanovich seeks a modern version of Otrepev or Pugachev. The eventually omitted chapter, "At Tikhon's" casts him as a repentant child rapist, in an echo of Dostoevsky's own *Crime and Punishment*.

But this time genre and content seem to align less comfortably. Stavrogin's discussion with Kirillov, initially to ask him to act as second in Stavrogin's duel with Gaganov, drifts into a philosophical discussion about the relationship between suicide, ethical behaviour and happiness. The subsequent conversation with Shatov, again justified by Stavrogin's desire to warn him of the threat posed by Petr Stepanovich's revolutionaries, broadens into a debate about the relationship between nationalism and religious belief. Both are topics which sit comfortably within the genre span of *The Russian Messenger*, in which these chapters were first serialised. Each responds to known concerns of the educated readership of the journal – Victoria Thorstenson even contends that Katkov manipulatively groups articles by different authors, including both Dostoevsky and Leskov, in order to intensify criticism of the Nihilist movement.<sup>30</sup>

But, if this is a strategy by Dostoevsky to reclaim his journal readership after the debacle of *The Idiot*, it seems to contain flaws. In the first place, it gives the impression that discussion of serious philosophical, political or ethical issues is only possible within the confines of a Gothic envelope. Much the same problem had arisen in the latter stages of *The Idiot*, where Myshkin and Rogozhin (like Stavrogin identified by his 'burning eyes') only seem able to broach such subjects in the melodramatically isolated surroundings of Rogozhin's house. Secondly, and despite the volumes of critical expatiation of the themes announced by Kirillov, Shatov and Shigalyev, the actual arguments which Dostoevsky puts into his character's mouths are their own best enemies, stylistically and logically. Kirillov asserts the possibility of complete happiness through self-knowledge in terms which are derided as platitudes – openly by Stavrogin (*IICC* 10; 188-189) and silently, perhaps, by many external readers (*IICC* 10; 276). Shatov asserts the unity of nationhood and religious belief but simultaneously confesses his own inability to believe (*IICC* 10; 200-201). Shigalyev's quest for freedom leads to its own contradiction (*IICC* 10; 311-313). The contrast between the context of satirical trivialisation and these ring-fenced deep-dives into moral or ethical intensity still divides readers between those who ignore the context and fo-

30 Victoria THORSTENSON, "The Inkwell of *The Russian Messenger*: Editorial Politics and the Serialization of Dostoevsky's *Demons* and Leskov's *At Daggers Drawn*", *The Russian Review* 75 (January 2016), pp 26-50.

cus on the philosophy and those who wonder whether the corrosive influence of the context does not, perhaps, reflect on the philosophy too.

Both, though, point to an underlying authorial dilemma. Stavrogin is presented as a novelistic hero, both in relation to the in-story characters and to the external reader. Dostoevsky refers to him in terms as “the main character in the novel”<sup>31</sup> But of what narrative is he the hero? He seems to fit in nowhere. He has not been part of the town or, indeed, his family for some years. He arrives, dramatically, from Switzerland, a *tabula rasa* Dostoevsky has used before to erase Myshkin's antecedents. The in-story characters either ignore him or reinvent him for their own purposes. Kirillov treats him as a figure from the past (*ИСС* 10; 189). Shatov idealises a re-imagined version of who he used to be (*ИСС* 10; 202). The duel with Gaganov recasts him as a traditional Romantic literary hero, a mould he is keen to reject (*ИСС* 10; 227). Marya Timofeevna initially casts him as a Shakespearean hero then, realising he doesn't fit this mould, as a pretender, (*ИСС* 10; 219) a characterisation later also taken up by Petr Stepanovich (*ИСС* 10; 325). It is an important distinction: a pretender is a hero only by virtue of acclamation by others, in the same way that the hero of a novel requires recognition by readers to merit the title. Within the narrative, Stavrogin seems to be a revolutionary leader without a revolution to lead. To the reader, he seems more character in search of an author who knows how to fit him to the narrative. Perhaps for this reason, his eventual suicide seems an exaggerated and not particularly credible response to a lack of fictional clarity.

The authorial dilemma is at its most acute in the omitted chapter, “At Tikhon's”. The narrative frame is the stuff of the boulevard newspaper. The setting is pure Gothic melodrama – night, a monastery, a confession. The story told by Stavrogin is of crime, sex and voyeurism. The theme, however, is a thick journal essay on the role of confession, repentance and forgiveness. Once again Dostoevsky experiments with melodrama as a vector for ethical debate. But this time it seems inescapably tied to its method of production. Bizarrely, Stavrogin presents his confession in the form of a pamphlet, printed in a run of 300, which he intends to distribute. Even more oddly, Tikhon responds as though he were the publisher. His first words, after Stavrogin's reading has come to an end, are to ask if he can edit the document; “Do you think it might be possible to make a few changes to the document, perhaps?”<sup>32</sup> His criticism, it turns out, is the standard accusation against the genre of the boulevard newspaper. “... I was horrified by so much idle energy deliberately being wasted on such disgusting

31 «...главн[о]лиц[о] романа». Letter to Katkov, 8/20 October 1870 (*ИСС* 29; 142).

