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Dostoevsky and Swedenborg

Very few books and studies on Dostoevsky appeared in the first two decades after his death. The year 1900 may be chosen as the turning point, for after that date the number of publications, first in Russian, then in other languages, increased steadily. By the middle of our century the canon of Dostoevsky scholarship was well established, so that hardly any new departures seemed to be possible. Today, whether our attention is focused on Dostoevsky's opinions or on the stylistic devices and structures of his novels, we note that practically every method of approach has already been tried by at least one of our predecessors. Thus Dostoevsky, not unlike Nietzsche, was discovered and appropriated by the first half of the twentieth century. It was then that he grew to the stature he now possesses, and it was then that he was recognized as a forerunner of new trends in European literature and philosophy.

As the past recedes in time, it is quite normal for the perspective to change and for some habits of thought, once accepted as universal, to reveal their conventional character. These habits explain certain blind spots or unintentional omissions, while new questions arise concerning Dostoevsky's significance as a historical phenomenon. This essay toys with some interpretations of Dostoevsky which may be applied in the future, when the present transitional stage is over. It introduces the name of Emanuel Swedenborg as a useful catalyst.

Swedenborg may be linked with Dostoevsky in two ways. First, Russia's cultural lag left the Russian intelligentsia open to a sudden onslaught of Western scientific thinking, with centuries compressed into a few decades. That is why Dostoevsky the religious thinker is similar in many respects to religious thinkers in the West who earlier resisted the corroding impact of scientific innovations. Not infrequently he resembles and even sounds like Pascal. In the seventeenth century Pascal was, after all, the most representative of those writers engaged in the defense of the faith against the skeptics. Also the Age of Reason, as personified by Voltaire, oppressed Dostoevsky, as did nineteenth-century science, personified for him by Claude Bernard ("Bernardy" in *The Brothers Karamazov*). As a theologian confronted with the rationalistic science of the day, Swedenborg had recourse to an aggressive exegesis of Christianity, and an analogous tendency can be distinguished in Dostoevsky.

A second link is provided by Dostoevsky's borrowings from Swedenborg. To affirm that they exist is not farfetched, for even the books in Dostoevsky's library supply a sort of material proof. The catalogue of Dostoevsky's library, published in 1922 by Leonid Grossman, lists three such books.¹ These are, all in Russian, the following: A. N. Aksakov, *The Gospel According to Swedenborg: Five Chapters of the Gospel of John with an Exposition and a Discussion of Their Spiritual Meaning According to the Teaching on Correspondences* (Leipzig, 1864); A. N. Aksakov, *On Heaven, the World of Spirits and on Hell, as They Were Seen and Heard by Swedenborg*, translation from the Latin (Leipzig, 1863); A. N. Aksakov, *The Rationalism of Swedenborg: A Critical Analysis of His Teaching on the Holy Writ* (Leipzig, 1870). A. N. Aksakov was in Russia a chief proponent of spiritism, or, as we would say today, parapsychology, an interest which was treated unkindly by Dostoevsky in *The Diary of a Writer*. He became acquainted with Swedenborg, however, thanks to Aksakov's essays and translations, and he took from these books what suited his purpose.

Swedenborg in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

During the first half of our century much attention was paid to so-called symbolism in poetry, and it seems strange that despite this preoccupation Swedenborg was little known. After all, Baudelaire's sonnet "Les Correspondances," a poem crucial to symbolist poetics, took its title and contents from Swedenborg. Curiosity alone should have directed critics to explore the original concept, not just its derivatives. The truth is that every epoch has dusty storage rooms of its own, where disreputable relics of the past are preserved. Swedenborg was left there, together with the quacks, miracle workers, and clairvoyants so typical of the not-so-reasonable Age of Reason—people like Count Cagliostro, the legendary Count Saint-Germain, and an initiator of the "mystical lodges" in France, Martinez Pasqualis. The risk of taking Swedenborg seriously was too great. Besides, nobody seemed to know what to think of him.

Neither his contemporaries nor posterity ought to be blamed too much for this neglect. Swedenborg's destiny was extraordinary. A scientist of wide reputation, who pursued research in various disciplines, from geology to anatomy, a member of the Royal Mining Commission in Sweden, he had a sudden moment of illumination, abandoned his scientific pursuits, and produced a voluminous *oeuvre* in which he described his travels through Heaven and Hell and his conversations with spirits. He continued to frequent the

1. L. P. Grossman, *Seminarii po Dostoevskomu* (Moscow and Petrograd, 1922; reprint Prideaux Press, London, 1972), p. 42.

high society to which he, as a royal counselor, belonged, and even though he claimed to move simultaneously in the other world, his congeniality and humor disarmed those who would have been ready to call him a madman. After his death in 1772, his works, translated into English, made several converts who organized themselves into the Swedenborgian Church of New Jerusalem. Romanticism in its turn made use of Swedenborg, adapting him to its own needs. For Romantics an ethereal, spiritual world opposed to the world of matter was most alluring: it was this they saw, albeit not quite correctly, in Swedenborg's teachings. Balzac's *Seraphita* is typical of such a Romantic misinterpretation.

