

# Storying the Self: Recovering a Spiritual Dimension to Existential Psychotherapy.

Timothy Quinlan, BRelSc, STL, MA, Grad Dip SEN.

Doctor of Philosophy

Supervisor: Dr. Andrew O'Shea

School of Human Development,

Institute of Education,

Dublin City University,

July 2022



## Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Ph. D. is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: *Timothy E. Quinlan*

ID No.: 16213719

Date: 27/07/2022



## Acknowledgements

This dissertation has been a journey in so many ways, an academic one most definitely, but also very much a personal and spiritual one, given its psychological and spiritual provenance and its helpful and healing goal. Many people have shared the many different paths on that journey with me over the years from colleagues and students at second level to more recent colleagues at third level to whom I owe much thanks. However, the most profoundly influential people on that journey have been the students whom I have counselled over the years and whose amazing growth and trust in me confirmed my love for an existential approach to psychotherapy.

I wish also to acknowledge the on-going and ever-sustaining support of my brothers, Gerard and Patrick, whose encouragement never waned. Gratitude must also be tendered to Rev. Professor T. Casey, external examiner and to Rev. Dr. T. Grenham, his internal counterpart for their interest and expert attention to detail. However, my greatest and deepest thanks must go to my supervisor, Dr Andrew O'Shea, who guided me with a sure hand at the tiller as I journeyed through many choppy waters. His thoroughness and commitment to good practice were exemplary, and his patience, encouragement and good humour were at all stages supportive as I brought the craft to shore.



# Contents

Introduction.....	ix
Prologue.....	xliv
Chapter 1: Existential Psychotherapy: Confronting the Core Concerns of the Self.....	1
1.1. Introduction.....	1
1.2 Existential Concerns in Psychotherapy.....	4
1.3 Choosing Yalom.....	8
1.4. Irvin Yalom’s Approach to Existential Psychotherapy.....	9
1.5 Yalom’s Ultimate Concerns.....	12
1.5.1 Ultimate Concerns not ultimate enough: Outlining My Central Argument.....	14
1.5.2. Death as an Ultimate Concern.....	16
1.5.3. Freedom as an Ultimate Concern.....	19
1.5.4. Existential Isolation as an Ultimate Concern.....	22
1.5.5. Meaninglessness as an Ultimate Concern.....	24
1.6 Conclusion: Confronting the Barriers to Self-Discovery through the Talking Cure.....	29
Chapter 2.....	34
Authoring our Lives through Talk <i>and</i> Text: The Power of Story.....	34
2.1 Introduction.....	34
2.2 Authoring our Selves through Talk: Therapeutics in the work of Irvin Yalom....	37
2.2.1 The Four Core Conflicts.....	37
2.3 The Power of Story to Heal.....	39
2.4 Authoring our Selves through Text: Therapeutics in the work of René Girard....	50
2.4.1 Dostoevsky: The Quintessential Author of Self.....	58
Chapter 3: The Fragmented Self in Dostoevsky’s Life and Early Work:.....	65
3.1 Introduction: The Presenting Problem: The Fragmented Self.....	65
3.2 Dostoevsky’s Life.....	67
3.3 The Human Condition: Triangular Desire and Core Conflicts.....	75
3.4 The Fragmented Self in <i>The Double</i> (1846).....	77
3.5 The Fragmented Self in <i>The House of the Dead</i> (1861).....	85
Chapter Four.....	96
Storying the Self and the Therapeutic Presence of the Other.....	96
4.1 Introduction.....	96
4.2. The Possibility of Healing and Redemption.....	96
4.3 <i>Notes from Underground</i> (1864).....	98
4.4 <i>Crime and Punishment</i> (1866).....	108

4.5 Conclusion: The Therapeutic Presence of the Other.....	121
Chapter Five .....	126
The Spiritual Quest 1 — Encountering The Mystery of Evil .....	126
5.1 Introduction .....	126
5.2 The Spiritual Quest.....	126
5.3 Encountering the Mystery of Evil .....	130
5.5. <i>Demons</i> and the Destruction of Relationships .....	142
5.6. <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> and the Suffering of Innocent Children as a challenge to Faith .....	149
5.7. Conclusion: Taming Demons and Giving the Lie to Untruth .....	158
Chapter Six .....	160
The Spiritual Quest 2: Suffering and Death: Intimations of an Answer .....	160
6.1 Introduction .....	160
6.2. <i>The Idiot</i> — Encountering God through Mystical Experience .....	163
6.3. <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> : Finding Spiritual Sustenance .....	177
6.4. Conclusion.....	200
Chapter Seven: Conclusion .....	205
Drawing the Threads Together: The Recovery of a Spiritual Dimension for Existential Therapeutics: A Synopsis of the Argument .....	205
7.1. Chapters One and Two: Spelling out the Problem and Elucidating a Double Hermeneutic .....	205
7.2. Chapters Three to Six: The Unfolding Story of Self in Dostoevsky’s Life and Work and the gradual elucidation of a Spiritual Foundation to Therapeutics .....	214
7.3 Conclusion: Summary of the Argument.....	239
7.4 Limitations and Opportunities.....	249

# Abstract

## Storying the Self: Recovering a Spiritual Dimension to Existential Psychotherapy

by *Timothy Quinlan*

Acknowledging that storying the self is a more powerful and wholistic way of describing personal identity than the more theoretical and structural approaches offered by mainline therapies from psychodynamic and behaviourist to the more humanistic schools of thought and practice, this dissertation sets out to establish that there is a far deeper reality underpinning the Self. That deeper reality, I argue in these pages is an enlivening spiritual foundation which is all too often unacknowledged and cursorily dismissed. Existential Therapy, I contend, is by far the most profound therapy as it faces head-on the presence of evil in the world at large and in the lives of both therapist and client as well as the more common presenting problems encountered in therapy. Focussing on the clinical work and existential theory of the American psychiatrist Irvin Yalom, this dissertation presents the case that, while his approach is at the cutting edge of existential therapy, his work is lacking in its acknowledgement that to do therapy in the most healing way possible involves a spiritual dimension or foundation that can be best approximated through story. It is here that I engage with an analysis of what I argue is the more powerful and effective storying of the Self offered by the nineteenth century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. The storying used by Irvin Yalom is immanent and bounded within the human concerns of the patient while the storying employed by Fyodor Dostoevsky is unbounded, open-ended and open to the transcendent. My argument is that this latter unbounded and transcendent-focused writing therapy effects a greater healing than that offered by the immanent therapy provided by Yalom. This dissertation is a detailed examination, then, of the shared existential space between Talk (Yalom) and Text (Dostoevsky) which will result in the fullest healing of the client when at last a spiritual foundation has been acknowledged.



# Introduction

This dissertation found its inspiration in the research I did at master's level in the field of human development. That investigation explored and elucidated a philosophical psychology of Self based on the comparison of the approaches to psychotherapy of three distinct schools of thought and practice: the psychodynamic, the humanistic and the existential.<sup>1</sup> My master's thesis was a personal project which set out to examine the age-old question "Who am I?", a question that has perdured for as long as human beings have been self-aware conscious subjects living in community. That quest was inspired by what is commonly called "a mental breakdown," which I experienced at the significant age of forty years, an event that marked a major turning point in my life and that, since then, through much personal experience and reflection, I have re-interpreted, not so much as a breakdown, but as a breakthrough. Despite or because of the academic language of what follows, much of this dissertation is an attempt to convey the meaning of this breakthrough.