32 «А нельзя ли в документе сем сделать иные исправления?» (*ИСС* 11; 23). The response appears in the first version of the omitted chapter but not in the second.

filth”<sup>33</sup> Katkov may well have felt the same in refusing to print the chapter. For Dostoevsky, though, it may have been a watershed moment in recognising how difficult it would be to reconcile the conflicting demands of boulevard content and thick journal gravity of purpose. This central conflict would, in fact, never disappear: Ivan Karamazov’s tale of the Grand Inquisitor is a direct descendant of this dilemma.

One person who does seem to understand the problem is Petr Stepanovich. If I push the analogy of *Devils* as an experiment in combining boulevard content with thick journal format one step further, it would be logical for Dostoevsky to represent reactions to this technique within the in-story cast of characters. Petr Stepanovich’s role is just that. He takes the role of critic, a kind of latter-day Belinsky. He has access to all levels of local society. He is shown as a devastating satirist of provincial tastes, cultural, behavioural and literary, from Yulia Mikhailovna to Karamzin to his own father, relentlessly exposing affectation and pretension – but, by the same token, with a keen awareness of what constitutes provincial taste and its predilection for the frivolous, the scandalous, the voyeuristic. Dostoevsky presents him as a self-aware fictional construct – an in-story character who consciously adopts a second role of being himself. “...of course I decided to adopt a role [...] so then I finally decided to stick with being myself. Fine, but what exactly is this self of mine?”<sup>34</sup> He shows how Petr Stepanovich is able to gather an audience, in the shape of his so-called revolutionary group, who may disagree on anything substantial, who hold earnest and lengthy debates arriving at contradictory or illogical conclusions, but who are nonetheless united by a shared fascination for a supposedly radical cause with a strong leader which they can romanticise into a heroic class struggle.

Listen, I’ve done the maths: the teacher who laughs at his children’s god over their cradles is one of ours. The lawyer whose defense of an educated murderer is that because he needed money and was smarter than his victim, he had to kill, is ours. Schoolkids who kill a peasant just for the thrill of it are ours. Jurymen who indiscriminately acquit criminals are ours. The prosecutor quaking in court for fear he’s not liberal enough is ours is one of us. Civil servants, writers, so many of them are with us without even knowing it.<sup>35</sup>

33 «...меня ужаснула великая праздная сила, ушедшая нарочито в мерзость» (*ИСС* 11; 25).

34 «...я, конечно, решился взять роль [...] то я и остановился на собственном лице окончательно. Ну-с, какое же мое собственное лицо?» (*ИСС* 10; 175).

35 «Слушайте, я их всех сосчитал: учитель, смеющийся с детьми над их богом и над их колыбелью, уже наш. Адвокат, защищающий образованного убийцу тем, что он разви-

Petr understands how to extend his reach into new demographics, how to tap the newly educated readership beginning to emerge: precisely the readers of the *faits divers*. Perhaps most importantly, he understands the role of reader reception: any role is credible as long as the audience buys in to the fiction, even if the author of the role himself does not believe it. Suddenly the reader starts to understand the importance of the image of the pretender, so frequently repeated in this novel, an image specifically applied to Stavrogin but applicable by analogy to others in the novel who pretend to be what they are not, from Petr Stepanovich to the narrator himself who again and again pretends to have been present at scenes only the author imagined.

But as the readership expands, so controlling it becomes ever more difficult. As long as the fiction retains its intensity, it seems, the audience can be persuaded to follow: up to the point of Shatov's murder, the revolutionary gaggle sticks together despite some bumps on the way. The climax once passed, though, the process of unravelling begins.

