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Dostoevsky's *The Devils* and the Antinihilist Novel

The majority of nineteenth-century literary critics identified *The Devils* as an antinihilist novel.¹ The basic theme of Dostoevsky's work, the journal in which it was published, and the author's own journalistic commentary on his novel all seemed to link Dostoevsky to such conservative writers as Pisemskii, Leskov, and Krestovskii. Modern critics, both Soviet and Western, are aware that *The Devils* has qualities which make it vastly superior to the antinihilist works of the writers mentioned above. But in stressing Dostoevsky's artistic superiority, there is a danger of underestimating the powerful influence of badly written conservative novels upon his desire to write *The Devils*. Dostoevsky was a polemist, an impassioned writer who wanted to correct the misconceptions of other novelists. His work, therefore, takes on added significance when placed in a literary context that includes what can be regarded as the more profane novels of his contemporaries.

The connection between Dostoevsky's novel and the antinihilist novel is primarily a polemical one. Just as *The Devils* is a political attack against nihilism, it is also an artistic argument aimed at antinihilist writers who, in Dostoevsky's view, did not fully appreciate the significance of what they were depicting. In reworking the antinihilist novel, Dostoevsky used images, characterizations, and historical events that were typical of this type of prose. The contemporary reader knew that he was in the familiar realm of criminal demons in the guise of political radicals.² But Dostoevsky had transformed the antinihilist novel beyond the level of mere vindictiveness. Antinihilists were not wrong in their attitude toward radicalism; they had just inadequately perceived the profundity of their observations—their metaphor of nihilists as devils had not been realized. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, created a work in which nihilism as a manifestation of the moral cynicism of secular culture would be dramatized as a palpable, believable evil, incarnate in the words and deeds of Stavrogin and of Peter Verkhovenskii and his fellow demons.

In 1864, Evgenii Edel'son made a hypothetical case for the antinihilist novel as a potentially new literary phenomenon which had adapted itself to new realities. He felt that Turgenev, Pisemskii, and Kliushnikov, in responding to the demands of the reading public for analyses of Russia's rapid social and political changes, had tried to develop a "new form of novel more suitable for conveying

1. For a good anthology of nineteenth-century reviews of *The Devils*, see V. Zelinskii, *Istoriko-kriticheskie kommentarii k sochineniiam F. M. Dostoevskogo*, 3 vols. in 1 (Moscow, 1885–86), vol. 3. For a summary of these and other reviews, see I. I. Zamotin, *Dostoevskii v russkoi kritike*, vol. 1: 1846–1881 (Warsaw, 1913); see also Serge V. Gregory, "The Literary Milieu of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1977), pp. 49–62.

2. See Charles A. Moser, *Antinihilism in the Russian Novel of the 1860's* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964). Chapter 6 ("Characteristic Aspects of the Antinihilist Approach in Russian Literature of the 1860's," pp. 137–80) is especially relevant.

certain contemporary problems."³ Their novels did not concentrate on the gradual exposition of the life and psychology of a major character, but rather sketched a broad panorama of contemporary society, using the hero of the novel only as a point of focus. The speed of contemporary events necessitated "quick, almost hurried photographs" of various aspects of social development. Edel'son suggested that if writers desired to create this type of novel, they must do so boldly, by rejecting forms that were unsuitable for expressing "new problems." The result would be the formation of some sort of stylistic distinctiveness that would set the genre off from other types of novels. But Edel'son complained that this was precisely what the antinihilist novel had failed to do. Its caricatures and indiscriminate incorporation of all kinds of literary, journalistic, and rhetorical mannerisms had destroyed the stylistic integrity essential to a work of art. The antinihilist novel had merely put new wine into old bottles.

In discussing the antinihilist novel, other nineteenth-century critics pointed out the negative influence of both the French popular novel and the feuilleton.⁴ Twentieth-century criticism has stressed the eclecticism of the antinihilist novel and its use of cliché-ridden literary devices.⁵ A literary omnivore, Dostoevsky used the same themes and motifs that antinihilists used. At the same time he showed no overt fondness for the conservative works of Leskov, Krestovskii, and others. In the notebooks for *The Devils*, Dostoevsky cautioned himself against falling into the established patterns of antinihilist writers who announce the moral corruption and evil intent of their nihilist-scoundrels and then proceed to repeat endlessly the same negative traits.⁶ Dostoevsky suggested that his "Nechaev" would be presented more subtly than depictions of nihilists in previous conservative novels.