Swedenborg's legend was still alive at the time of Balzac and Baudelaire, but gradually it waned during subsequent decades. In the period which interests us, namely the first half of the twentieth century, Swedenborg was at best an enigma attracting explorers of mental abnormality. It will suffice here to mention the names of two major figures who exemplify an attitude of uncertainty, if not of actual helplessness.

The first name is that of Karl Jaspers, who published a study of schizophrenia in 1922; he chose Strindberg, Van Gogh, Swedenborg, and Hölderlin as cases of famous schizophrenics. The second name is that of Paul Valéry, whose 1936 essay on Swedenborg is quite curious. Valéry was once at the center of the symbolist movement; and as a brilliant essayist he dominated the French literary scene for several decades. In his essay he confesses that to him Swedenborg had always been no more than a literary myth, and leaves one wondering whether he has ever read the author he is writing about. Valéry's essay was written as an introduction to the French translation of a book on Swedenborg by the Swedish scholar Martin Lamm. The book does not provide any answer to the question that preoccupies Valéry, "How is a Swedenborg possible?" He looks for a solution of his own, rejecting the most common hypotheses, charlatanism and insanity. But Valéry's own, psychological explanation sounds even less convincing than Jaspers's diagnosis of mental illness and betrays Valéry's positivistic bias. His rather weak essay on Swedenborg offers us an insight into the positivistic background of French symbolism, into its basic duality. Swedenborg's visions were, according to Valéry, a kind of daydreaming—that is, they occurred in a state between sleep and wakefulness. Perhaps we would not be guilty of insolence if we read into that statement, precisely because it lacks Valéry's usual sharpness, an avowal of his skepticism regarding creations of the human mind. He is very tactful and voices his respect for the "real" reality of nature and of human society. Another reality, that of the artist, of the visionary, is autonomous, an area apart where veracity and delusion are on an equal footing.

Swedenborg is not the only writer who was something of a nuisance

then. Another was William Blake. The question of Blake's mental illness was debated quite seriously at the beginning of our century, and though his admirers rejected it as nonsense, their studies published in the thirties and forties were known to relatively few people. The fact that Blake today has become a major figure of English literature is one of the signs indicating a serious change in attitude. And of course an acquaintance with Blake must awaken interest in Swedenborg, not only because Blake was influenced by him but also because Swedenborg can best be understood when approached using Blake's own criteria.

Let us pose a simplistic question: did Swedenborg really travel through Heaven and Hell and did his conversations with spirits really take place? The most obvious answer is: no, not really. He only believed that he had access to the other world at any time, for instance when attending a party or walking in his garden. Everything happened only in his mind. This amounts to conceding that Jaspers was right when he pronounced his verdict: schizophrenia. We should note that Romanticism had already treated Swedenborg in a way no different from the way positivistic psychiatry did later on—that is, a split into the material (real) and the spiritual (illusory) had been accepted, but with a plus sign, not a minus, added to the phantoms of our mind. If, however, William Blake's help is enlisted in reading Swedenborg, the picture changes radically. The question asked and the answer given would be rejected by Blake as absurd. Blake read Swedenborg exactly as he read Dante: these were for him works of the supreme human faculty, Imagination, thanks to which all men will be one day united in Divine Humanity. Through Imagination, spiritual truths are transformed into visible forms. Although he took issue with Swedenborg on certain matters, Blake felt much closer to his system than to that of Dante, whom he accused of atheism. Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is modeled on Swedenborg, and he would have been amused by an inquiry into whether he had "really" seen the devils and angels he describes. The crux of the problem—and a serious challenge to the mind—is Blake's respect for both the imagination of Dante, who was a poet, and the imagination of Swedenborg, whose works are written in quite pedestrian Latin prose. Dante was regarded by his contemporaries as a man who had visited the other world. Yet Jaspers would not have called him a schizophrenic, because the right of the poet to invent—that is, to lie—was recognized in Jaspers's lifetime as something obvious. It is not easy to grasp the consequences of the aesthetic theories which have emerged as the flotsam and jetsam of the scientific and technological revolution. The pressure of habit still forces us to exclaim: "Well then, Swedenborg wrote fiction and he was aware it was no more than fiction!" But, tempting as it is, the statement would be false. Neither Swedenborg nor

Blake was an aesthete, and they did not enclose the spiritual within the domain of art and poetry and oppose it to the material. At the risk of simplifying the issue by using a definition, let us say rather that they both were primarily concerned with the *energy* which reveals itself in a constant interaction of imagination with the things perceived by our five senses.

Swedenborgian Elements in "Crime and Punishment"

The doctrine of correspondences is treated at length in Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*, which Dostoevsky purchased in Aksakov's translation probably during his stay in Germany in 1865. Let us note the place and date of publication: Leipzig, 1863. *Crime and Punishment* was begun in Wiesbaden in 1865. That Baudelaire in his *Flowers of Evil* was indebted to Swedenborg is well known, but there are, in my opinion, strong traces of Swedenborg's influence in *Crime and Punishment* also. A big phantasmagoric city, whether it be Paris, literally called by Baudelaire the *cit  infernale*, or St. Petersburg, where Raskolnikov is beset by nightmares, already seems to be the modern form of a Dantesque hell; a description of it may refer implicitly to the doctrine of correspondences. To sound convincing, one ought to quote numerous passages from Swedenborg. However, that is beyond the scope of a brief essay, and I shall limit myself to a few sentences.

