

Dostoevsky and the Politics of Parturition: Childbirth as Political Motif in *Demons*

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Spiritual rebirth, as many scholars agree, is one of the most powerful and pervasive themes in Dostoevsky's mature fiction: Raskolnikov's re-awakening, Dmitry Karamazov's re-invention of self, the rehabilitation of Stepan Trofimovich in the final chapters of his novel *Demons* (1872).¹ Physical birth, specifically the mother-child relationship (or its absence), is also a persistent and significant theme. In *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin compares the first smile exchanged between a mother and her infant to the love God experiences towards new converts. Alyosha Karamazov's Christian faith derives from cherished childhood recollections of his mother praying to the icon of the Madonna in her room (Cicovacki 217). Such beatific representations of maternity were exemplified by the print of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, which hung above the divan in Dostoevsky's study. In Dostoevsky's later novels, the material facts of childbirth and maternity begin to overshadow this traditionally beatific representation of the mother-infant dyad.

This article explores the significance of the theme of childbirth in Dostoevsky's 1872 novel *Demons* on three levels: the material, the miraculous, and the metaphorical.² On the first level, I test the verisimilitude of Dostoevsky's detailed depiction of the mother's labour and the midwife's role. On the second, I query the conventional view that *Demons* represents childbirth as a universally redemptive miracle. The third, 'metaphorical' level of enquiry tries to establish what symbolic values or parallels Dostoevsky *did* intend to develop through his depiction of childbirth. *Demons* demonstrates, to an exceptional degree, Dostoevsky's fascination with birth as a physical and ethical phenomenon. Already three times a father by the time *Demons* was completed, Dostoevsky was as familiar as a nineteenth-century layman could be with the physical experience of childbirth. Moreover, his fiction exhibited increasing sensitivity to childbirth as a moral determinant in narrative. In *Brothers Karamazov*, for example, the sinister character of Smerdiakov, the

fourth, parricidal Karamazov brother, is prefigured by his ill-omened birth in a bath-house in the middle of the night; his mother's dying groans are mistaken by another mother nearby for the cries of her own dead infant, buried the day before. But if Dostoevsky intended the circumstances of birth principally to foreshadow character, why does the narrator of *Demons* squander three chapters on detailed description of the birth of a child who dies within days and develops no independent character at all?

Susanne Fusso, in her illuminating discussion of the Sistine Madonna in *Demons*, suggests that the various paradoxes associated with the birth of the short-lived Ivan Shatov form a deliberately parodic retelling of the Nativity, an interlude that re-affirms both life and Christian faith, drawing strength from its own futility. I share Fusso's conclusions but suggest that the ultimate significance of the childbirth theme is not, as she suggests, 'to reclaim a spiritual power lost to all art in the post-Chernyshevskii world' (Fusso 275); rather to emphasize the futility of the post-Chernyshevskian materialist school in the absence of that spiritual power. In the following discussion, I will assume knowledge of the tangled plot of Dostoevsky's novel. My focus centres on the intense relationships between four major characters: the educated former serf, Ivan Shatov; Nikolai Stavrogin, the dissolute, over-privileged anarchist; Shatov's estranged wife Maria, pregnant with Stavrogin's child; and the wife whom Stavrogin secretly married, the mad Maria Lebyadkina.

Material labour

Dostoevsky places a striking degree of emphasis on the physical details of Maria Shatova's labour which begins within hours of her unexpected arrival at her estranged husband's door. As she harangues and mocks the husband she deserted over a year previously and now apparently intends to exploit for food and shelter, Shatova is progressively overcome by her pains. She suffers three contractions, clearly described by the narrator:

Она встала, хотела шагнуть, но вдруг как бы сильнейшая судорожная боль разом отняла у ней все силы и всю решимость, и она с громким стоном опять упала на постель. Шатов подбежал, но Marie, спрятав лицо в подушки, захватила его руку и изо всей силы стала сжимать и ломать ее в своей руке. Так продолжалось с минуту. (Dostoevskii 553)