Nevertheless, there is indeed a relationship between the eclecticism of the antinihilist novel and the eclecticism of *The Devils*. The stylistic sources of antinihilism are often the stylistic sources of Dostoevsky's novels: the feuilleton, newspaper accounts, and crime novels. The critic A. I. Beletskii observed in 1923 that the boulevard novel, written by authors as diverse in talent and fame as Dostoevsky, Leskov, and Krestovskii, retained the basic structure of its historical source—the traditional adventure novel.⁷ The essential difference was in the intro-

3. Evgenii Edel'son, "Russkaia literatura," *Biblioteka dlia chteniia*, 1864, no. 6, p. 33.

4. See N. I. Solov'ev, "Dva romanista: Kritika Peterburgskikh trushchob V. V. Krestovskogo, Nekuda, Oboidennykh, Voitelnitsy, Chaiushchikh dvizhenii vody i Rastochitelia M. Stebnitskogo," *Vsemirnyi trud*, 1, no. 12 (December 1867), section 2, pp. 35–66; N. Aleksandrov, "Sovremennoe obozrenie. Melochi dnia. Kriticheskaia zametka o tendentsioznykh pisateliakh," *Delo*, 1868, no. 12, pp. 1–29; Okr-ts [pseud.], "Zhurnalistika 1869 goda: Stat'ia I (Novye romany starykh romanistov)," *Delo*, 1869, no. 9, pp. 72–112.

5. See Iu. S. Sorokin, "K istoriko-literaturnoi kharakteristike antinigilisticheskogo romana (Dilogiia Vs. Krestovskogo *Krovavyy puf*)," *Doklady i soobshcheniia filologicheskogo fakul'teta MGU*, no. 3 (Moscow, 1947), pp. 79–87; A. G. Tseitlin, "Siuzhetika antinigilisticheskogo romana," *Literatura i marksizm*, 1929, no. 2, pp. 33–74; and V. G. Bazanov, *Iz literaturnoi polemiki 60-kh godov* (Petrozavodsk, 1940).

6. Dostoevsky wrote: "Don't do as other novelists do, that is, from the very beginning blow your horn that here is indeed a most unusual person. On the contrary, conceal it and reveal it slowly with strong artistic strokes" (F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 17 vols. to date [Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–], 11:264 [hereafter cited as PSS]).

7. A. I. Beletskii, "V masterskoi khudozhnika slova," in B. A. Lesin, ed., *Voprosy teorii i psikhologii tvorchestva* (Kharkov: Nauchnaia mysl', 1923), p. 155.

duction of topical social motifs: the “obstacles” (*prepiatstva*) in the flow of the novel took the form of motifs concerned with exposing social inequality, the denouement involved a court drama or criminal proceeding. But the basis of the tangled design of the boulevard novel, according to Beletskii, was to be found in a set of shocking incidents created to satisfy the demands of those readers who desired no more than entertaining reading. Beletskii wrote that Dostoevsky masterfully used these stylistic sources for the resolution of his particular artistic problems:

Fires, murder and suicide, overheard conversations which reveal the secrets of as yet unexposed evildoers, public scandals, unexpected escapades of characters whose motivations are revealed only later in the novel, duels, abductions, sudden fainting spells of heroines, abandoned and substituted children, meetings of secret societies, and so forth—these are several of the motifs which made it possible to hold the interest of a reader who was in a state of extreme excitement and was not overly concerned with verisimilitude; these motifs made him swallow a book in one gulp and wait in nervous agitation for its sequel.⁸

One does not have to look very far to find comparable motifs in *The Devils*.

The antinihilist novel was confined to a literary subculture in which material of a questionable level of taste, according to the proponents of belles-lettres, was related in a style that hovered between art and journalism. In the 1830s, the “mass literature” produced by writers like Bulgarin, Masal'skii, and Zagoskin was instrumental in the development of Russia's prose style. The Gogolian tradition evolved in part from this native “pulp” literature. Dostoevsky, as a writer within the Gogolian tradition, had always used popular literature as a source of themes and plot lines. His altering of antinihilist clichés was merely the continuation of the practice of parodying and arguing with the literary subculture, a style he had developed in the 1840s, when his romanticized naturalism seemed to breathe new life into the physiological sketches which had become part of journalism and popular literature.⁹

The Devils fits into Edel'son's characterization of the antinihilist novel to the extent that it interprets the meaning of “striking phenomena,” the unusual events (*sobytiia*) afflicting society. But Dostoevsky's method consisted of using allegory and the distillation of events rather than the chronicle approach suggested by Edel'son. At the same time, the texture of *The Devils* is rich in thematic and stylistic diversity from a social satire on provincial life to philosophical speculation on the existence of God. This panoramic quality is not spatial, not a result of description, but cerebral. The literary diversity is put in the service of a single overriding idea: Russia's descent into chaos. The satirical description of a scandalous provincial fete contributes as much to this theme as does Kirillov's tortuous logic.