"What a correspondence is is not known at the present day," says Swedenborg, "for several reasons, the chief of which is that man has withdrawn himself from heaven by the love of self and love of the world" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 87). That lost vision embraced creation as a unity, because "the whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world, and not merely the natural world in general, but also every particular of it; and as a consequence everything in the natural world that springs from the spiritual is called correspondent" (p. 89). Man by virtue of his mind is part of the spiritual world, and therefore "whatever effects are produced in the body, whether in the face, in speech, or in bodily movements, are called correspondences" (p. 91). Perhaps the gist of Swedenborg's teaching resides in his carrying the anthropocentric vision implied by Christianity to an extreme. The maxim "As above, so below" has always been invoked by hermetic Christian movements, with their system of mirrors, for according to them the macrocosm was reflected in the microcosm, and thus correspondences are to be found in the whole tradition of alchemy and in Jakob Boehme. But Swedenborg went one step further. For him the whole universe in its only valid essence, celestial and spiritual or infernal, had a human shape: "It has been shown that the entire heaven reflects a single man, and that it is in image a man and is therefore called the Greatest Man" (p. 94). As a consequence

everything human acquires an extraordinary importance, for this entire world to which we apply physics and chemistry exists so that it might provide *human* imagination with archetypes and human language with signs.² Any man may live in a constant relationship with the Greatest (Cosmic) Man—in other words, live in Heaven. But he may also avoid it and keep company with the Cosmic Evil Man—in other words, live in Hell. When he dies, he finds himself in one of the innumerable heavens or hells which are nothing other than societies composed of people of the same inclination. Every heaven or hell is a precise reproduction of the states of mind a given man experienced when on earth, and it appears accordingly—as beautiful gardens, groves, or the slums of a big city. Thus everything on earth perceived by the five senses will accompany a man as a source of joy or of suffering, much as the alphabet, once learned, may be composed into comforting or depressing books. In the eighteenth century Swedenborg was not alone in discovering this strange dimension—the dimension of human inwardness. Others, as well, searched for a counterbalance to the world of scientists, which was conceived as a mechanism seen *from the outside*. Different as they are from each other, in many ways several thinkers have in common this search for the *inside*: Berkeley with his *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived), Kant with his categories of the mind, and, of course, Blake. Swedenborg's choice of states of the mind and images as the foundation of his system was to appeal to Romantic and symbolist poets for obvious reasons. Yet, by shifting the emphasis, they obtained the opposite of the original idea. Correspondences are not symbols to be chosen arbitrarily by a poet or a novelist. If the word "symbol" applies here, it refers to "objective symbols"—that is, they are preordained by God and determined by the very structure of nature and human imagination.

2. In this respect an English metaphysical poet, Thomas Traherne, is Swedenborg's predecessor. See, for example, the following stanza from his poem "My Spirit" (*The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne*, London, 1932):

This made me present evermore
 With whatsoere I saw.
 An Object, if it were before
 Mine Ey, was by Dame Nature's Law
 Within my Soul: Her Store
 Was all at once within me; all her Treasures
 Were my immediat and internal Pleasures;
 Substantial Joys, which did inform my Mind.
 With all she wrought
 My Soul was fraught,
 And evry Object in my Heart, a Thought
 Begot or was: I could not tell
 Whether the Things did there
 Themselves appear,
 Which in my *Spirit truly* seem'd to dwell:
 Or whether my conforming Mind
 Were not ev'n all that therein shin'd.

A visionary, a prophet, unveils them, and Swedenborg, who assigned himself a prophetic role, deciphers with their help the hidden spiritual meaning of the Bible. All this had little to do with literature, at least as far as he was concerned. It was not destined to become a basis for legitimizing uncontrolled subjectivity or for establishing a democratic equality of subjective symbols and metaphors. It is true, some poets have noticed that not all symbols are of equal power, and they have valued most highly those that have their roots in archetypes. But this is a separate issue, alien to Dostoevsky, at least on a conscious level.