Она хотела было сделать отрицательный знак головой, и вдруг с нею сделалась прежняя судорога. Опять она спрятала лицо в подушку и опять изо всей силы целую минуту сжимала до боли руку подбежавшего и обезумевшего от ужаса Шатова. (Dostoevskii 555)

И она опять упала на постель в припадке той же судорожной боли; это уже в третий раз, но на этот раз стоны стали громче, обратились в крики. (Dostoevskii 556)

She got up, tried to take a step, but suddenly it was as if a most violent convulsive pain took away all her strength and all her resolve at once, and with a loud groan she fell back on the bed. Shatov ran to her, but Marie, her face buried in the pillows, seized his hand in hers and began to squeeze to and wring it with all her might. This went on for about a minute. (Dostoevsky 577)

She was about to shake her head, but suddenly the same convulsion came over her. Again she hid her face in a pillow, and again for a whole minute she clung painfully, with all her might, to the hand of Shatov, who rushed to her and was out of his mind with terror. (Dostoevsky 579)

And she fell back on the bed again in a seizure of the same convulsive pain; this was the third time now, but this time her moans grew louder, turned into cries. (Dostoevsky 580)

Extraordinarily, however, Shatov fails to recognize what is happening until she tells him: “Да неужели вы, наконец, не видите, что я мучаюсь родами, — приподнялась она, смотря на него со страшною, болезненною, исказившею всё лицо ее злобой. — Будь он заране проклят, этот ребенок!” (Dostoevskii 556). “But can’t you finally see that I’m in labor [sic]?” she raised herself a little, looking at him with a terrible, painful spite that distorted her whole face. “Curse it beforehand, this child!” (Dostoevsky 580). Shatov’s conventionally masculine imbecility in this context is only equalled by that of his former friend Kirillov, with whom he has following exchange:

— Кириллов, жена родит!
— То есть как?
— Родит, ребенка родит!
— Вы... не ошибаетесь? (Dostoevskii 557)

“Kirillov, my wife’s giving birth!”
“How’s that?”
“Giving birth, to a baby!”
“You’re not... mistaken?” (Dostoevsky 581)

Kirillov adds unhelpfully, “Очень жаль, что я родить не умею, — задумчиво отвечал Кириллов, — то есть не я родить не умею, а сделать так, чтобы родить, не умею... или... Нет, это я не умею сказать” (Dostoevskii 557) [“It’s a great pity that I’m not able to give birth,” Kirillov answered pensively, “that is, not that I’m not able to give birth, but that I’m not able to make it so that there is birth ... or ... No, I’m not able to say it” (Dostoevsky 581). Kirillov’s inability

to say that he cannot help a woman give birth (unlike Maksim Gorky, whose autobiographical narrator would do just that in the short story *Rozhdenie cheloveka* [The Birth of a Man, 1912]), leads him accidentally to state that he cannot give birth, and finally to confess that he cannot say what he wants to say. His biological inadequacy, as a man, becomes literally and lexically confused with his verbal and ideological sterility, as a sympathizer with the novel's radical activists – an early warning from Dostoevsky of the novel's looming moral. More pragmatically, however, Kirillov provides a ruble from his lunch money to help pay the midwife's fee; Shatov then performs the symbolic act of selling his gun (a substitute phallus and therefore a false fertility symbol) to raise the rest of the money.

The issue of the midwife is significant and reveals both Shatov's rather surprising familiarity with the social politics of obstetrics in nineteenth-century Russia, and Dostoevsky's display of detailed knowledge of an arena traditionally confined to women. Shatov's wife requests a *baba* or *starukha*, that is, the lowest level of midwife: usually an old woman who had assisted at many births but lacked any formal medical training. The official term for this category of midwife was a *povitukha* (later used incorrectly by the narrator of *Demons* to describe Virginskaia (Dostoevskii 637)). Shatov insists on providing his wife with a *pobival'naia babka*, meaning a certified midwife who has taken obstetric training in a licensed institute; in the 1860s this would have been one of the Imperial Foundling Homes in St Petersburg or Moscow (Ramer). It was easier to find certified midwives in towns than in the country, as they were in high demand; for their own convenience and profit, they tended to cluster in urban areas. We learn that there are at least three people qualified to act as midwives in this town: Virginskaia herself, considered the best, a certain Maksheeva and an army doctor called Rozanov who is trained as an *akusher* or male midwife. (The terms *akusherka* and *pobival'naia babka* were interchangeable in common parlance but only the second had legal status). When Virginskaia arrives, she speedily describes the options faced by mothers at that time:

“С помощью простой какой-нибудь старухи, простонародной бабки, вам пятьдесят шансов кончить худо; а уж тут хлопот и расходов будет больше, чем с дорогою акушеркой. Почему вы знаете, что я дорогая акушерка? Заплатите после, я с вас лишнего не возьму, а за успех поручусь; со мной не умрете, не таких видивала. Да и ребенка хоть завтра же вам отправлю в приют, а потом в деревню на воспитание, тем и дело с концом.” (Dostoevskii 563)

“You'd have fifty chances of ending badly with the help of some simple old woman, some peasant granny; and then there'd be more troubles and costs than with an expensive midwife. How do you know I'm an expensive midwife? You can pay later, I won't take too much from you, and I guarantee

you success; with me you won't die, I've seen lots worse cases. And I'll send the baby to the orphanage, tomorrow even, if you like, and then to the country to be brought up, and that'll be the end of that." (Dostoevsky 588)

Mothers can thus choose between risking infection and death with an unlicensed midwife or the guarantee of survival offered by Virginskaia. Not only does she promise a successful birth, she takes responsibility for sending the child to a foundling home and then to be fostered in the country – once again, standard outcomes for unwanted children lucky enough to survive infancy.

Miraculous birth

Once Virginskaia arrives, Shatova's labour and birth progress with equally intense but less prolonged descriptive passages, culminating in the child's arrival:

В руках у Арины Прохоровны кричало и копошилось крошечными ручками и ножками маленькое, красное, сморщенное существо, беспомощное до ужаса и зависящее, как пылинка, от первого дуновения ветра, но кричавшее и заявлявшее о себе, как будто тоже имело какое-то самое полное право на жизнь... (Dostoevskii 567)

In Arina Prokhorovna's hands a small, red, wrinkled being was crying and waving its tiny arms and legs, a terribly helpless being, like a speck of dust at the mercy of the first puff of wind, yet crying and proclaiming itself, as if it, too, somehow had the fullest right to life ... (Dostoevsky 592)

Once the child is delivered, he is never again described; the narrative switches from naturalistic description of physical experience to the emotional and psychological changes undergone by Maria Shatova and her husband. Both of them are described ambiguously as *blazhennyi*, which can mean either *blessed* or *foolish* (Dostoevskii 567-9).³ Both new parents feel and act reborn. Marie's entire attitude to her long-discarded husband is transformed:

Marie лежала как без чувств, но через минуту открыла глаза и странно, странно поглядела на Шатова: совсем какой-то новый был этот взгляд, какой именно, он еще понять был не в силах, но никогда прежде он не знал и не помнил у ней такого взгляда. (Dostoevskii 567)

Marie was lying as if unconscious, but after a moment she opened her eyes and gave Shatov a strange, strange look: it was somehow quite a new look, precisely how he was as yet unable to understand, but he did not know or remember her ever having such a look before. (Dostoevsky 592)

Meanwhile, in what the reader already realises is tragic irony, Shatov begs his wife to let him go to his last meeting with Verkhovensky's fivesome, claiming "“это уже самый последний шаг! А там новый путь, и никогда, никогда не вспомняем о старом ужасе!”” (Dostoevskii 570) [“[T]his is the very last step! And then the new path, and we'll never, ever remember the old horror”” (Dostoevsky 596)]. The tragic irony is, of course, that he will be killed; his wife will wake up to find him missing, discover Kirillov's body in the next apartment then run down the snowy street in her bedclothes, dooming both herself and the infant to premature death. In contrast with his dramatic entrance, the infant's death is almost unnoticed by *Demons'* narrator. He disappears almost imperceptibly from the narrative, like Liza Tushina. The death of Ivan Shatov Jr is pathetic but entirely believable in its historical context; infant mortality rates for under-fives in Russia in the nineteenth century were at fifty per cent (Ramer 218).