8. Ibid.

9. In discussing the transformation of the clichés of popular literature in the works of Gogol and the young Dostoevsky, Peter Hodgson writes: “The familiar appurtenances of the literary subculture are so presented here that they not only expose their literary shortcomings as the articulatory agents of a bankrupt literary sensibility, but they also reveal the underlying chaos and despair which the specious epistemology of that literary sensibility was attempting to mask” (Peter Hodgson, *From Gogol to Dostoevsky: Jakob Butkov, A Reluctant Naturalist of the 1840's* [Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1977], p. 66).

By introducing what I call a "comic demonology" into *The Devils*, Dostoevsky adapted one of the primary motifs in antinihilist literature to his own purposes. As a nihilist "son," Peter Verkhovenskiĭ displays the bestial features which were typical in depictions of political radicals in conservative novels. Within the "Great Chain of Being," nihilists are consistently portrayed as base creatures of the realm, as mutants and reptiles.¹⁰ Peter Verkhovenskiĭ is described initially as a garrulous serpent of the devil. Liputin is a gossip and a busybody whose meddling plays a crucial role in establishing the mood of the town in the beginning of the novel. Shigalev has enormous ears. Liamshin is a maniacal piano player who in the end is incapable of accepting the consequences of the cacophony he helped to create. The grotesque descriptions of the villains in an antinihilist novel often produced crude and sarcastic comic effects. Critics were always pointing out the caricatured (*sharzhirovannye*) figures in antinihilist novels, and, as is evident in the descriptions of Erkel', Tolkachenko, and Shigalev, Dostoevsky himself was not above creating scathing caricatures of nihilist types.¹¹

The comic demonology in *The Devils* is used quite consciously to create a sense of pandemonium, a feeling that grotesques are in control and methodically wreaking havoc. The comedy in the novel does not provide relief, but instead exposes the fragility of individual and social sanity, giving the reader the feeling that in this amoral world, disorder and absurdity seethe beneath the artifice of convention and social respectability. The effect is comparable to that of modern black comedy, which jars and loosens the stability of social conventions and thus reveals a sense of the absurd which lies near the surface. In this way, Dostoevsky was able to take a superficial trait of antinihilism (the comic bestiary) and provide it with a complex resonance. The slowly changing tone of *The Devils* directly corresponds to the changing forms of comedy. *The Devils* begins with social satire—the ridiculous bumbblings of the old-fashioned liberal-romantic Stepan Trofimovich—and moves on to the domestic comedy between him and Varvara Petrovna. After the appearance of Stavrogin and Peter Verkhovenskiĭ, strange, even absurd, elements start to dominate the novel, piling up until the chapter "U nashikh" and the ensuing fete. These two events with their bizarre humorous touches hurl the novel toward its melodramatic climax. The evolving black comedy thus builds toward the morbid atmosphere of the conclusion.

The demonology of *The Devils* is an example of Dostoevsky's ability to reshape the imagery of antinihilism by adding both psychological complexity and dramatic effect. This does not completely discredit, however, the feeling among nineteenth-century critics that the novel did not develop entirely beyond the normal dictates of antinihilism. Dostoevsky borrowed the title for his novel from Pushkin's 1830 lyric. Used as an epigraph (Dostoevsky quotes eight lines), Pushkin's poem presents the feeling of a world in turmoil: man has lost his way, the storm rages, and everything seems to be in the grip of demons. Antinihilist novels characteristically carried titles that reflected a sense of impending chaos.¹²

10. See Bazanov, *Iz literaturnoi polemiki*, p. 52. In Leskov's *Cathedral Folk* the nihilist Termosov is described as a centaur who simultaneously looks like a man, a woman, and a horse.

11. Erkel' and Tolkachenko are recognizable as the Nechaevists Nikolaev and Pryzhov, respectively (Dostoevskii, *PSS*, 12:207).

12. See, for example, Pisemskii's *The Troubled Sea* and *In the Whirlpool*, Leskov's *No Way Out* and *At Daggers Drawn*, and Goncharov's *The Precipice*.

If the Pushkin lyric symbolizes dissonance, the second epigraph—the quotation from Luke about the herd of swine infected with demons—symbolizes the potential for divine grace. Before Dostoevsky wrote *The Devils*, the symbolism of the herd was already part of the antinihilist lexicon. At this point, it is important to introduce into the discussion of the literary context of Dostoevsky's novel several external similarities between *The Devils* and Krestovskii's *Panurge's Herd* (*Panurgovo stado*), published two years earlier in *Russkii vestnik*. The title of Krestovskii's novel comes from *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by Rabelais. In Rabelais's novel, Panurge has an argument with the sheep merchant Dingdong while crossing the sea. Panurge buys one of the sheep from the merchant, throws it into the water, and the rest of the herd follows.¹³ Krestovskii's "herd" refers to the mob, to those who are sucked into the "whirlpool" or "cesspool" created by Polish sympathizers.¹⁴ The ostensible hero of the novel, Khvalyntsev, who wavers in his decision to join the nihilists until he falls in love with a Polish activist, is described as the "new goat" in Panurge's herd.¹⁵ The antinihilist genre of the 1860s, especially those works published in *Russkii vestnik* under the supervision of its editor M. N. Katkov, typically contained a pitched battle between the forces of good and evil with the drama centering on those caught in the middle.¹⁶ Shatov's role, at least in part, develops from this tradition. Although repudiating the nihilists, he is a victim of his former allegiance to them. His murder, which occurs immediately after a reconciliation with his wife, functions as a highly melodramatic climax calculated to shake the reader and expose the brutality of the nihilists. The notebooks for *The Devils* show Shatov as a representative of the Slavophile Dostoevsky at his most vitriolic, at one point characterizing Westernizers as "vile, petty, stupid academic kiddies, our herd of Panurge," a direct reference to Krestovskii's novel.¹⁷