In *Crime and Punishment* the streets of St. Petersburg, the dust, the water of the canals, the stairs of tenement houses are described as seen by Raskolnikov and thus acquire the quality of his feverish state. His dreams, his coffinlike room, and the city itself are woven into the rich symbolic texture of the novel. All this is not unfamiliar to a reader of the early Dostoevsky and seems only to intensify the devices already used in *The Double* or in *The Landlady*. There is, however, one character who displays too much kinship with the spirits of Swedenborg for his direct descent from the book *Heaven and Hell* to be doubted. This is Svidrigailov. We will grant that he has captivated many readers and scholars who sensed in him a somewhat exotic element previously unencountered in Dostoevsky's novels. While a good deal of symbolism is involved in the name, appearance, and behavior of Sonya, we feel in Svidrigailov still another dimension, as though he had just arrived from the beyond and was returning there, in spite of his palpable presence and his presumed biography. All things about him—the way he visits Raskolnikov for the first time, his physical features, his gestures, his speech, and his dreams—qualify as Swedenborgian correspondences. And viewed from that angle he is, though alive, a melancholy inhabitant of hell. In parentheses, the strong identification of Dostoevsky with Svidrigailov has been noted by critics, but nobody to my knowledge has pointed to the origin of that hero's name to back the assumption. Dostoevsky was not indifferent to the past of his family, and he liked to refer to his ancestors—nobles who had owned an estate, Dostoevo, in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. One of the Lithuanian rulers of the fifteenth century was Duke Svidrigaila, a well-known historical figure. No other character of Dostoevsky's is endowed with a Lithuanian name. But unraveling the author's little secrets is more or less an idle game. What is important is that love of self, as a central theme, appears in *Crime and Punishment* in two forms, the one represented by Raskolnikov, who gradually becomes aware of its power, the other by his double, Svidrigailov, who has nothing to learn, for he knows his evil nature and has a feeling of eternal damnation. Love of self, according to Swedenborg, characterizes all the inhabitants of the infernal realm, which, however, is infinitely differentiated. To quote: "Every evil, as well as every good, is of

infinite variety. That this is true is beyond the comprehension of those who have only a simple idea regarding every evil, such as contempt, enmity, hatred, revenge, deceit, and other like evils. But let them know that each one of these evils contains so many specific differences, and each of these again so many specific or particular differences, that a volume would not suffice to enumerate them. The hells are so distinctly arranged in order in accordance with the differences of every evil that nothing could be more perfectly ordered or more distinct. Evidently, then, the hells are innumerable" (*Heaven and Hell*, n. 588). Raskolnikov is an intellectual of the nineteenth century who has rejected heaven and hell as depicted in Christian iconography and rejects immortality along with them. The conversation between him and Svidrigailov on that subject is one of the strangest in world literature:

"I don't believe in a future life," said Raskolnikov.

Svidrigailov sat lost in thought.

"And what if there are only spiders there, or something of that sort," he said suddenly.

"He is a madman," thought Raskolnikov.

"We always imagine eternity as something beyond our conception, something vast, vast! But why must it be vast? Instead of all that, what if it's one little room, like a bathhouse in the country, black and grimy and spiders in every corner, and that's all eternity is? I sometimes fancy it like that."

"Can it be you can imagine nothing juster and more comforting than that?" Raskolnikov cried, with a feeling of anguish.

"Juster? And how can we tell, perhaps that is just, and do you know it's what I would certainly have made it?" answered Svidrigailov, with a vague smile.

This horrible answer sent a cold chill through Raskolnikov.

How could we assume that this image of a private hell does not come straight from Swedenborg? Spiders, tarantulas, scorpions as symbols of evil return so persistently in Dostoevsky's late works that they deserve the appellation of correspondences. A passage from Swedenborg enlightens us sufficiently about what are the hells which are built out of correspondences to things perceived by the senses: "Some hells present an appearance like the ruins of houses and cities after conflagrations, in which infernal spirits dwell and hide themselves. In the milder hells there is an appearance of rude huts, in some cases contiguous in the form of a city with lanes and streets, and within the houses are infernal spirits engaged in unceasing quarrels, enmities, fightings, and brutalities; while in the streets and lanes robberies and depredations are committed" (*Heaven and Hell*, n. 586). Of course, in view of the infinite variety of hells, there is room also for a country bathhouse with spiders.

Svidrigailov suffers from the systematic visits of specters, but he does not dismiss them as delusions. He is inclined to think, "Ghosts are, as it were, shreds and fragments of other worlds, the beginning of them." The dreams he has shortly before his suicide are so vivid that they resemble visions more than sequences of blurred images loosely bound together by an oneiric logic. Their horror surpasses even Raskolnikov's dream after the murder, and one would not be far wrong in considering *Crime and Punishment* a novel which deals with Raskolnikov's self-will on one level only, while on a deeper level there is another crime and another punishment, Svidrigailov's rape of a child and his suicide. But is there any reason to think that Svidrigailov had really committed that crime? Not necessarily. The coffin in which a fourteen-year-old girl lies among flowers, like Shakespeare's Ophelia, may lead us to believe that he had debauched an adolescent who then committed suicide. If so, he is a very sensitive devil indeed, for in the next dream the victim changes into a five-year-old child, and he is terrified when suddenly she opens her eyes and looks at him with a "glowing, shameless glance." Faced with Svidrigailov's presumed misdeeds, the reader is more or less in the position of Dostoevsky's biographers, aware of his obsession and uncertain whether he had in fact once raped a little girl. Just as in *Crime and Punishment* the very core of evil had to do with the rape of a child, so in *The Possessed* Stavrogin, though he harbors in himself all the devils of Russia, accuses himself in his *Confession* of precisely the same sin. Yet his conversation with Tikhon leaves the reader perplexed. It is impossible to be certain that Stavrogin once behaved as he says he did. The purpose of his confession, reflected in the ugliness of its style, is noted by Tikhon: this is an act of defiance by Stavrogin, not of contrition; he does not ask for forgiveness, but tries to provoke hatred and scorn. If this applies to the style, it may apply to the content as well, and the whole story of the rape might have been invented. It seems as if Dostoevsky's feelings of guilt were constantly searching for expression through one symbolic event which returns again and again as a fixed correspondence. That symbolic reality has the same substance as do Swedenborg's hells: it resides beyond commonly accepted notions of the existing and the imaginary, the objective and the subjective.