There will be no 'new path' for the new family. Yet this irony does not deny the miraculous nature of the event. As Fusso emphasizes, 'As she [Shatova] gives birth in the poverty-stricken home of her cuckolded husband, the mystery of the Nativity is briefly re-enacted in a godless world by three insignificant and doomed people' (Fusso 265). Shatov's fierce acceptance of the child he did not father, his refusal to let it be sent to a foundling home and, most of all, his speech to Virginskaia mark the strength of his returning faith in the ineffable. He declaims spontaneously to Arina Prokhorovna:

‘Тайна появления нового существа, великая тайна и необъяснимая, Арина Прохоровна, и как жаль, что вы этого не понимаете! [...] Было двое, и вдруг третий человек, новый дух, цельный, законченный, как не бывает от рук человеческих; новая мысль и новая любовь, даже страшно... И нет ничего выше на свете!’ (Dostoevskii 567)

‘The mystery of the appearance of a new being, a great mystery and an inexplicable one, Arina Prokhorovna, and what a pity you don't understand it!’[...] ‘There were two, and suddenly there's a third human being, a new spirit, whole, finished, such as doesn't come from human hands; a new thought and a new love, it's even frightening ... And there's nothing higher in the world!’ (Dostoevsky 592–3)

Shatov's idealism places him on the side of Stepan Trofimovich (the only character in *Demons* privileged to experience a full-scale spiritual rebirth) and of Raphael in the former's aesthetic dichotomy between great art and petroleum, appropriately, since his wife is an ekphrastic copy of the Dresden Madonna which admired so deeply by Dostoevsky in his final years (Fusso 264–5).

Anna Prokhorovna's cheerfully utilitarian retort that childbirth represents

nothing more significant than “дальнейшее развитие организма, и ничего тут нет, никакой тайны [...] Этак всякая муха тайна. Но вот что: лишним людям не надо бы родиться. Сначала перекуйте так все, чтоб они не были лишние, а потом и родите их. А то вот его в приют послезавтра тащить...” (Dostoevskii 568) [“... the further development of the organism, there’s nothing to it, no mystery. [...] That way every fly is a mystery. But I tell you what: unnecessary people shouldn’t be born. First reforge everything so that they’re not unnecessary and then give birth to them. Otherwise, you see, I’ve got to drag him to the orphanage tomorrow...” (Dostoevsky 593)]; the author thus places her equally firmly on the side of petroleum. She is a lost cause, a hopeless materialist and a convinced antagonist of aesthetic ideals and disinterested judgement. Yet she also plays an important role in the narrative as a whole, interweaving the two halves of the plot. As a midwife, she brings new life into the world, yet she does so unconventionally, swearing and spouting anarcho-socialist propaganda at her patients. Her reputation as the best midwife in town withstands the general dislike of her opinions; she is even credited with having shocked one difficult case into delivering more promptly. As a private individual, Arina Prokhorovna is wife and sister to two members of the fivesome; a freethinker like Shatova, she considers herself free to openly cuckold her husband with Lebyadkin. Her brother Shigalyev is the most interesting member of the fivesome, a Fourierist who is critically aware of the ethical tensions within political terrorism. Arina Prokhorovna’s responsibility with regard to Shatova’s death resembles Verkhovensky’s connection to the fivesome. Both are cynics professionally committed to bringing new phenomena into the world; each is blamed for the destruction of that phenomenon but each escapes punishment.