Essential to Shigalev's theory in *The Devils* is the concept that the majority of the people will be led around like sheep: one-tenth will have power over the remaining nine-tenths, who will "lose their individuality and turn into a herd. . . ."¹⁸ Verkhovenskii understands that this is the most important part of Shigalev's crazed ideology: "Slaves must be equal: there has as yet never been freedom nor equality without despotism, but in a herd there must be equality, and that's Shigalevism."¹⁹

In the first chapter of part 3 of *The Devils*, in what is perhaps the most abusive language in the novel, the narrator comments on the *svolochi*. Anton Lavrent'evich is a conservative member of the gentry and as such is drawn toward antinihilist sentiments. Toward the end of part 2, he speaks of the workers at the Shpigulinskii factory as a "herd of sheep."²⁰ In *Panurge's Herd*, the commune members "yell like a herd of sheep" as they disrupt the readings at a liter-

13. François Rabelais, *The Heroic Deeds of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, vol. 2 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1929), pp. 117–22.

14. See V. V. Krestovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3: *Panurgovo stado* (St. Petersburg, 1904), pp. 36, 151, 218.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

16. See P. G. Pustovoit, *Pisemskii v istorii russkogo romana* (Moscow, 1969), p. 167.

17. Dostoevskii, *PSS*, 11:147.

18. *Ibid.*, 10:312.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

ary evening. Dostoevsky had difficulties in writing the section of part 3 in which the narrator attacks the *svolochi*. He changed the composition of the chapter several times, but the basic tone of the narration remained more or less the same in all the variants.²¹ Dostoevsky knew what he wanted to communicate in this chapter, but he struggled to find a palatable way of presenting it, possibly because he sensed the excessive tone. In any case, this was one section of the novel that made an impression in the minds of those contemporary critics who were ready to see Dostoevsky as just another antinihilist writer.

The Devils develops two scenes that also play important roles in *Panurge's Herd*: the nihilist meeting and the scandalous literary fete. In *Panurge's Herd*, the leader of a radical circle, Charyvskii, does not preside over the discussions at a meeting, but instead sits away from the others and says little, making what he does say carry a great deal of weight. In the chapter "U nashikh," Verkhovenskii's controlled silence produces a similar effect, but because his silence contrasts with his earlier garrulousness and is so much more effectively dramatized, his tactics have a greater significance on the development of the plot. When Verkhovenskii joins the other members of the circle, who are already nervous about their roles at the meeting, he immediately puts on a stern, almost cruel pose. In the course of the evening, he interrupts the conversation only a few times before asking the final shocking question about the extent of the conspirators' loyalties. Each interruption, because it is a jarring *non sequitur* amidst the general desire for orderly and serious discussion, elevates the agitation in the group.

Panurge's Herd also includes comic scenes that ridicule democratic pretensions. The nihilists set up a commune in which labor is strictly divided, although the leader Poloiarov manages to escape any kind of work and handles all the money. Even with the rather uneven division of labor, the order of the commune breaks down completely every time someone knocks at the door. Whenever this happens, the nihilists argue about whose turn it is to open the door. In "U nashikh," the democratic act of voting on the question of whether the gathering is an official meeting only succeeds in producing further disruptions; the nihilists cannot decide what the word "meeting" means, much less vote on having one. Later, during Shigalev's pedantic speech, the nihilists, in an act of obvious self-mockery, suggest that everyone vote on whether they have to listen to Shigalev. Dostoevsky and Krestovskii both try to discredit the radical mentality by showing how its actions contradict its ethos.