A literary parentage going back to Gogol and E. T. A. Hoffmann is sufficient to explain the fantastic elements in the young Dostoevsky's fiction, such as the pranks of Golyadkin Jr. in *The Double*, which are yet explained away in a rational manner by Golyadkin Sr.'s mental illness. Beginning with *Crime and Punishment* the rational cover for these extraordinary, bizarre occurrences grows very thin, and thus they are elevated above mere phantoms. A rational explanation is contrived in the form of a state between dreaming and wakefulness, as experienced by Svidrigailov on the night before his

suicide; of a confession written by Stavrogin; of falling asleep in *The Dream of the Ridiculous Man*, though the travel through time into the remote past of mankind has nothing dreamy about it; or, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, of the sober, psychiatric title of a chapter—"The Devil. Ivan's Nightmare"—while neither Ivan nor the reader is convinced that the devil was merely a product of Ivan's sick brain.

Dostoevsky as a Heresiarch

It is more than likely that Dostoevsky read Swedenborg when working on *Crime and Punishment* and that he was emboldened by a theology which assigns such a prominent place to the imagination. Whether and precisely what he borrowed from Swedenborg remains uncertain, with the possible exception of Svidrigailov's bathhouse full of spiders. But Dostoevsky's strategy as a religious thinker is of more consequence than possible borrowings of details, and Swedenborg's writings may offer some clues in this respect.

Anna Akhmatova used to call Dostoevsky and Tolstoy "heresiarchs"—as we learn from Nadezhda Mandelshtam's memoirs.³ This is true enough. Their extraordinary minds, their fervor, and the gigantic stakes they played for did not save them from preaching fuzzy or even wild doctrines. Although basically dissimilar, they were alike in their effort to adapt Christianity to what they believed to be the needs of modern man. Yet Tolstoy's "true" Christianity, diluted by Rousseauism, resembled more and more a nontheistic Buddhism, as Soloviev noted. In Tolstoy's copious output as a sermonizer the metaphysical meaning of the Gospels evaporated and only the moral meaning remained. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Tolstoy ended where Dostoevsky started and to locate the latter's point of departure during his Fourierist phase, at the time when he belonged to the Petrashevsky circle.

The Christian vocabulary of utopian socialism should be kept in mind, whether its spokesman be Saint-Simon, Fourier, or George Sand. In its rejection of Christian churches and in placing itself under the sign of the Gospels, utopian socialism was, to some degree, the inheritor of such populist Christian movements of the past as the Hussites or the Anabaptists who had proclaimed a return to the original purity of the early Christian communes. Yet the vocabulary veiled a profound change in belief, a result of the influence of the eighteenth-century Lumières. A social utopia now occupied the first place, not Christ. He was admired only as its announcer, as the most sublime teacher and reformer. Dostoevsky, as we know, was shocked by Belinsky's derogatory and scornful words about Christ. When he joined the Petrashevsky circle, it was different; discussions of Fourier or Considérant

3. Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vtoraia kniga* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1972), pp. 303–4.

did not threaten his personal attachment to the figure of Jesus as a moral ideal, for the precise reason that they focused on the Kingdom of God on earth as something not very remote, and easily attainable. Subsequently, Dostoevsky's whole life, beginning with his stay in the penal colony of Omsk, would be marked by the incessant struggle in his mind between two images of Christ: one, a model of perfection never equaled by anyone else, yet still a mortal man and thus subject to the law of death; the second, a God-Man triumphant over death. A contradiction, overlooked by the humanists and socialists of the Petrashevsky circle, gradually was to take shape in Dostoevsky's work, up to its most poignant presentation in *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*. The argument of the Grand Inquisitor with Christ is nothing more and nothing less than that of a utopian socialist with his supposed leader who refuses to serve as a leader and, what is worse, shows that his disciple had misunderstood him. Christ says in fact that his Kingdom of God is not of this world, and the freedom he offers man does not lead to any perfect society. No one but the God-Man intending to lift man up to his own divine level can ask for acceptance of this freedom. The utopian in Dostoevsky yearned so much for the Kingdom of God on earth that he sided with the Grand Inquisitor, and it is this that explains the forceful speech the author, himself internally divided, puts into the mouth of his tragic old man. The divine nature of Christ appears as a major obstacle to human happiness on earth and therefore should be denied. But, by a dialectical countermovement, as soon as the earthly happiness of man is chosen as a goal, it becomes obvious that it can be attained only at the price of the total annihilation of human freedom. Thus the argument expresses Dostoevsky's despair at the thought of the erosion of Christian faith—in himself, in the Russian intelligentsia, and in Western Europe. And it was this that forced him to resort to arbitrary and unrealistic remedies. In that big Either-Or—either a Christian civilization or the totalitarian society of Shigalev and of the Grand Inquisitor—he hoped, paradoxically, to find a third way and clung to his Holy Russia of the peasant below and the tsar above as the only possible mainstay of Christianity and, consequently, of human freedom.