Metaphorical sterility

If there is potentially more than one midwife in the narrative of *Demons*, there are many birth stories. Behind the short-lived Ivan Shatov, there are two ghost babies – the presumably fantastic child of the mentally ill Maria Lebiadkina, Stavrogin’s legal wife, and the rumoured pregnancy of Shatov’s sister Dasha, which never actually materializes. Lebiadkina dreams about dressing her baby in ribbons then drowning it in the depths of a forest; significantly, after recounting her dream to Shatov, she asks after his wife. When Maria Shatova is described as *blazhennaia* after the birth of her son, it is another link to this permanently blessed and already heaven-bound holy fool. Stepan Trofimovich agonizes over the marriage he will be forced to make with Dasha in order to cover up ‘other men’s sins’.⁴

Birth pervades the novel on a textual level. Even before the story opens, Russia's agitation for social rebirth has reached fever pitch: 'вся Россия вдруг взликовала и готовилась вся возродиться,' (Dostoevskii 27) ['the whole of Russia suddenly became exultant and ready to be reborn' (Dostoevsky 16)]. Shigalyev diagnoses the mission of the fivesomes as being to "зародить цинизм и скандалы, полное безверие во что бы то ни было, жажду лучшего" (Dostoevskii 525) ['to engender cynicism and scandal, complete disbelief in anything whatsoever, a yearning for the better' (Dostoevsky 547)]. Stepan Trofimovich macaronically and with unwitting prescience describes his son Petr Stepanovich as a child as "*Enfin*, чувства изящного никакого, то-есть чего-нибудь высшего, основного, какого-нибудь зародыша будущей идеи ... *c'était comme un petit idiot*." (Dostoevskii 101) ["*Enfin*, no sense of refinement whatsoever, that is, of anything lofty, essential, of any germ of a future idea ... *c'était comme un petit idiot*"] (Dostoevsky 92)]. The day of the fete organized by the mayor's wife is haunted by incipient 'зародыши беспорядка' (Dostoevskii 447), ['germs of disorder' (Dostoevsky 463)]. Each metaphor connects the theme of birth to something unwholesome, revolutionary, or both.

I have thus far avoided mentioning Stavrogin, who is both unwholesome and ambiguously revolutionary. As the father, biological or imaginary, of three infants, Stavrogin is a remarkable combination of fecundity and futility. All his children perish: the ghost child, drowned by its mad mother; Dasha's putative child, never even born; the flesh-and-blood Ivan Shatov Jr, dead from exposure. All this fertility, which as we have already seen represented immense spiritual value to Dostoevsky, is not expended in the narrative without purpose, nor is the Shatovs' childbirth scene merely an antithesis to the solipsistic sadism represented by Stavrogin and his admirers. I suggest that Dostoevsky emphasizes the miraculous nature of birth in order to demonstrate the ineradicable sterility of all that Stavrogin, Verkhovensky, Virginskaia and their ilk represent. They are so far gone that they cannot create new life. The child's death confirms the sterility of radical materialism. Kirillov, in one of his pseudo-epileptic monologues, comments that "В Евангелии сказано, что в воскресении не будут родить, а будут как ангелы божии" (Dostoevskii 566), ["It's said in the gospel that in the Resurrection there will be no birth, but people will be like God's angels"] (Dostoevsky 566)]; the irony here is that while the fivesome are clearly not angels nor is the Resurrection in progress, the power to create new things, whether new human beings or new ideals, has been lost. To Dostoevsky, this negation of creative energy, whether aesthetic or generative, is one of the worst possible scenarios: a sterile Apocalypse, a Resurrection without new life. Kirillov's admission to Shatov could serve as Dostoevsky's epitaph to the radical materialists, as voiced by the most sympathetic of their cohort: "я родить не умею", – "I'm not able to give birth".

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Rudicina.
- 2 This paper is an early study for a monograph under preparation, *Hideous Agonies: Childbirth in Russian Literature*, which will examine the symbolism of childbirth in fiction by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and other male Russian writers.
- 3 For more on the significance of this term, see Fusso 270.
- 4 ‘Чужие грехи’: a recurring phrase introduced as the section title of Part 1, Chapter Three.

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