The meeting in *Panurge's Herd* becomes heated when Poloiarov expounds on the uselessness of art, on the worthlessness of Shakespeare in comparison to shoes because free people do not need art, only useful trades. This theme was canonical to antinihilist literature ever since Bazarov first confronted Kirsanov in *Father and Sons*.²² In *The Devils*, Stepan Trofimovich repeats the argument on art versus utility during his speech at the fete. The meeting in *Panurge's Herd* ends in disarray. Beigush, a vacillating Pole, concludes that there is nothing human in the actions of the nihilists: "It's some sort of chaos, a mishmash of ideas, an impenetrable confusion."²³ Dostoevsky's intentions do not differ greatly from Krestovskii's when it comes to characterizing the actions of nihilists, but

21. Ibid., 11:322.

22. See Bazanov, *Iz literaturnoi polemiki*, p. 55.

23. Krestovskii, *Panurgovo stado*, p. 198.

Dostoevsky is able to dramatize the chaos, whereas Krestovskii can only point his finger at it.

The notebooks for *The Devils* provide ample evidence of a factual basis for much of the detail in the novel. The two halves of the fete—the reading and the ball—are recognizable scenes taken from contemporary events. On March 2, 1862, a “literary evening” was organized in St. Petersburg ostensibly for the benefit of impoverished students, although it was in fact held to aid two exiles. At the benefit, Chernyshevskii read in an awkward oratorical style his recollections of Dobroliubov, who had just died. Afterward, a translation of Beranger’s poem “Mr. Iskariotov” was recited and received with approving shouts and applause. The audience was in a fever pitch when the final speaker, P. V. Pavlov, a liberal professor of history at St. Petersburg University, came to the podium. Dostoevsky attended the benefit and Pavlov became the prototype for the third speaker at the fete, “the maniac who continually waved his fist.”²⁴

In *Panurge’s Herd*, the nihilist commune attends the *very same* literary evening and actually incites the crowd with sarcastic outcries and inappropriate applause. Chernyshevskii is described in unflattering terms:

He began. . . . However, this was not a reading, but an extemporization, an improvisation. He discussed “his acquaintance with Dobroliubov.” His monologue, which was extremely artless and limp and accompanied by strange, overly familiar mannerisms, was not interrupted by a single sign of approval by the audience. Obviously, the public did not expect this. Its confusion increased; grumblings were heard, even amused chuckling. . . . Finally, someone went up to the podium and said that it was time to conclude, and when the publicist fell silent, suddenly whistles, hissing, boos, and cries of indignation rang out.²⁵

Krestovskii’s description borrows heavily from articles on the event appearing in the conservative press.²⁶ Krestovskii created the veneer of a historical chronicle, while Dostoevsky described the event satirically and placed it in a different, more highly charged setting. The narrator in *The Devils* comments on the fete in the manner of a moralizing feuilletonist: man’s natural inclination leads him to depravity. Russians like nothing better than a scandal, because of their overabundant cynicism which poisons everything. As a result, the *svolochi* emerge. They are a wild force of destruction, personified as the back row at the reading which claps, hoots, coughs, shuffles, and blurts out such things as “My God! What nonsense!” and “He aimed at a crow and hit a cow” during Karmazinov’s recitation.

Dostoevsky fills his version of the reading with absurd humor and disjointed dialogues. As in the scandal scene at Varvara Petrovna’s, Lebiadkin’s unexpected entrance quickly changes the mood: he stumbles on stage, looks at the audience, and bursts out laughing. The back row applauds. His advice in verse to the needy governesses shatters any pretense of respectability. Karmazinov’s subsequent speech, as related by the narrator, becomes a grotesque satire on Turgenev’s

24. Dostoevskii, *PSS*, 12:310 and 312.

25. Krestovskii, *Panurgovo stado*, p. 229.

26. See Moser, *Antinihilism in the Russian Novel*, p. 17.

emotionalism. But the tediousness and bad taste of "Merci" also contributes to the rising tumult: Karmazinov (read Turgenev) has always been a willing dupe for Verkhovenskii (read nihilists). As the hysteria and confusion increase, "poor Stepan Trofimovich falls into this incipient chaos."²⁷ His speech—"Gentlemen, hurray! I propose a toast to stupidity"—is essentially an antinihilist diatribe, an attempt to expose the true nature of the *svolochi* and their means of grasping power. Unlike Karmazinov, he returns the insults of the back row, causing an even greater uproar which will be amplified by the final two unscheduled speakers.

The second half of the fete changes the tone from the comic absurdities of the earlier parts of the novel and prepares the reader for the atrocities reported in the conclusion. The ball parodies two actual events which occurred in early 1869. The January 1 edition of *Golos* reported a ball for the benefit of invalids in Moscow at which, amidst screams, rioting, and a general uproar, people danced "a most desperate and insolent cancan which was not allowed in public."²⁸ In February 1869, the Moscow Artists' Circle, whose members had established a politically liberal repertoire at the Malyi teatr, sponsored a benefit at which they criticized governmental interference with newspapers and public activities.²⁹ At the benefit there was a literary quadrille in which the participants were dressed in costumes that symbolized Moscow and Petersburg newspapers of varying political persuasions. From time to time during the quadrille, participants would break out into a cancan, but if they were noticed by "observers," they would receive a "warning." After three warnings they were eliminated from the quadrille.