The Human and the Divine

The problem of the two natures of Christ underlies Dostoevsky's whole work, and it also determines his journey from a socialist utopia to a nationalistic one. To say that at some given moment he became an atheist (whatever that word may mean) under Belinsky's influence is not truly relevant, for he was haunted by the figure of Christ the teacher perhaps no less in the forties than later on, when in the penal colony. Yet undoubtedly he under-

went a change of heart in Omsk in the sense that now the necessity of an act of faith became clear. His much-quoted letter of 1854 to Fonvizina, written upon his release from the prison camp, contains the nucleus of those internal contradictions which torment his major heroes: "I will tell you regarding myself that I am a child of the age, that I have been a child of unbelief and doubt up till now and will be even (I know it) until my coffin closes. What terrible torments this thirst to believe has cost me and still does cost me, becoming the stronger in my soul the more there is in me of contrary reasonings. And yet sometimes God sends me moments when I am utterly at peace; in those moments I love and find that I am loved by others and in such moments I have constructed for myself a symbol of faith in which everything is clear and sacred to me. This symbol is very simple: to believe that there is nothing more beautiful, profounder, more sympathetic, wiser, braver, or more perfect than Christ; and not only is there nothing, but, as I tell myself with jealous love, there *could not* be anything. Even more: if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if it were a *fact* that the truth excludes Christ, I would rather remain with Christ than with the truth. . . ."

This last sentence is potentially that of a "heresiarch." Who could *prove* to Dostoevsky that Christ was beyond the truth? A scientist, a philosopher, for whom everything is submitted to deterministic laws and who would shrug at the story of Christ rising from the dead as an offense to our reason? That sort of proof, through the universal order of nature, is accepted by those characters of Dostoevsky's who are, more or less, the spokesmen of his "intellectual part": Ippolit in *The Idiot*, Kirillov in *The Possessed*, and Ivan Karamazov. "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain," says Saint Paul (1 Cor. 15:14). Ippolit, Kirillov, Ivan—and the Grand Inquisitor—have their proofs that it is really so, but they also realize that if it is so, if Christ deluded himself in announcing his resurrection, then the world is a devil's farce. Dostoevsky himself, or that part of him which turns against his skeptical characters, "would rather remain with Christ than with the truth," and thus yields the field, in reality, to the so-called scientific *Weltanschauung*. The juxtaposition of faith and reason has behind it an old tradition, but the juxtaposition of faith and truth is a desperate novelty and dangerously favors any self-imposed deception.⁴

4. Here Dostoevsky comes close to Kierkegaard, but the dichotomy is resolved by Kierkegaard, who tips the scales in favor of "inwardness" and "subjectivity," and thus identifies faith with truth: "The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite. . . . But the above definition of truth is an equivalent expression for faith. . . . Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty" (*Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton, 1941, p. 182).

A saying of Meister Eckart's may be recalled here: "If God were able to backslide

There is perhaps also a second layer of meaning in that enigmatic sentence. Since the Gospels are not a treatise on ethics and their message is often self-contradictory, many Christian mystics counseled clinging to the person of Christ as opposed to norms or values. This is a well-founded counsel, but at the same time a precept cherished by every sectarian, for it authorizes transforming the image of Christ as it suits a given man or community. The suspicion arises whether the "Russian Christ" of Dostoevsky is not connected with such an exalted arbitrariness.

The Onslaught of Philosophy—and of Gnosticism

Unfortunately, a brief digression is necessary here. Christianity has in modern times, beginning with the Renaissance, been forced to renew its quarrel with philosophic thought. Earlier, in the Roman Empire, the foe had been Greek philosophy. Assimilated and tamed by the church, it tended nevertheless to recover its autonomy; and at last, thanks to so-called humanism, it grew in strength, inspiring modern science. Or, to be more precise, one side of Greek thought was now taking over and turning against the other, which had been fused with the Jewish heritage. Quite symptomatic was the revival, in the sixteenth century, of the anti-Trinitarian heresy also known as Arianism, though Arius had been condemned by the Council of Nicaea long before, in 325. Perhaps one should call it *the* heresy and trace it down through the history of Christianity in its various contradicting guises. At first sight, the "luminous," rationalistic trend in the Renaissance (and undoubtedly Arianism, with its dislike of incomprehensible dogma, belongs here) had nothing to do with its contemporary "dark," more esoteric counterpart. Yet the two were just the two sides of the same philosophic coin, much as they had been before in the Hellenistic world. The origins of attacks upon the Trinity should be traced back to Gnosticism, which had already by the second century introduced a duality, a separation between Christ on the one hand and the God of the Old Testament on the other. The very dogma of the Trinity—of the three hypostases designated the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—was elaborated as the response of the early church to that Gnostic cleavage which broke the continuity of the Revelation through History. From its birth the Gnostic heresy, in its various ratiocinations, had at its core a resentment of the evil world: a God responsible for such evil could not be a supreme being, while Christ was—or represented—the true deity.⁵ Then the Manicheans

from truth, I would fain cling to truth and let God go."