## Clarifying the Basic Terminology

The title of this dissertation is "Storying the Self: Recovering a Spiritual Dimension to Existential Psychotherapy." Its central hypothesis, therefore, may be stated simply: Existential Therapy is in touch with its greatest potential when it is employed with an

---

<sup>1</sup>Quinlan T. (2013), thesis written in partial fulfilment of the M.A. in Human Development, Dublin City University. That dissertation described the humanistic approach as essentially democratising therapy by making it available to a wider public mainly under its newer incarnation as counselling. That approach also broadened the narrower focus of the psychodynamic perspective and of the behaviourist approach which had respectively reduced the human person to either basic instincts or a collection of behaviours. It sought to describe the reality of being human in a more holistic sense by putting the selfhood of the client centre stage as a phenomenological fact. The patients are not looked upon as a catalogue of symptoms or pigeonholed by pathologies but rather as clients who know best what ails them, and their healing lies very much in the collaboration with their counsellor. Existential Psychotherapy deepened the approach of all the above schools of thought and therapy by facing the client with issues and concerns that dealt more directly with the bigger existential questions such as death, freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and the thorny questions of evil and suffering in the world.

openness to its spiritual dimension. Rooted in story that is open to a spiritual dimension that is both immanent and transcendent, my argument attempts to make the case for an existential therapeutics of the Self.

Let me first describe what I mean by the term “Self.” Fully cognisant that the notion of the Self has been an important philosophical and psychological concept in western thought for more than two millennia, and that volumes in their thousands have been written and continue to be composed about its origins and nature, it is extremely important to be clear about what I mean by the term. Over the years a plurality of definitions of human personhood has been offered from all quarters and perspectives in various cultures and in the theologies, philosophies and literatures that are an expression of them.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, for some traditions, the concept of Self does not exist at all.<sup>3</sup> The philosopher Mary Midgley, in her penultimate book, *Are You an Illusion?*(2014) takes deniers of the Self strongly to task and descends to well-deserved mockery where she laments “the current tendency of many well-qualified scholars to claim, apparently in the name of science, that they believe themselves, and indeed their readers, not to exist, selves having apparently been replaced by arrangements of brain cells” (p. vii). Such

---

<sup>2</sup> See Taylor, C. (2010) for a comprehensive and in-depth history of the development of the concept of the Self from the early Greek philosophers down to contemporary thinkers, and chapter one of Brinich & Shelley (2002) for a brief but insightful commentary on the history of the concept of Self in the context of modern psychotherapy, all the while emphasising that a plurality of approaches to the nature of the Self exists and that no one rigid approach should be taken on the issue. Christianity, like many religions, privileges the notion of soul over against Self whereas I am arguing in this dissertation that just as religious experience is the depth dimension of ordinary experience, the soul could be adjudged to be the depth dimension of the Self.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the Scottish empiricist philosopher David Hume was adamant that such a reality as the Self did not exist and that it was simply a “bundle of perceptions” at the very most. See Blackburn, S (2001) for a good explanation of Hume’s thoughts on the unreality of the self and the response given by his fellow Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid to the strident atheistic empiricist (pp. 122 — 123). Quite separately from this philosophical scepticism, Buddhism has long declared that at the core of all human beings and living creatures, there is no eternal, essential and absolute something called a soul, Self, or atman — this position is called the anatta doctrine of the non-self. The American psychotherapist, Mark Epstein, in *Thoughts Without a Thinker* (1995) and *Going to Pieces without Falling Apart* (1999) argues for the usefulness of the counter-intuitive Eastern teachings of non-self in psychotherapy.

objectification or reduction of humanity is a scientism that makes the fundamental error of forgetting that observers are witnesses with human eyes who look through the lenses of microscopes or telescopes in the first place. Reductionists are seemingly oblivious to the Self who has decided on the action prior to all scientific theorisations. It would seem that common sense is not to be taken into account in modern science.<sup>4</sup>

An examination of the history of the Self is beyond the compass of a dissertation in Existential Psychotherapy. Therapy of all kinds accepts the common-sense approach that patients or clients consult experts in the field in an effort to put shape, form, structure or meaning on who they are as persons. For my purposes in this dissertation, the Self may be described as an on-going, life-long project which, while hard to turn into a normative assignment, is nonetheless experienced as a real phenomenon which we encounter in our interactions with others and the world in general, especially in our experiences of finitude, fragmentation, loneliness, anxiety and suffering as well as in moments of peak experiences whether of love, joy, or beauty. In other words, the Self is rooted in the genuine human experience of living life. As a project, the on-going development of the Self requires great courage in the exercise of our freedom in facing up to previously unacknowledged (perhaps unconscious) truths about Self, others, and the world – indeed the Self is a Self to the extent that it is lived in relation to others. The phenomenon I am exploring as Self is at once both a project or task we undertake in freedom with others as well as a discovery or discernment of native or innate gifts and talents, and indeed a mystery for those open to the gift of life and love offered by a beneficent benefactor that many refer to as God.

---

<sup>4</sup> The biologist Lewis Wolpert (1992) states: “If something fits in with common sense it can’t be science” p. 1.

A related term to Self is that of “individual.” The present-day world knows much about individuality; indeed, its prevalence is the driving force behind the power of capitalism. Certainly, the burgeoning capitalism that Fyodor Dostoevsky, the main protagonist of my preferred version of storying, witnessed in the wake of the World Exhibition in London in 1851 frightened him to his core when he visited the Crystal Palace on his first European trip in 1862. He had long believed that Europe was a dying culture with no moral or spiritual vision at its centre. Not that Russians were blind to their own moral corruption, a moral dissipation he covered in depth in his novels as did other Russian authors like Tolstoy, but Europeans, he believed, were blithely unaware of their blindness in these matters. In a reference to the cult of the individual, Dostoevsky (1978a) says presciently in one of the speeches of the dying Fr. Zossima that radical individualism will end up in separation from neighbour, isolation and eventually self-destruction (see pp. 356 — 357). This piece of prose is amazingly radical in content and tone, if not prescient, given that it was composed in 1879. The implications of this piece are worth dwelling on here. We are not islands cut off from one another. As Martin Buber (1937) has insightfully observed with respect to the nature of humanity or the individuals who make up that reality, that we are simply not lone islands since “in the beginning is relation” (p. 18). In short, we are relational creatures whose selfhood or identity is mediated through interaction with others, the world in which we all exist, and with language.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Ricoeur (1994) remarks, the Self is not immediately explicit to itself as it needs others to mediate its self-awareness (see pp. 141 — 145 and 165 — 168).<sup>6</sup> Dostoevsky was deeply aware of

---

<sup>5</sup> Taylor (2010) asserts: “There is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into language” (p. 35).

<sup>6</sup> Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker (2005), speaking on the philosophy behind Existential Psychotherapy, emphasise that for Heidegger, also, the world of Dasein is a “with-world [Mitwelt]” that is always experienced in relation to others (p. xxi). The Buddhist scholar Nhat Hahn (2009) talks about “interbeing” and states that we all “inter-are” (pp. 3 — 4). Ott (1974), a Catholic theologian, stresses that

this factor as is apparent here. While Dostoevsky would believe that modern individuals instead of achieving self-realization can lapse instead into complete isolation or indeed self-destruction, Taylor reminds us that modern identity also contains what he calls an ideal of authenticity.<sup>7</sup> This I believe is the real inspiration of existential psychotherapy — one that is open to the possibility of all of creation as good.

Like the concepts of the Self and the individual, another tricky term to come to grips with is “spirituality.” What do we mean by it? Everyone seems to have his or her own personal interpretation of its meaning. Finnegan (2008), a theologian and psychologist, acknowledges the complexity, comprehensiveness and the seeming stubborn resistance of spirituality to precise definition while it offers us a plethora of interpretations from its expression in dance and music, in art and architecture, in literature and philosophy as well as in the fields of psychology and religion. While his work is a creative exploration of spirituality in all its complexity, Finnegan offers us a precise theological definition as “*the continuing personal transformation of an individual or group of persons responding to the call of God to live fuller, more ethically creative lives*” (author’s italics), (p. 273). However, the focus of his book, while theologically orthodox, is on what he terms “a poetics of spirituality,” that is, a creative and authentic, life-enhancing description that embraces spirituality in its life-giving fullness — the creative side of the Self explicitly attuned to God. We may ask: but what of the suffering servant who finds he/she is not so attuned? The novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, as I argue through the course of this dissertation, eloquently expresses the plight of those not so attuned as well as the situation of those who are more open to the reality of the spiritual world.