Mimetically, this Dostoevsky illustrates this through the fragmentation of the group and the disintegration of its ideas. In an ironic echo of Stavrogin's earlier encounter, Petr Stepanovich visits Kirillov to try to get him to use his suicide to cover up Shatov's murder – a thoroughly boulevard newspaper story. As in the earlier meeting, the conversation veers into a thick journal debate on the nature of self-will. But this time the debate seems to go nowhere, ending rapidly in circularity: "I am forced to shoot myself because the most complete expression of my free will is to kill myself"<sup>36</sup>

Diegetically, too, there are indications that Dostoevsky may be having trouble controlling his own fiction as he seeks to respond to anticipated reader reactions. The technique of an apparently random walk from one digression to another, which we have seen at granular level in the excerpt discussed earlier, is effective at creating atmosphere but less so for progressing the action. The first part, narrated almost exclusively through the eyes of the in-story narrator, is characterised by extreme complexity of plot as the narrator, in true *faits divers* style, ignores coherence and continuity in favour of the latest gossip or scandal. As the novel nears its climax Dostoevsky seems to sense that a faster pace is

тее своих жертв и, чтобы денег добыть, не мог не убить, уже наш. Школьники, убивающие мужика, чтоб испытать ощущение, наши. Присяжные, оправдывающие преступников сплошь, наши. Прокурор, трепещущий в суде, что он недостаточно либерален, наш, наш. Администраторы, литераторы, о, наших много, ужасно много, и сами того не знают!» (ПСС 10; 324).

36 «Я обязан себя застрелить, потому что самый полный пункт моего своеволия – это убить себя самому» (ПСС 10; 470).

required. The narrator is unceremoniously dropped in favour of authorial omniscience. The result leads to some inconsistency in characterisation. Shatov's murder is the climax of the final part of the novel, but Shatov himself is one of the less well-developed characters in earlier parts. In an apparent attempt to heighten the pathos of his death, Dostoevsky introduces an entirely new storyline in the shape of the return of his wife and the birth of her baby. The device is so transparent that it forces the reader to question if its only purpose is to add a bit more spice to the novel's main murder victim. By contrast, Dostoevsky had spent many pages earlier in developing the character of Stepan Trofimovich and now finds himself needing an exit for a personage too important to leave hanging, but of little relevance to the plot of the final part of the work. His solution is to send Stepan Trofimovich off on a sentimentalised final journey which occupied an entire chapter of the final part, introduced an entirely new character in the shape of Sofya Matveevna Ulitina. It reads more like a separate parable of repentance, a format emphasised by Sofya Matveevna's work as a bible pedlar, but called into question in equal measure by the fact that we know Stepan Trofimovich is incapable of anything requiring repentance. And finally, Stavrogin's suicide, which concludes the work, seems a disproportionate response to his actions, especially once the Tikhon chapter had been omitted. Fiction, it seems, goes quickly off the rails when judgements about reader reception go awry.

"Anyway, there's just one more really grim story to tell"<sup>37</sup> Right to the end the narrator remains a constant presence, reminding us of the plot, adding one more final victim to the body count of this most sensational of all Dostoevsky's novels. He is an important character in his own right, not merely because of his ubiquity across the text but also because Dostoevsky positions him as the representative of popular taste. He is a local, he has access to every stratum of town society, and he is a writer with deep and personal experience of his readership. It is clear that this readership is wider than that of the traditional thick journal, encompassing the upper layers of the town's merchant and professional classes, represented by characters such as Liputin, Lyamshin or Virginsky: the very sources of the mass readership that Dostoevsky would have seen in his travels in Western Europe. We have already seen that the tastes of this new readership are the tastes of the boulevard journal and the *faits divers* – voyeurism, fashion, the exotic, the taxonomic, delivered in the style of a local gossip. Even the sentimentalized outcomes of the Shatov and Stepan Trofimovich narrative threads fit this pattern – if in doubt, choose a predictable reader response. The narra-

37 «Впрочем, остается рассказать еще одну очень мрачную историю» (ИСС 10; 512).

tor is the emblem of this new market, the representative of its tastes and a vibrant demonstration of how successful it promises to be. It is entirely appropriate that he should be the one to close the narrative, just as he has opened it.

John Jones, an under-rated Dostoevsky critic, suggested that Dostoevsky was writing the same book all his life.<sup>38</sup> If so, *Devils* is perhaps the middle chapter, where Dostoevsky reaches back to the style so successful in *Notes from the Underground* and combines it with techniques drawn from the new world of the boulevard press and the *faits divers*. Emulating its success had opened up a new stylistic register for Dostoevsky and had allowed him to experiment radically with its enthusiastic exploitation of discontinuity and fragmentation. In *Devils* he succeeds in developing this combination into a unique and recognisable voice capable of reaching out, at the scale of a full-blown novel, to multiple different readerships. But also shows a growing tension, which Dostoevsky arguably never resolved, between the grasshopper-like attention span of popular taste and the extended intellectual engagement required by the thick journals. The devils, it seemed, lurked in the detail.

38 John JONES, *Dostoevsky* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 308.