5. "The following may be noted as the main points in the Gnostic conception of the several parts of the *regula fidei*: (a) The difference between the supreme God and the creator of the world, and therewith the opposing of redemption and creation, and there-

stepped in and followed a well-blazed trail. Ever since, till today, Christology has been a territory for which heretics have had a predilection; they have tended to oppose Redemption to Creation, the Savior to Jehovah, or even to exult in the human nature of Christ, who, through kenosis, "emptied himself" of his divine attributes. In Dostoevsky's major novels all these problems are present implicitly or explicitly.

The theology of Swedenborg, who was both a modern Christian and a scientist, was a major attempt at wrestling with the dogma of the Trinity as recognized by all three branches of Christianity: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. He accused all of them of teaching the faithful to imagine three gods and thus of disguising polytheism under a formula incomprehensible to the human mind. At the same time, however, he disapproved of the solution offered by the Arians, for whom Christ was not of the same nature as the Father and for a large segment of whom he was merely a man. Swedenborg's system is dominated by a Christ who is the *only God*, not in spite of his having been born a man, but precisely because he was born a man. Absolutely Christocentric, Swedenborg's system is also absolutely anthropocentric. Its most sacred books are the Gospel of Saint John and the Apocalypse—by coincidence these were also the most sacred books for Dostoevsky. Swedenborg's credo is embodied in the exclamation of Thomas the Apostle when he touched Christ's wounds: "My Lord and my God." Man was created in the image and semblance of God, for Our Father in Heaven is Man; Heaven, as I have already quoted, is, according to Swedenborg, the Greatest Man.

To compare Dante and Swedenborg as writers would be hazardous, but their respective visions of the "other shore" constitute two decisive testimonies to the imaginative life of our civilization. Dante's cosmology is medieval and his theory is based on Thomas Aquinas, in whose syllogisms Greek philosophy was put to a Catholic use. The importance of man, created and redeemed by God, is guaranteed in Dante by the earth's central place in the universe. But by Swedenborg's time the universe is resolved into a mo-

fore the separation of the Mediator of revelation from the Mediator of creation. (b) The separation of the supreme God from the God of the Old Testament, and therewith the rejection of the Old Testament, or the assertion that the Old Testament contains no revelations of the supreme God, or at least only in certain parts. (c) The doctrine of the independence and eternity of matter. (d) The assertion that the present world sprang from a fall of man, or from an undertaking hostile to God, and is therefore the product of an evil or intermediate being. (e) The doctrine that evil is inherent in matter and therefore is a physical potency. (f) The assumption of Aeons, that is, real powers and heavenly persons in whom is unfolded the absoluteness of the Godhead. (g) The assertion that Christ revealed a God hitherto unknown." See Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Dover ed., 7 vols. in 4 (New York, 1961), 1:257-59. Harnack also lists additional points.

tion of whirling planets and stars. If it were not for one man, Christ, God incarnated, mankind would dwindle into a speck of dust, into an accident in the incomprehensible mechanical order of things. Perhaps for that reason Swedenborg emphasizes God-Man as pre-existing, the Creator and Redeemer in one person. It would be incorrect to classify Swedenborg as anti-Trinitarian, for all he wanted was to propose a new concept of the Trinity. Yet his disciple William Blake, occasionally a rebel against his master, hardly modified the Swedenborgian doctrine when he chose the Human Form Divine as the key to all the secrets of existence. But—unlike Swedenborg's approach—Gnostic affinities are obvious in Blake's multiple reversals of religious concepts: God the lawgiver equated with Satan, Elohim with inferior demiurges. The creation of the world, which is presented by Blake as an act of mercy *after* the Fall has already taken place (or simultaneous with it, which is the same where there is no time), is purely Manichean. In the teachings of the founder of Manicheism, Mani (d. 277), after the Kingdom of Light was contaminated by the Kingdom of Darkness, the Kingdom of Light allowed an inferior demiurge to create the world in that zone so that it might be purified through the action of time.

Swedenborg (and Blake) humanized or "hominized" God and the universe to such an extent that everything, from the smallest particle of matter to planets and stars, was given but one goal: to serve as a fount of signs for human language. Man's imagination, expressing itself through language and identical in its highest attainments with the Holy Ghost, was now to rule over and redeem all things by bringing about the era of the New Jerusalem. Man was again at center—even though his earth and his galaxy were not. The Christian strategy of Swedenborg (and Blake) perhaps parallels that of Thomas Aquinas, who felt that philosophy (or at least Aristotle, *the* philosopher) must be absorbed by Christian thought. In the eighteenth century the Christian strategist was confronted with a more difficult task: philosophy was to be absorbed in its two derivatives, in the rationalistic trend and in the more somber heretical tradition of duality, of a chasm between Creation and Redemption. It was made possible by affirming that the Divine is eternally Human and that the Human is potentially Divine.