---

the individual never exists alone or monologically but always dialogically, and he emphasises Buber’s insight of the “between” nature of human existence (p. 45).

<sup>7</sup> See Taylor, C. (2003), especially chapter 3, “The Sources of Authenticity.”

What Finnegan earlier describes as “journey of discovery,” “quest for meaning,” “path to fuller life,” or “way of love” as broad definitions of spirituality can only be experienced through encountering other human beings (ibid., p. 13). The Self is not immediately unambiguous to itself as it needs others to mediate its self-awareness. This means that self-knowledge can only develop through our understanding of our relation to the world and of our life with and among significant others as we grow up in community.<sup>8</sup> Since identity is culturally mediated through symbols and language and a host of other cultural factors as is the practice of spirituality itself, we may conclude that, as Finnegan succinctly puts it, “spirituality and human identity are linked experiential structures” (p. 71). The first definition offered above is a tight one that demands more precise academic unwrapping while the second is freer and is hermeneutically open. The second, while looser, is more explicitly attuned with human development and psychotherapy insofar as it encompasses both the areas of psychology and religion and seeks to find shared ground between both disciplines. In other words, it emphasises the given and immanent aspects of existence without denying the significance of transcendence.

My own description of spirituality, which I offer here and further explicate in chapter five as the nexus of relationships we engage in where we relate or connect with (i) the Self, (ii) the Other and (iii) the *Other* (whom some call God), attempts to hold both the human and divine dimensions of spirituality within the context of the dynamism of tangible relationships.<sup>9</sup> It is my argument that the philosophical

---

<sup>8</sup> Such interaction with others in community evokes Socrates’ crucial question, “How should one live?” See Higgins, C. (2011), pp. 22 — 25.

<sup>9</sup> I have avoided a lot of very loose definitions, which water spirituality down to little more than a psychological impulse. Gaffney (2012), an experienced psychologist of standing, offers “having a coherent set of beliefs about the higher purpose of life; knowing where you fit in within the larger scheme of things...” as one such watery definition, while Ó Murchú (1997), a social psychologist and pastor, offers “an ancient and primal search for meaning that is as old as humanity itself.” (p. vii) as his

anthropology advanced in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky does exactly that, that is, that it provides a shared foundation between psychology or Existential Psychotherapy and religion by suggesting that spirituality is the depth dimension of all human experience if we have the courage to enter the reflective well of the Self and go deep enough.

McDonagh (1997), a well-regarded theologian, remarks that “persons become persons only in community; communities are composed of persons” (p. 131). Dostoevsky believed that he was most quintessentially himself in his community of fellow Russians, and shortly before he died he wrote that he had sought both in his life and in his literary work “with total realism, to find the man in mankind. This is primarily a Russian trait, and in this sense I am really in the last analysis of the people [naroden] — for my tendency flows from the depths of the Christian soul of the people — although I am unknown to the Russian people at present, I will be known in the future” (from the writer’s *Notebooks*, quoted in Frank, 2010, p. 920). The last sentence here, notwithstanding the forgivable sexist language indicative of the time, is so ironic given the national grief in Russia at his passing, the Tsar’s acknowledgement of his services to Russian literature and the thousands who gathered for the two-hour long funeral procession from his home to the church. Dostoevsky’s close friend Solovyev summed up his mentor’s contribution not alone to Russian literature but to Russia itself as being that of a “prophet” who represented in his person “the highest spiritual power” because he grasped “the spiritual ideals of mankind” (quoted in Frank, 2010, p. 932). Such spiritual ideals were captured both in his life and work, which I have read as a

---

definition. Corey (2005), a professor of psychotherapy, suggests that spirituality is that which “connects us to people, nature and the source of life.” These last two definitions seem to be somewhat more open to a possible transcendent dimension (pp. 466 — 467). While there is nothing wrong with any of these definitions in themselves, they arguably reduce the mystery of spirituality to a purely human and immanent experience.

gradual storying of the Self in text, a storying that culminated in a sense of selfhood that could only be expressed at once through the transforming suffering he endured and through his deep love for his family, his nation, and his church. In short, his individuality was always circumscribed or framed by other powerful influences like community, nationhood, and religious belief. While Irvin Yalom, the second exemplar of my variety of storying, would not reject the language of the spiritual *tout court*, he would respect the significance of the transcendent for a spiritual quest. My point here in this dissertation is to argue that for a journey of the Self to be truly meaningful, an ultimate destination is required.

#### A Fictional Device: Emergent Themes

The present academic work begins with a prologue that sets the scene for my central argument, namely that to do therapy in the most healing way possible involves a spiritual dimension or foundation that can be best approximated through story. The prologue is a creative approach to the storying of the Self which is a therapeutic device used by both the writers chosen for this dissertation. Dialogue is also an approach used widely by both the therapist Yalom in his own writing and by Dostoevsky, the creative artist, in his novels. Therefore, a prologue in the form of a dialogue sets the scene in a relevant and dynamic way before I engage in the more academic aspects of my exposition. That dialogue opens the debate by presenting a conversation between an atheistic and Christian understanding of therapy. I have selected Irvin Yalom, who has written what is now regarded as a foundational textbook in the subject to represent the central tenets of modern Existential Psychotherapy from an atheistic and humanistic perspective. It is he whom I have chosen as the exponent of storying the Self in and through talking therapy, perhaps its greatest populariser in the last fifty years. I have also selected Dostoevsky, who is widely acknowledged as one of the first great

Christian existentialist writers, as clearly expressing in his novels a philosophical anthropology upon which can be built a solid Existential Psychotherapy animated by a Christian vision. It is he whom I have selected as an exponent of storying the Self in and through the textual therapy of literature. Both these forms of therapy will from hereon be referred to as talk and text, respectively.

My work seeks to explore the similarities and differences in approach Yalom and Dostoevsky would have both to life in general and Existential Psychotherapy in particular. For Yalom, the Self is most definitely limited to a task or project we undertake in freedom with others, while for Dostoevsky, the storying of the Self embraces the wider mystery open to the transcendent. It is the space between these two intellectual positions that is the terrain explored in this dissertation. The prologue foregrounds the later exposition of the differences in approach of Yalom and Dostoevsky to an Existential Therapeutics dealt with in the body of the dissertation. In so doing, it explores dialogically such factors as how one's sense of Self is deeply rooted spiritually, socially, and culturally as well as psychologically. It presents Dostoevsky's storying of the Self in the context of his firm sense of identity as a Russian Orthodox Christian believer. I underscore this fact as his personal identity as an individual is firmly rooted in the broader sense of identity as having been born into a unique community namely that of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. That sense of national identity was also closely intertwined with his faith in the Russian Orthodox Church, his belief that the Tsar was the anointed one of God and his love for the peasant people of the country. In short, storying the Self for Dostoevsky involved belonging to a community that in turn strengthened his sense of personhood.

In contrast, Yalom (2015) as a second-generation immigrant to America felt very much lost as he recounts in his memoir: "Always out of place — the only white kid

in a black neighbourhood, the only Jew in a Christian world” (p. 30). Furthermore, as a rebellious youth he tells us that he rejected the religious practices of his parents, refused adamantly to learn Hebrew, was thrown out of Sunday school by the rabbi for his sharp questioning of Jewish practices and had shamed his parents at his Bar Mitzvah by showing little or no interest in the ceremony (pp. 30 — 31). He underscores many times the fact that he is an atheist both in this memoir and elsewhere, statements that would leave him unwilling to accept the possible spiritual base of therapy. However, I hasten to point out that Yalom as a great therapist and leading expert in Existential Psychotherapy is never antireligious in his approach, remaining at all times open to and accepting of his patients’ religious experiences but only insofar as they have a right to exercise their beliefs even if they are not supported by hard evidence. Yalom is simply indifferent to the religious impulse as it is meaningless personally for him.<sup>10</sup> In short, the prologue offers a more dramatic rationale for the later academic exposition of the differences in approach to therapy of Yalom and Dostoevsky to an Existential Therapeutics. The emergent themes signposted in the prologue are (i) the purely immanent framing of Yalom’s use of storying while Dostoevsky’s framework is open-ended and open to transcendence, (ii) the notion of identity primarily as task or project for Yalom while the Russian author sees selfhood as both gift and task, and (iii) the challenge of making meaning in the face of suffering.