In *Panurge's Herd*, Krestovskii reacted with outrage to the new dances which were becoming popular in St. Petersburg. He especially criticized a quadrille which included the "debauched orgy of the cancan."³⁰ To make the shock of such a social scandal more dramatic, Dostoevsky describes much of the ball through the eyes of a conservative general who is quite apprehensive about such novelties: he reports all the details to a distressed Iulia Mikhailovna von Lembke. Dostoevsky again expands the significance of a "media event." The literary quadrille symbolizes the cavorting of devils and grotesques who have now taken over the entire town and turned this peculiar world upside down. The disjointed and confused reaction of the public to the quadrille echoes the disintegration of social sanity. Soon Governor von Lembke turns pale, loses grasp of his senses, and collapses. The narrator, as he helps carry away von Lembke, says he is delivering the governor "from hell."³¹ They are all in a metaphorical hell, with demons rushing about and everyone surrounded by a raging fire.

In *Panurge's Herd*, which as a semidocumentary novel follows an actual historical chronology, the St. Petersburg fires of May 1862 break out not long after the literary evening in March. Dostoevsky abstracts the historical events and compresses them into one evening. Krestovskii, in a long account of the fires that often quotes newspaper articles, implicitly blames nihilist-arsons. In

27. Dostoevskii, *PSS*, 10:370.

28. *Ibid.*, 12:315.

29. S. Panov, "'Literaturnaia kadril'" v romane *Besy*," *Zven'ia*, vol. 6 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1936), pp. 573-82.

30. Krestovskii, *Panurgovo stado*, p. 227.

31. Dostoevskii, *PSS*, 10:393.

The Devils, the crazed von Lembke comes to the same conclusion: "It's arson! This is nihilism! If something is burning, then it's nihilism!"³² The narrator, acting as a reporter, reveals that three workers from the factory together with Fed'ka started the blaze in order to cover up the murder of the Lebiadkins and a servant. Although the fires had a political side, the primary motive is given as a purely criminal one.³³

When the realistic bases of *The Devils* are examined, it becomes clear that Dostoevsky was not only reacting to the Nechaev affair of 1869–70, but was also reworking the events of 1861–62—the student uprisings, the literary scandals, the St. Petersburg fires—which produced such strong and varied reactions in the literature of the 1860s. Dostoevsky had compressed both historical time and individual events. In the notes for the novel, however, Dostoevsky wrote a disclaimer for the narrator in which the latter stressed that the novel was not meant to portray the everyday life (*byt*) of a provincial town, but rather the occurrence of a seemingly fantastic event (*sobytie*). The narrator's comments reflect Dostoevsky's belief that events occur in reality which might seem too fantastic to be portrayed in fiction but actually exist as profound symbols for the state of human affairs:

I consider myself a chronicler of one particular, curious event [*sobytie*] which occurred suddenly and unexpectedly in the recent past and which caught us all unawares. However much it seems excessive, useless, and prolix, it is indeed closely linked with the very core of events. This is always the way it is in reality. Something that is unexpected, something that is trivial, suddenly becomes essential and everything else circles around it secondarily and subordinately. Of course, since this matter did not occur on the moon but in our midst, it would be wrong of me not to touch upon at times, purely as illustration, the everyday [*bytovoi*] side of our provincial life, but I warn you that I will do this only inasmuch as it is demanded by inescapable necessity. I do not plan specifically to lend myself to the descriptive part of our contemporary everyday life [*byt*].³⁴

Obviously, Dostoevsky considered the Nechaev affair to be one of these fantastic and tremendously evocative events. At the same time, he was aware that antinihilist literature, with its portrayal of unusually brutal people and shock-expression) precisely because the author was obsessed with ideas rather than the distillation of reality which lay at the core of his concept of literary verisimilitude. In a letter to Maikov in January 1871, Dostoevsky criticized Leskov's *At Daggers Drawn* (*Na nozhakh*) for the bizarre reality which it created as a result of sloppy style and poorly motivated characterizations: "There's a lot of nonsense, a lot of God knows what, as if it were occurring on the moon. The nihilists are misrepresented to the point of sheer laziness. . . ."³⁵ Dostoevsky was equally

32. *Ibid.*, p. 395.

33. Dostoevsky's attitude toward student radicalism in the early 1860s was more lenient. In 1862, he wrote an article about the St. Petersburg fires that was subsequently censored. In it he tried to explain rationally why the frightened public might unfairly blame students for the blaze (see F. M. Dostoevskii, *Novye materialy i issledovaniia*, Literaturnoe nasledstvo, vol. 86 [Moscow: Nauka, 1973], pp. 48–54).