But Swedenborg (and Blake) teetered on the very edge, where the equilibrium between Christian faith and its anti-Christian denial was constantly threatened. The divinization of Man was already in the offing, accompanied by the advent of "European nihilism" as foretold by Nietzsche. Our era, the second half of the twentieth century, is marked by a tragicomic escapism—namely, a "death of God" theology which proceeds from the idea of Divine Humanity and subjects it to an imperceptible alteration, so it is completely transformed. It is enough to read a book on Blake by one of the chief

“death of God” theologians to observe how this can be accomplished—obviously by enlisting the help of Hegel.⁶ To Dostoevsky’s credit, let us recall here that although the dialectics of God-Man and Man-God was present in his novels, he desperately struggled against blurring the basic antinomy between the two.

Dostoevsky’s Attempts to Solve the Problem

When describing the books in Dostoevsky’s library, Leonid Grossman admits the probability of Swedenborg’s influence on what we may consider Dostoevsky’s last word in religious matters, the discourses of Father Zosima on prayer, love, hell, and contact with other worlds.⁷ Grossman’s hint has not, to my knowledge, been taken by anyone, and a study of the subject is lacking. Father Zosima in many of his pronouncements indeed sounds like Swedenborg, particularly in his talk on eternal damnation. A man’s life, according to Zosima, is a “moment of *active living* love” and is given to him as a gift of time and space, where love can be exercised. The drama of eternal life resides precisely in the brevity of this encounter with time and space, which soon are no more, and then everything one has lived through becomes part of his interior states. The flames of hell are within the damned and correspond to the quality of their love on earth: “For them hell is voluntary, and they cannot have enough of it.” “They cannot behold the living God without hatred and demand that there be no God of life, that God destroy himself and all his creation.”

In Father Zosima’s thinking, a Manichean hatred of Creation is characteristic of the damned. Yet Dostoevsky, like Swedenborg and Blake before him, tried hard to absorb the heresy and integrate it into a Christology of his own. In a novel this is, however, more difficult than in theology and poetry. Dostoevsky seems to say: if the concept of a God-Man, free from sin, is to have any validity, then human nature should allow us at least an inkling of how it might be possible. That is why Dostoevsky spent so much energy striving to create a wholly good man as a hero of fiction. And he failed. Prince Myshkin is living negative proof, for his acts show to what extent love of self is at the root of human nature and how insufficiently human someone is who lacks it. Myshkin, who is completely selfless and devoid of aggression and sexual drive, is no less a monster of emptiness than is Stavrogin with his excess of self-love. Father Zosima comes straight from the lives of the saints and eludes our questioning, for he is protected by his prestige as a

6. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (East Lansing, 1967).

7. Grossman, *Seminarii po Dostoevskomu*, p. 17.

repentant sinner. As for Alyosha, he is convincing only as one of the Karamazovs, united by their dark, violent blood. His missionary activities among schoolboys and the brotherhood that results are, to be frank, melodramatic and outright sentimentality. Artistic falsity reveals here the falsity of Dostoevsky's self-imposed collectivistic belief, his heresy which he propagated especially in his journalism. Alyosha, a Christ-like leader, suggests the future Russian Christ and is surrounded by twelve children-disciples, but, by a strange twist of stylistic fate (there are stylistic fates), the presumed church changes into a boy-scout unit. It is a doubtful proposition that one can achieve the Kingdom of God on earth by converting mankind into boy scouts, and that is why those chapters of *The Brothers Karamazov* read like an unintended parody. Shatov in *The Possessed*, who loves the Christ-like Russian people but does not believe in God, might have been, on the other hand, a sarcastic jab intentionally directed by Dostoevsky against himself.

In the history of the rebellion of Man against God and against the order of nature, Swedenborg stands out as a healer who wanted to break the seals on the sacred books and thus make the rebellion unnecessary. By revealing that God is Man—he was convinced—he had fulfilled Christ's promise one day to send a Comforter, the Spirit of Truth; through him that Spirit spoke. Swedenborg's serene Christology may help in elucidating Dostoevsky's tormented and tortuous Christology. At the same time such a study would uncover some Blakean elements in Dostoevsky, who never heard of Blake.

Dostoevsky's rebels are invested with a false, exaggerated moral sensitivity: the order of the world should be rejected because it offends man's moral judgment; this world is full of the suffering and agony of creatures tormenting one another. The ideal man, Jesus, must be juxtaposed with that natural order; unfortunately, he was for the rebels merely a man, and his mistakes had to be corrected; hence the only logical conclusion was to postulate the advent of a Man-God. But Dostoevsky's "positive" heroes fare no better. His failures in drawing them probably testify to his utopian (Fourierist) vision of the Ideal Man as perfectly meek, perfectly humble, and deprived of selfhood. William Blake knew better: he distinguished between Imagination enslaved by the Specter—that is, by the Self—and Imagination making use of the Specter which is a permanent component of human nature. Such an appraisal of human faculties is more realistic. But Dostoevsky's failures, even more so than his successes, pay tribute to the permanence of the dilemma which, some eighteen centuries ago, emerged in the guise of a quarrel between the early Christian churches and the Gnostics. The divinization of Man, when one abhors the order of the world as essentially evil, is a risky and self-contradictory venture.