The aim of this dissertation is not alone the elucidation of a spiritual dimension of Existential Psychotherapy, but also its recovery from its long eclipse if not banishment from modern mainstream approaches to mental health and healing. What

---

<sup>10</sup> In his latest book, Yalom (2021) still asserts that he is a “nonbeliever” (p. 68). He declares with equanimity that human life is “a minuscule crack of light between two eternities of darkness, one before life and one afterwards” (p. 122). And, on the penultimate page of this book he declares that he is “an ardent materialist” (p. 221).

emerges from the dialogue between both thinkers is that a spiritual dimension to therapy is not just one choice among many equally valid reasons for engaging in psychotherapy of whatever approach one cares to mention. Rather, I will set forth the argument that a spiritual dimension, which I believe is foundational to psychotherapy in general and its existential incarnation in particular is in fact what I call the depth dimension of all therapies. It is most especially the depth dimension of the existential approach to therapy because the latter is the only perspective to deal effectively and thoroughly with the thorny problems of evil and suffering that are inextricably part of the human condition, and which modern society with its instant and quick-fix solutions to all problems papers over by way of denial, repression, and suppression of both these universal realities.<sup>11</sup> Such avoidance of the problems associated with the reality of evil will, I contend, exacerbate those problems for individuals and communities in the long run as it erodes trust in a genuinely personalist philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

### Setting out the argument

Picking up and developing the emergent themes from the prologue, in chapter one, I offer a general picture of the major concerns of the existential movement in philosophy and then set out in detail what is entailed in both the theory and practice of Existential Psychotherapy, giving a detailed account of that approach as it pertains to Irvin Yalom

---

<sup>11</sup> Let me highlight the process of recovery from any addiction to clearly explain my conviction as to why a spiritual dimension to therapy in particular, and by extrapolation to life in general, is so foundational to the healing of the human person. The Twelve Steps Programme of any addiction self-help group is now seen as foundational to any possible recovery from such dependency. Step two of this programme boldly states that addicts to alcohol must “come to believe that a Power greater than themselves could restore them to sanity.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 2002, p. 59). In other words, when one experiences oneself at what is colloquially and graphically called “rock bottom,” and when one can do nothing to escape that existential hell, the reaching out in hope for a power greater than one is the only way out of one’s dilemma. This we may call a “spiritual lifebuoy,” which for a believer will be the grace of God.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the greatest example of such exacerbation through denial was witnessed in the general national reaction in Germany and beyond to the holocaust instituted by the Nazis before, during and in the aftermath of the Second World War.

whose work I have selected as a focus of my dissertation. I foreground his emphasis on story as one of the most important ways of helping and healing those who come for therapy. In expressing and encountering the phenomena of Self and others, he argues that we employ storying as our main means of communication. Telling and listening to stories are as ancient as civilisation, and stories and story-telling play a central role in our everyday lives, not just in the various literary genres. Aristotle is still quoted, not alone in academic, but also in creative writing circles, as an expert on what makes a good story.<sup>13</sup> He observed famously that a good story helps us to create a shareable world. In that shared imaginative world, we can empathise with a character by having pity for him or her and even express a whole range of other feelings through a process he called “catharsis” or relief from strong or repressed emotions. The important point that Yalom helps articulate here is that stories help us share our experiences, and in so doing we not alone shape the Self but help it to heal. In other words, the narrative structure of selfhood is thought and recommended by Yalom to be the best practical approach to describing what the phenomenon of Self is in practice for any individual whether he or she comes to therapy or not.

➤ Chapter One

Chapter one explicates Yalom’s four “ultimate concerns” which Yalom sees as the corner stones, or what I call the “co-ordinates” of storying the Self. These burning issues or “ultimate concerns” are (i) death, (ii) freedom, (iii) existential isolation and (iv) meaninglessness. According to Yalom, it is around these ultimate concerns that the conflicts that fragment the human person constellate. I describe in detail how and where these core concerns of Self are encountered in Existential Psychotherapy as well as giving a brief history of the issues involved in existentialism in general and how

---

<sup>13</sup> See Aristotle’s (2013) *The Poetics*, chapters 6 — 9 especially.

these became incorporated into this particular approach to psychotherapy. If as Nietzsche, the arch-atheist once declared, we are now the sole locus of our own values and the authors of ourselves as Yalom would argue, and, furthermore, since the metaphysical view of God has been thoroughly deconstructed the question remains: are we emotionally and spiritually equipped to shoulder such a daunting responsibility?<sup>14</sup> I argue that we are not sufficiently emotionally or spiritually equipped to shoulder alone, or even in community, the burden of choosing our own values under the often-intolerable weights of evil and suffering without an openness to a spiritual dimension that includes an openness to transcendence. In other words, human beings do not have to live without hope in God. The issue is that Yalom's co-ordinates of story, coordinates which encapsulate his understanding of "ultimate concerns," present us with a process of storying that represents a purely immanent vision, one limited by and within the very borders of a materialist human vision. Such a reduced account of these major concerns or core conflicts by Yalom closes them to a wider and deeper dimension of belief. Yalom's purely immanent vision of ultimate concerns, I argue, is a problem for Existential Psychotherapy as it simply is not inclusive of all human experience because it rules out its religious or spiritual dimension from the start. In sum, Yalom's vision of therapy is decidedly a secular immanent one that does not take account of the full range of human experience and excludes a properly human search for truth. In short, his ultimate concerns are simply not "ultimate" enough. In each of the following chapters, I outline where this gap or lacuna in Yalom's approach fails to acknowledge such an ultimacy that Dostoevsky's more comprehensive account of the human person adequately captures.

---

<sup>14</sup> Kearney (2011) argues for what he calls an "anatheism," which he describes as a mediating stance between faith and doubt and between traditional theism and atheism. Anatheism is a sort of "wager" and at the same time a "risk" that comes when we return to God after we have moved beyond God. It is a deepening of the debate that points to a "post-religious theism" (p. 3, *passim*).

➤ Chapter Two

In chapter two, I deal with a methodological problem pertaining to a therapy of text versus the more established therapy of talk or of the talking cure. The chapter sets out to establish a suitable hermeneutic which would sustain the contention that an author's writing can be traced back to his or her own subjective experience. To his or her own Self.<sup>15</sup> In other words, how much personal truth can we attribute to the author's "fiction"? In an effort to answer this thorny problem, I found the work of French cultural anthropologist and literary critic René Girard especially useful as a lens to interpret Dostoevsky's texts. It is an approach that proposed an existential method that takes full account of the theory and structure of "triangular desire," which highlights the therapeutics at work for the author whereby a spiritual transformation results. The struggle of the writer to author the novel is, consequently, a struggle with himself whom he meets in and through the very characters he creates in the novel. This struggle results in the shattering of illusions of hero-worship (what Girard calls the "triumph over metaphysical desire") and the consequent conversion to the truth of authenticity and the reality of personal integration, or what Rogers calls the truth of self-congruence and Jung that of personal individuation. Girard (1997) calls this emphasis in Dostoevsky's work the "dialogue of the novelist with himself" (p. 102). because his argument is that the novelist is engaged in the discovery of his true identity.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Creative writers are engaged in a complex imaginative exercise that encompasses many influences and contributory factors such as stories heard from others, the conflation of traits of many characters whom they have encountered in real life into one protagonist, the impact upon them of their own life's experiences, their predilection for certain forms of writing and modes of expression coupled with the influence of the sheer wildness of their own creative imagination. Nonetheless, the argument of this dissertation, aided by what I describe and explain in detail within as a double hermeneutic, is that a substratum of truth, namely the quest for selfhood as expressed in story is a foundation of the whole literary enterprise that results in the novel or short story.