34. Dostoevskii, *PSS*, 11:240–41.

35. F. M. Dostoevskii, *Pis'ma*, vol. 2, ed. A. S. Dolinin (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1930), p. 320. In the same letter, Dostoevsky expressed admiration for Leskov's depiction of one character, the female nihilist Vanskok.

critical of the nihilists Termosov and Bornovolokov in Leskov's subsequent novel *Cathedral Folk* (*Soboriane*). In a review attributed to him (*Grazhdanin*, 1873, no. 4), Dostoevsky maintained that these characters were not even worthy of being called caricatures, because they lacked the necessary "salt," or sharply delineated outlines, to be typified as such.³⁶ If a successful novel presents, in the form of characters, the essence of separate human attitudes (types), then, according to Dostoevsky, Leskov's meandering, mosaic style is a distraction from this necessary process of distillation. Dostoevsky wrote that secondary figures must have a clear coloration in order not to confuse the reader; they must be "flat" characters with carefully defined and limited functions within the work. Although Dostoevsky himself was not completely satisfied with his minor characters in *The Devils*, for the most part they do fulfill the above definition.³⁷ For Dostoevsky, Leskov's nihilists did not fit into this categorization: "Instead of an artistic type, the author in his creation opens up a gaping hole for us which remains a gaping hole and only tears apart his composition."³⁸ Thus the nihilists, who suddenly arrive to destroy the natural order of life in Starogorod, also further disrupt the already weak structure of the work.

In reacting to Leskov in such a manner, Dostoevsky was expressing his unwillingness to accept the loose composition of a chronicle novel, in which a sense of chronology dominates the structure of the work and overshadows any organizing system based on themes or character development. Chronicles allow the introduction of disparate and unrelated events because the genre claims to be reproducing the unartistic flow of daily life (*byt*) rather than the artistic order of fiction. This reportorial approach accounts for the "hurried photographs" of contemporary society which Edel'son had noted in the antinihilist novel. Krestovskii's *Panurge's Herd* was a historical chronicle, which combined recognizable events, actual newspaper quotes, and fictional characters, thereby giving his portrayal of nihilism the ring of truth. *Cathedral Folk*, which Eikhbaum has described as a syncretic novel, was a conscious deviation from the conventional novel.³⁹ It has a core which resembles the plot line of a conventional novel (the relationship between Tuberozov and Desnitsyn), but surrounding this core is a myriad of secondary characters and seemingly pointless digressions. Leskov's *At Daggers Drawn*, which is vastly inferior to *Cathedral Folk*, also employs endless digressions, but, on the whole, they fail to give the impression of *byt* because they lack credibility. The nihilists and their world are created in a manner that is merely preposterous, not fantastic.

Dostoevsky's novel, on the other hand, "overcame time" (to use Bakhtin's expression) precisely because the author was obsessed by ideas rather than the normal flow of events. Even in his most historical novel he rejected the depiction of *byt* as a means of achieving verisimilitude. In reworking the particulars of the Nechaev affair, Dostoevsky also compressed events that had spanned a decade of political radicalism into a period of several weeks and situated the action pri-

36. The article has been published in V. V. Vinogradov, "Dostoevskii i Leskov v 70-e gody XIX veka (Anonomiia retsenziia F. M. Dostoevskogo na *Soborian Leskova*)," in Vinogradov, *Problema avtorstva i teoriiia stilei* (Moscow: Gostlitizdat, 1961), pp. 487-555.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 514.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 516.

39. Boris Eikhbaum, "Leskov i sovremennaia proza," *Literatura, kritika, polemika*, reprint ed. (Chicago, 1969), p. 213.

marily in a small provincial town. This struck many contemporary readers as an unconscionable meddling with reality. In his review of *The Devils* in the radical journal *Delo*, P. N. Tkachev, who, as a result of his conviction for involvement in the Nechaev affair, certainly had both a political and personal ax to grind, wrote:

It is possible to say without exaggeration that not even the most vulgarly popular writers of our native press have ever fallen into such psychological absurdity, have ever so crudely violated the elementary laws of artistic creation and the most legitimate demands of verisimilitude.⁴⁰

But by assaulting the accepted literary notions of realism, Dostoevsky was able to create an artistic unity of time, action, and setting which would intensify the allegorical power of his novel. The antinihilist writers, no matter how extreme their characterizations were, never operated from the premise that they were creating a heightened reality. When they created the image of nihilists as grotesque beasts, they did so as caricaturists who firmly believed that a nihilist deserved the tag "monster." For them the ordinary might be stylized, caricatured, but it could not be mythologized, that is, they did not have an organic sense of their aesthetic and political opposition to nihilism.⁴¹ They called nihilists "monsters," but they did not integrate that appellation into the structure of a unified work of art.