<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein the Irish Nobel Laureate, W.B. Yeats once remarked: "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." Seamus Heaney, another laureate would sustain that sentiment with the poetic lines "I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing" ("Personal Helicon.") Authors, then, somehow see their work as reflecting their journey to selfhood.

Furthermore, Girard's painstakingly logical elucidation of his theory of "triangular desire," when brought to its conclusion by the shattering of twisted "truths" and the elimination of illusions, sustains this deeply held belief in the Self's quest for wholeness, conversion to Christianity, and healing. Hence, the text's profound theistic therapeutics.

A parallel question can also be asked of the talking cure as to how far a story can be argued to be autobiographical. It is my contention that story relates back to the patient and thereby establishes the conditions of self-revelation. The power of story to reveal the Self orally is intricately connected to the self-disclosure of the therapist which establishes a bond of trust with the patient. Admittedly, the approach of Irvin Yalom provides one suitable lens through which to read the therapeutics involved in the "talking cure." It is this relationship between story and the establishment of selfhood that is so critical for Yalom in creating the conditions of encounter in the therapeutic relationship and, consequently, he spends much time and effort emphasising the crucial importance of therapist self-disclosure in helping the patient express his or her story. In linking the dual concepts of storying and ultimate concerns, I will advance the contention that storying the Self involves facing the challenges of each of Yalom's ultimate concerns. If, as I have argued, the Yalomian concerns are not ultimate enough, that the Self's own search is foreclosed, it follows logically that Yalom's concept of storying is not wholistic enough either, as it, too, does not allow for the broadness and depth of the mystery of the human being that is open to the reality of religious experience that we confront in our encounter with transcendence. Briefly then, in chapter two, I examine in detail the therapeutics at work in storying the Self in talk, with the help of Irvin Yalom *and* the therapeutics involved in that same task in text with the assistance of the aesthetic, literary and spiritual insights of Girard whose central

literary focus is Dostoevsky's life and work. This dual approach, which I call my double hermeneutic, will allow me in chapters three through six to interpret the novels of Dostoevsky as a creative way of storying his own encounter with himself, i.e., his own self-therapy.

➤ Chapter Three

Turning to chapter three, I argue that when patients attend for therapy, they come there with a sense of their selfhood being somehow compromised, their sense of identity unclear or vague, with a feeling of fragmentation or fracture at the very foundations of their being; or harbouring an abiding perception of being lost, disoriented and without definite direction in their lives, often prompted by a personal crisis. This contention is reflected in the relevant literature from the beginnings of psychotherapy starting with the work of its founding fathers Doctors Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, then, chapter three traces this initial feeling of fragmentation that a client coming to therapy might feel, what is called the “presenting problem” in the professional world of therapy. I begin the chapter with a brief biography of the life of Dostoevsky that would add a deeper insight into the problems he had to face in life, his six-month incarceration in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, his sham trial, the mock execution, imprisonment in Siberia, his enforced exile, the death of his first wife, his struggles with gambling, depression and chronic epilepsy and the deaths of two of his children. Such personal struggles highlighted how Dostoevsky had to come to grips with the encounter with the four “ultimate concerns” as described by Yalom. Furthermore, in chapter three, I explore such fragmentation as the “presenting problems” in two of the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky namely *The*

---

<sup>17</sup> Breuer and Freud sought to make the unconscious of the patient conscious thereby unifying the personality by unmasking hidden motivations and repressed desires.

*Double* (1846) and *The House of the Dead* (1860 — 1862). In the first novel, the would-be hero is in the process of descending into the hell of utter fragmentation. Employing the insights of Girard, the second prong of the double hermeneutic (therapy through text), I interpret the text as offering the reader an encounter with a human being who is undergoing a mental breakdown or some form of mental disintegration, mirrored in part in Dostoevsky's own experience of depression. The hero's name is Mr Golyadkin, which in Russian means the "naked one" (an appellation that suggests a lack of outward as well as inward identity) who dearly desires to advance another rung on the ladder of success, as Dostoevsky himself desired to rise higher in virtue of his increased accomplishments in the literary world of nineteenth-century Russia. In this interpretation of "text as therapy," I contend that in writing this novel the author is, in fact, facing and thereby expiating his own fears of mental breakdown, by facing the demons of hallucinations in the double personality of his protagonist. Mr Golyadkin Junior becomes the protagonist's (Mr Golyadkin Senior's) internal mediator in this regard as both are so close psychically that we suspect from their first meeting that nothing short of ruin is in store for the hero. This novel was written in 1846 when Dostoevsky was a young man of twenty-five years before what is called "the talking cure" appeared on the scene. We are, therefore, left in little doubt of the dreadful fate that would be in store for a broken human being in the backward Russia of the early nineteenth century. I also advanced much autobiographical evidence that Dostoevsky himself had suffered from depression from early on in life and had also experienced a certain level of fragmentation of Self, experiences that render this novel a very authentic expression of mental ill-being.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Stammers, S, Pulvermacher, R. (2020) offer insights based on recent research that ill-being in terms of mental suffering can be helped by guided reflection in a philosophical setting that helps the sufferer put structure on his/her suffering (pp. 743–752). Arguably, Dostoevsky is doing such a self-analysis.

If his early experiences of depression were not enough for such a tormented individual as Dostoevsky was, his imprisonment in the *katorga* system of penal labour outside the city of Omsk in the icy wastes of Siberia would have added greatly to what I am terming in this chapter his experience of the fragmentation of Self. This was effectively an enslavement rather than an imprisonment, where the prisoners were subjected to hard labour in the extreme heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter. He recounts all these experiences in a very even-tempered and surprisingly unbiting way in *The House of the Dead* (1860 — 1862) — an account doubtless assuaged by the passage of some ten years by the time of writing. Always chained, both hand and foot, the inmates were expected to expiate their crimes in sweat and blood. The greatest trial at Omsk was the interminable lack of privacy experienced by all prisoners. A person of Dostoevsky's sensitivities and gentlemanly values must have been severely tested as he had to share his life, eat, drink, work, and sleep in a common dormitory mostly with illiterate serfs and often men who had committed the most dastardly crimes. Save for his copy of the New Testament, he, like all the inmates, was forbidden to read anything else. Hence, they all bore the physical and mental scars of being subjected to both dehumanising conditions and the brutalising actions of the guards. Dostoevsky was to remark later in life that his experience of life in the Siberian prison camp and his addiction to gambling were the two most "hellish enslavements" of his life.<sup>19</sup> Such experiences of hell generate in the author what I am terming the fragmentation of Self, a state in which many clients, having experienced their own traumas, appear in the consultation rooms of therapists today. Reading these two novels as an introduction to the therapeutic and spiritual trajectory of his more profound novels as argued in this dissertation, they describe the fragmentation and lostness of the individual soul as it

---

<sup>19</sup> Letter to the critic N.N. Strakhov, 1863, quoted in Briggs (2010), p. xxi.

yearns for some spiritual consolation. While Yalom's ultimate concerns may be described in their pages, the writer hints at a deeper meaning which I argue leaves the narrative open to a more ultimate interpretation, especially when placed side by side with his other works.