Dostoevsky comprehended the "fantastic" element in antinihilism.⁴² He perceived that the antinihilist novel was a jarring combination of realism (whereby the authors firmly intended to convince the reader that "this really happened and you must believe it") and satirical hyperbole. He did not avoid caricatures of nihilists and sarcastic attacks on them, but he was able to fashion a consistent symbolic structure in his novel based on the image of the demonic nihilist. The title of the novel, the epigraph, and the machinations of Peter Verkhovenskii and his fellow demons who turn the provincial town into a microcosmic hell all enhance Dostoevsky's didactic intent to brand nihilism as nothing more than rationalized chaos. Even Stavrogin, who functions on a level that is, for the most part, removed from the novel's specifically antinihilist elements, is tied to the power of demons. Fed'ka is described as Stavrogin's "small, repulsive, scrofulous little demon with a runny nose."⁴³ He torments Stavrogin with his offer to kill the Lebiadkins. In a scene which Dostoevsky removed from the novel along with the chapter "U Tikhona," Stavrogin confesses to Dasha that he is plagued by demons whom he knows are only reflections of his own

40. Tkachev in *Delo*, 1873, no. 4, pp. 372–73.

41. See V. A. Tunimanov, "Rasskazchik v *Besakh* Dostoevskogo," in V. G. Bazanov, G. M. Fridlender, and V. V. Vinogradov, eds., *Issledovaniia po poétique i stilistike* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972), p. 150.

42. If we use the categories formulated by Tzvetan Todorov, *The Devils* is not a "fantastic" work. Todorov defines as fantastic those works in which there is an ambiguity as to whether the events related are possible or just imagined. Dostoevsky's concept of the fantastic is related to hyperbole and compression rather than the presentation of an ambiguous reality (see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975]).

43. Dostoevskii, *PSS*, 10:231.

personality, of his sense of self-loathing.⁴⁴ In his conversation with Tikhon, Stravrogin asks: Is it possible to believe in demons and not believe in God? Tikhon's affirmative answer reflects Dostoevsky's view of Russia's plight: Russia believes in demons, in bankrupt ideologies, but she does not believe in God, and this is why the social order was disintegrating.

By lifting his action out of the ordinary into a metaphysical framework, Dostoevsky gave his novel a thematic unity lacking in antinihilist novels. One of the intrinsic problems of antinihilist literature was that the emphasis on content resulted in formlessness. Lacking the distinctness of a genre, the antinihilist novel was essentially defined by what it opposed. As a reactionary art form, it responded, in a manner designed to appeal to popular tastes, to threats on the church, family life, and the established order without expressing a coherent vision. Dostoevsky's genius lay in his ability to infuse the antinihilist novel with a new metaphysical significance. The antinihilist elements in *The Devils* become part of a biblical allegory. Stepan Trofimovich, nearing death, listens to Sof'ia Matveevna as she reads the parable from Luke and then offers his own interpretation:

These devils coming out of the sick man and entering the swine—these are all the sores, all the putrescence, all the filth, all the demons, and all the imps that have accumulated in our great, blessed, and ailing Russia for centuries and centuries.⁴⁵

Contemporary readers who recognized the antinihilist and "popular" elements in the novel were decidedly uncomfortable with the introduction of a religious allegory: What did mystic-religious questions have to do with Russia's radical youth?⁴⁶ Yet it was precisely as a result of his organic vision of Russia on the brink of divine judgment that Dostoevsky was able to present the anarchy of the "new people" in a formally consistent and comprehensible manner. The poetics of Dostoevsky's conservatism rests on a keen sense of the amorphousness of society. It is a quest for form in a world that has lost its center.⁴⁷ By connecting the rise of radicalism with an elaboration of a divine plan, Dostoevsky was able to take antinihilism's fearful response to the rise of social chaos and invest it with a sense of prophecy.

44. *Ibid.*, 12:141.

45. *Ibid.*, 10:499.

46. N. K. Mikhailovskii asked this very question in his review in *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 1873, no. 2, pp. 314–43. Mikhailovskii maintained that the Nechaev affair was a monstrosity which could not serve as a basis for a discussion of contemporary youth. He rejected the parable from Luke as a suitable correlative to the situation in Russia, because all the Russian types presented in the novel were eccentric and unrepresentative.

47. In his notes for a proposed afterword to *The Devils*, entitled "On the Question of Who Is Healthy and Who Is Insane: An Answer to Critics," Dostoevsky stressed the turmoil of contemporary society: "Traditions, the literature of the gentry, ideas, suddenly chaos, people without form—they have no convictions, no science, no point of emphasis; they believe in the vague mysteries of socialism" (Dostoevskii, *PSS*, 11:308). Dostoevsky felt that traditional prose forms, which he called "the literature of the gentry," were no longer capable of expressing the new turbulence in Russian society.