➤ Chapter Four

In chapter four, I deal with two novels under the title of "The Therapeutic Presence of the Other." The two novels I deal with there are *Notes from Underground* (1864), and *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Each of these novels presents us with women who have a secondary role but are particularly important for the self-development and healing (partial or whole) of the protagonist. In *Notes from Underground*, we meet an anonymous alienated man who grows somewhat in authenticity in the course of the novella, but who really is unable to make the final courageous leap into a wholesome authenticity, but we get a glimpse of a more authentic character in the presence and indeed eventual absence of the young prostitute Liza whom the protagonist encounters during the course of the narrative. She would have offered him the possibility of some redemption and healing had he been courageous enough to accept her offer of love. Instead, he contemptuously dismisses her with the offer of money which undoubtedly was rejected by the more authentic and real person of the lowly prostitute. Such an offer of love points to a more ultimate concern, namely the unconditional love of an Other. Unfortunately, the unnamed protagonist is not able to open himself to that gift.<sup>20</sup>

Then, in *Crime and Punishment* I present a close reading of the text mainly from the point of view of the ongoing therapeutic encounter between the murderer Raskolnikov and his lover Sonya. This storying of the selfhood of Raskolnikov is a

---

<sup>20</sup> The theology of gift signifies openness to being and to the whole of reality. Hans Urs von Balthasar's (1986) statement in *Prayer*, "What you are is God's gift to you, what you become is your gift to God" sums up nicely the spirituality behind this theology (p. 15).

psychological *tour de force* by Dostoevsky as he traces the thoughts, feelings, and reactions of a murderer before, during and after his heinous crime. It is a particularly profound treatment of the subject in that it holds out the possibility, indeed the probability in Raskolnikov's case, of redemption and healing. Sonya is the instrument through whom Raskolnikov is redeemed as it is she whom he chooses to be his confessor, or in my reading of the text, his psychotherapist. She believes God "does everything for her," she is only pursuing such an ancient profession to earn money to feed her starving siblings. Her character represents goodness, forgiveness and humility even to the extent of her having compassion on her axe-wielding lover and murderer of her best friend whose sister was also a victim. While this might strike a sceptical reader as overly sentimental, nevertheless the two scenes where Raskolnikov and she meet are deeply intense existential scenes which plumb the depths of guilt, remorse, forgiveness and redemption in a profoundly relational and compassionate way. Furthermore, employing my double hermeneutic, I argue that the author is in fact storying his own guilt which persisted throughout his life, his guilt at his selfishness and consequent pressure on his father to keep his living standards up when a young student, his shame over his unfaithfulness to his first wife, and his extreme guilt over his gambling which had a destabilising effect on the material and emotional wellbeing of his family. It is my contention that much of this remorse and shame is reflected on and processed by the author in *Crime and Punishment*. As a Christian, Dostoevsky was learning to accept his redemption and forgiveness by God. Even if the reader is a sceptic, what the critic reveals is the redemption the author himself experiences in and through the writing of the novel.<sup>21</sup> Again, such experiences of love and redemption after encountering much evil and suffering deepen, intensify, and transfigure the concerns of death, freedom,

---

<sup>21</sup> This is one of the main arguments of Girard (1976) in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.

existential isolation, and meaninglessness. This shows Yalom's concerns to be far less than ultimate as I will argue. Raskolnikov encounters each of Yalom's ultimate concerns, as does his author Dostoevsky, but his life is transformed and deepened, initially through his loving encounter with the healing other in Sonya and ultimately with the saving *Other* he meets in his reading of the New Testament. Indeed, I contend that the matter of Raskolnikov's final conversion to Christianity is inseparable from the issue of the on-going therapeutics of the text as it plays out in the course of the character's life, which is essentially a reflection of the author's own spiritual journey.

➤ Chapter Five

In chapter five, I deal with the question of evil, in both its moral and existential aspects, as it intruded on Dostoevsky's growth in selfhood. I argue that the way this author dealt with the existential obstacles this mystery presented him with was by composing his novels. Through this writing process, Dostoevsky plumbed his own depths of being and found his spiritual reserves. In other words, in the midst of that very struggle he encountered some hard-won healing through his faith stance. I compare this experience of evil in his personal life to the traditional Catholic mystical experience of what St John of the Cross (1542 — 1591) called "The dark night of the senses"<sup>22</sup>, a state of

---

<sup>22</sup> John of the Cross differentiated between what he called the "dark night of the senses" where he experienced the weakening of all attractions to worldly things and the "dark night of the spirit/soul" where he encountered a separation from all consolation. The first spiritual state correlates with what psychiatrists call "anhedonia." In the second state he would encounter periods of desolation yet experience God reaching out to him in mercy. For mystics such as St John of the Cross, the "dark night" became paradoxically and mysteriously the privileged if painful place to encounter God. The late Irish mystic William Johnston SJ, (2006) links the first dark night with Jung's personal unconscious and the second with his collective unconscious. In traditional Catholic theology there was always an emphasis on the redeeming and healing power of suffering. This doctrine stresses God's solidarity with us in our suffering, not in a magical sense of making it suddenly go away, but of companionship in the very worst times during our lives. This companionship in our suffering was essentially shown in the redeeming power of Jesus Christ's passion and death.

mind where the disciple of the Way experiences a distinct feeling of emptiness or absence of God in the lack of any consolations through the senses.

The inter-related mysteries of evil and suffering regularly impinge on all of us in our onward journey to an integrated personhood, or in the process of positively storying ourselves. The three novels I deal with in chapter five are *The Gambler* (1866), *Demons* (1871 —1872)<sup>23</sup> and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). The first of these novels, which deals with the addiction to gambling, was completed in much haste and with no little personal anxiety as failing to present it to the unscrupulous publisher, who had advanced Dostoevsky money to clear his gambling debts, would mean the forfeiting of the copyright to his novels for many years to come. Writing under such considerable pressure and anxiety, then, adds feverish tension and burning pace to the narrative as the writer rushes to meet the impending deadline. The hero, like the author, is riding an emotional roller coaster between exhilaration and despair as his emotions alternate between the highs of winning and the lows of losing. From an existential point of view, this novel deals with one of the compulsions many humans are heir to, the compulsion to throw caution to the wind and risk all they possess on the spin of a roulette wheel or the throw of a die. Again, addiction serves to keep the person fragmented rather than increase his/her integration and we are left in no doubt about how compulsive it is as a craving. For Dostoevsky, gambling exercised a demonic power over him as he was to write in one of his letters that it was one of the two “hellish enslavements” he was to suffer in life, the other being that of his incarceration in the aforementioned katorga

---

<sup>23</sup> Readers can at times be confused as there are three English translations of the original Russian title “*Bésy*”: *The Possessed*, *The Devils*, and *Demons*. The original translator Constance Garnet chose the first of these translations, though modern scholarship prefers the third as the most accurate translation/interpretation of what Dostoevsky intended.

prison in Siberia.<sup>24</sup> It appears as if Dostoevsky is asking us the question whether it is possible to overcome our addictions on the road to selfhood. In this novel, the answer seems to be very much in the negative. However, there are two wins associated with this novel, namely his winning of a new lover and partner in his life, his secretary and second wife Anna Snitkina and his meeting the publisher's deadline which brought him a large measure of literary success. So, while the thrust of the novel may be negative, its very success in publication marked a graced positivity in its author's life. While there is evidence of what Yalom describes as ultimate concerns in Dostoevsky's novel, for example in lack of freedom, the author's life brought more ultimate and unasked-for redemption of love that transformed his life. As with the openness that grasps a deeper connection in the dark night of the senses, the gain that comes from the openness to the Other points to a deeper spiritual foundation that cannot be fathomed by a purely secular hermeneutics of existential concern. Indeed, Dostoevsky was to admit several times in his letters that Anna was for him "a guardian angel".<sup>25</sup>

What happens in a world where there is no regard for a spiritual foundation to life, both individually and communally? Such a world, Dostoevsky believes, will lead to both personal and communal breakdown. It is more than a belief, it is a demonic vision. This is what the prophet in Dostoevsky is describing in his social and political satire *Demons*. Therein he presents us with a disturbing world picture where our worst nightmares have come true, where nihilism inspires all who are in power, and sheer chaos reigns: crime has escalated, properties are wilfully burned to the ground, plague and cholera threaten the health of the populace, subversives are promulgating the

---

<sup>24</sup> See footnote 19.

<sup>25</sup> In a letter during his four years exile in Europe, Dostoevsky remarked: "Anna Grigoryevna has turned out stronger and more profound than I had realized or anticipated. In many ways she has been a real guardian angel" (quoted in Hingley 1978, p. 127).

overthrow of the existing order through propaganda, and escaped convicts are at large committing the most heinous crimes. Girard (1976) refers to it as a “social contagion” (p. 282). In rereading this novel, it struck a relevant contemporary note about chaos abounding in the film *The Joker* which was released in October 2019.<sup>26</sup> In like manner *Demons* relates the tale of the social disintegration of a mid-nineteenth-century fictional Russian town as it descends into chaos and becomes the focal point of an attempted revolution, orchestrated by master conspirator Peter Verkhovensky. Dostoevsky is arguing that "demonic" forces have taken possession of the town in the persons of Peter, his father Stepan and the irredeemably evil character Nikolai Stavrogin. The demons that have possessed this evil triumvirate are the evil westernising ideas that have assailed Russia from decadent nineteenth century Europe, ideas which can be summarised in a list of destructive “—isms”: nihilism, materialism, rationalism, utilitarianism, positivism, and anarchism with their underlying uniting and igniting force, which for Dostoevsky is atheism. The writer himself had pursued some of these Westernising “—isms” in his own life in the 1840s which were quite revolutionary times in Russia but had vehemently rejected them after his incarceration in St Petersburg, his experience of mock execution and eventual imprisonment in Siberia. Yalom’s four ultimate concerns, if they were to be experienced as part of a social phenomenon, would be encountered by the citizens of such a world as Dostoevsky depicts in *Demons* by way of death and destruction, lack of freedom, in the isolation of fear and in the ensuing meaningless disorder and chaos. However, Dostoevsky would likely argue that individually and communally such a nihilistic society would need a

---

<sup>26</sup> This is an American psychological thriller directed by Todd Phillips which is the first live-action theatrical Batman film to receive an R-rating from the Motion Picture Association of America, due to its violent and disturbing contents. An R-rating means restricted viewing, that is, young adults under 17 years require an accompanying parent or adult guardian. The film tells the story of the social breakdown of the fictional Gotham City as well as relating the tale of how one character, Arthur Fleck, a much maligned, failed, and unhappy clown, degenerates into the evilest of individuals called the Joker.

presence and a resilience that can only be adequately provided for by a sustaining spiritual vision — if it were to survive its annihilation.

In my treatment of *The Brothers Karamazov*, I consider the problem of evil and the impossibility of the existence of a good God or the possibility of a malevolent deity; an argument often brought forward by well-meaning atheists. This justification of secularism is advanced dramatically in story form by Ivan, the intellectual Karamazov brother, who puts it forward in a singularly agonising way through the use of powerfully vivid pictures of real suffering. In this way, Dostoevsky is facing down all the demons he has encountered in his life and is setting the scene to counter such arguments in the persons and good example of his own admitted heroes of Fr. Zossima and his protégé Br. Alyosha. One of the main criticisms of the humanistic approach to therapy under Rogers *et al* is its failure to take account of the question of evil in the world and in the lives of individuals who are either its perpetrators or victims. The twin evils of moral turpitude and suffering present problems for everyone whether they come to therapy or not. After all, the number of people who are the victims of the evil actions of others are in the end innumerable as so much crime remains unreported. The question of moral evil and suffering are central issues that need to be coped with in human development over the lifespan of any individual. Dostoevsky does not shy away from facing these problems head-on, a stance that is peculiar to the existentialist approach to therapy. In my presentation of Dostoevsky, I am illustrating the therapeutic point that facing such issues head-on by acknowledging and accepting them is a good start in the battle against their overwhelming impact on us. I believe that not alone is Dostoevsky engaging in a therapeutics of text as he works his way through these issues in an imaginative form through his many anguished and authentic characters but that he also offers an engaged and sympathetic reader a way of working through his or her own problems in a

secondary but nonetheless effective way. Furthermore, he illustrates vividly the insufficiency of solely an intellectual or purely rational approach to the mystery of evil in the fact that Ivan experiences a breakdown that is manifested all too frighteningly in a visit from Satan himself. It is apparent that Yalom's ultimate concerns are not spiritually deep enough to engage with the mystery evil presents for us human beings, and therefore I argue his so-called ultimate concerns are once again found wanting.

### ➤ Chapter Six

In chapter six, I offer a critical reading of the two novels *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. The first text, *The Idiot* was an experimental endeavour on the writer's part as he sought to present to the reader an idealised hero who was "all things to all men," a Christian man in the fullest understanding of that term, a real saint who could do no harm to anyone except himself. From the outset the central idea of *The Idiot* as Dostoevsky wrote in a letter, was "to depict a completely beautiful human being".<sup>27</sup> Its protagonist is Prince Myshkin who is almost too good to be real, or who in the then Russian peasant spirituality was seen to be a Russian Holy Fool, a character of the order of a Don Quixote, and a type of nineteenth-century Christ in an unchristian world. However, I argue that this book presents the reader with a mystical take on life, one that pushes author and reader beyond the purely immanent vision of Irvin Yalom. In other words, Dostoevsky presents the reader with a sense of a deep presence or unity with the divine or the transcendent in the life experience of Prince Myshkin. I recount several experiences in the life of this protagonist that closely mirrors events in Dostoevsky's life, namely his account of the near-death experience of a condemned man, his

---

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Mills Todd III, W. (2004) p. xxiii. See also Peace, R. (1971) pp. 59 — 63.

unbelievable compassion for his lover's murderer, his equanimous and unperturbed nature, and the deep experience of unity with the divine in the "aura" experienced before an attack of epilepsy. <sup>28</sup>

Dostoevsky acknowledges that to choose to make such an apparently flawless Myshkin his hero was problematic from the outset. Such a protagonist would face the problem that all good characters would face in all novels. After all, just like all journalism since time immemorial, whether good or not, fiction which desires a broad audience is just not interested in portraying goodness as it is not as engaging as wickedness. A saccharine portrayal of goodness runs the risk of repelling readers because it is viewed as simply boring or plainly unentertaining. This novel was to remain Dostoevsky's favourite of all his works though he did admit it was far from perfect. Myshkin, who remains quintessentially unwaveringly good from beginning to end, is in fact too virtuous to be true and therefore fails to capture either the reader's interest or sympathy. However, he was a paradigm of virtuous living and perfect selfhood, whom Dostoevsky at the time of writing sought to emulate and whom he wished to present as an idealised hero for his readership. These strong convictions were possibly provoked by his extreme mental suffering at the time of the composition of this novel as he had suffered several extreme bouts of epilepsy and had lost his baby daughter Sophia (Sonya) by his recently-married second wife, Anna Grigoryevna. However, when we take into account the descriptions of his deep encounters with what

---

<sup>28</sup> American scientist and journalist Barbara Ehrenreich (2015), who describes herself as an empiricist with atheistic leanings, mentions the mysticism of Myshkin as being the nearest analogy she can use to describe her own experience of mysticism where she had "gained a privileged glimpse into some alternative realm or dimension" (p. 52). Ehrenreich is a hard-nosed scientist, and later in her book she states with respect to her mystical experience that "... certainly I had seen something. Yes, it was something inexplicable and anomalous, something that seemed, in a way I could not define, to be almost alive" (p. 198). She does not declare that she is a convinced nonbeliever in God, and she certainly is not a militant atheist as is obvious from her text. However, she does stress that "nonbelievers have mystical experiences, too." (p. 215) She implores the reader to at least have an open mind, and then she lures us into thinking all the more deeply about the mystery of life by finishing her book with the statement that that mystery "may be seeking us out." Dostoevsky would strongly agree.

he experienced as the transcendent (recounted above), we realise that a spiritual foundation is the depth dimension of ordinary experience as he saw it. Only concerns that arise from encounters of this nature merit the description of being ultimate for Dostoevsky, and for those who would take seriously the suffering and joy to be found in such a depth dimension where goodness can be affirmed.

Also, in chapter six, I argue that Dostoevsky abandoned this utopian idea of spirituality embodied in one perfectly good man in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Instead, he opted for the more realistic treatment of spirituality embodied in the community of believers represented by the old monk Fr. Zossima and his novice or protégé Br. Alyosha, who is one of the four sons of the paterfamilias of the Karamazov family, one Fyodor Pavlovich. The novel is structured around the interactions of these four brothers before and after the murder of their father. I argue in this chapter that the youngest brother Alyosha Karamazov is the sounding board for the three others as he appears in practically every scene to which they are central. He comes in, presents a rather equanimous and solid position or presence, allowing each of his brothers to confide in him, unburden themselves while he generally listens in silence and finally exits in a seemingly unperturbed manner from the scene. In this sense, I argue he is playing the role of a facilitator, or indeed therapist who listens to the stories, worries and problems of the other three. Other commentators have argued, as I indicate in this chapter, that the three legitimate brothers Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha portray respectively the emotional, the intellectual and the spiritual aspects of the Self and that they represent together a composite tripartite hero while the illegitimate one, Smerdyakov, denotes the Freudian Id of repressed desires and instincts. In this comprehensive and profound perspective on human nature, Dostoevsky believed that goodness could ultimately be

affirmed through facing up to the “shadow” within and to countering our demons head-on through unmasking lies and thereby facing the truth.

Moreover, I seek in chapter six to put a greater emphasis on the personal suffering experienced by the author as portrayed in the characters of his great novels, that is, I look at the issue of suffering as a further and deeper reflection on a truly ultimate concern. In this chapter I explore the paradoxical notion of Dostoevsky’s deep encounter with the divine at the very heart of his suffering. I argue that this level of suffering and pain can be compared with John of the Cross’s “dark night of the soul”<sup>29</sup> in intensity. Furthermore, I contend there that he was experiencing the third dimension of spirituality as I defined it in chapter five, namely, the reaching out of the *Other* or God to the person in the very midst of his or her torment and travail. This, again, is in itself a most profound mystery and Dostoevsky employed the wide spectrum of his many experiences and his great gifts as a creative writer to explore this enigma in a most comprehensive and profound manner without any simplification as one would expect from an existential writer. By presenting both the believer’s and unbeliever’s stance and a vast range of views in-between, he introduced the reader to what Bakhtin (1984) calls a “polyphony” of many voices with as many points of view (p. 6).

Chapter six continues, then, to sustain the argument of the lacuna or gap in Irvin Yalom’s approach to existential therapy, namely his failure to deal adequately with its spiritual dimension. Admittedly, he does remain open to accepting such a dimension as a major part in the lives of some of his patients. The point I am making here is that he never investigated it thoroughly or opened himself to it as a possible route to authenticity in therapy, but rather just viewed it as another choice some people make in their lives — one which he simply disagreed with. In other words, in chapter six I

---

<sup>29</sup> See footnote 22 above.

describe in detail the summit or climax of my argument that Yalom's ultimate concerns are simply not ultimate enough for a genuinely existential therapeutics. They do not take the religious or spiritual quest in identity or in storying the Self seriously enough, especially where in that search for meaning the individual encounters the sheer depths of suffering in his or her life and yet remains open to a good that can be affirmed, as it was arguably by Dostoyevsky's textual therapeutics.

➤ Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In this dissertation, then, I look at Dostoevsky's novels, not for their literary merit but rather as existential products of the author's own authentic searching quest. The author's therapeutics through storying often comprises a descent into the anguish of human suffering allied with the spiritual transformation wrought in persons by an openness to the divine working in their lives that allows them to experience a renewal or type of rebirth. I have addressed in these pages the lacuna in Yalom's concept and practice of storying by deploying Dostoevsky's more powerful model of storying that is far more comprehensive in its treatment of the breadth and depth of mystery that makes up the human phenomenon. The Russian author does not restrict himself to an immanent frame — he is open to the full range of human experience which I argue is an approach that is far more truly ultimate than is that of Yalom, and for that reason calls Yalom's "concerns" to task. Dostoevsky is an author who, I believe, best storied himself, and in the process healed himself, in an existential context through a wide-ranging literary oeuvre which showed amazing insight into the motivations and behaviours of human beings across the whole spectrum from normal to abnormal psychology, while all the time being open to the broadest and deepest understanding of human reality.

What is Dostoevsky's achievement? Firstly, with respect to Yalom's first ultimate concern of death, he continually pushes that encounter to a more ultimate degree than Yalom does as illustrated in Markel's (Zossima's older brother's) account of his own painful dying from tuberculosis in *The Brothers Karamazov*. There, the young man's experience of suffering is transformed into a deeper understanding of life, that human existence can be looked upon, no matter how deep our suffering, as grace-filled and beautiful. Through his profound pain, he gains a deeper love and respect for all living things under the transforming power of the Christian promise of immortality and the eternal endurance of love. Such a love as described in Zossima's orations and Markel's life is transforming because we experience ourselves as being loved unconditionally first and thereby enabled to love both Self and others in return.

Secondly, Dostoevsky pushes Yalom's ultimate concern of freedom beyond the responsibility for our daily decisions into the context of taking a radical stance that may bring us pain and suffering, over and against the more superficial rewards of society such as success, power, wealth, and happiness. Again, that ultimate concern is shown in the context of a radical choice for ultimate freedom as shown in Dostoevsky's powerful parable of the meeting of Jesus Christ with the Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition. He is exploring how we are far more comfortable choosing a lesser freedom where we select our own immediate happiness, our own instant indulgence and comforts far more readily than accepting and choosing our responsibilities for following the truth of redemption wherever that will morally lead us.

Thirdly, as regards Yalom's core conflict of existential isolation, Dostoevsky's novels are replete with examples of this core existential concern where major characters constantly engage in internal self-analysis when they are alone with themselves. Raskolnikov, the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* is a prime example of such self-

examination during sustained periods of existential isolation as is Dmitri in *The Brothers Karamazov* when he is called upon to examine his misspent life. This is what the critic Panichas (2005) means where he states that “Dostoevsky’s characters show the shock of transformation, particularly as it affects their inner lives” (p. 17). They make radical shifts in their values and are converted to the truth of their real and damaged characters which are in the need of spiritual nourishment from without, that is from a transcendent source of unmerited goodness and love.

With regard to Yalom’s fourth and final ultimate concern of meaninglessness, it is clear that Dostoevsky’s novels are well stocked with characters who experience their lives as meaningless and who more often than not see suicide as the only way out of their predicament like Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment* or Stavrogin in *Demons*. Dostoevsky posits the strong possibility of the transformation of meaninglessness into meaning through the exercise of the imagination of the newly converted person to see the sheer wonder and beauty that lies in life for those open to seeing it. This transformation is most essentially captured in his portrayal of the conversion of one of the members of the terrorist group in *Demons* who is liable to reveal to the authorities the planned explosion. The character in question is not alone converted from his terrorist inclinations but deeply moved by the beauty and hope of life captured in the birth of his first child. For him, a new and deeper meaning has replaced the meaninglessness and consequent triviality of life as reflected in a destructive terrorism or in the act of suicide. This sense of wonder at the awesomeness of life, shown all the more powerfully against the inevitable backdrop of evil and suffering and life’s eventual extinction in death, is itself a graced gateway to religious experience. That openness to an ultimate dimension or horizon beyond death is strengthened by faith,

which, like philosophy itself, can begin and be strengthened in wonder at the sheer magnificence of life and the range of the human experience.<sup>30</sup>

Dostoevsky's therapeutics of text, while often fraught with much pain and suffering, highlights a simple but profound message of healing. That message is that love is at the very heart of his therapeutics. An Existential Psychotherapy extrapolated from Dostoevsky's oeuvre would be one firmly based on our experience of unconditional love by a beneficent deity, a love that empowers us in return to love all around us whether other human beings, fauna or flora. It is a dynamic vision of living and loving summarised in Zossima's great orations. Within that vision, so typical of Dostoevsky, children are to occupy a special place of reverence and care. Early in *The Brothers Karamazov*, speaking of his admitted hero Alyosha, he describes him as "simply a precocious lover of humanity... he loved people so much that all his life he seemed to have complete faith in people, and yet no one ever took him for a simpleton or a naïve person" (Dostoyevsky 1978a, p. 17). Love is at the very heart of a Dostoevskian therapeutics where "to become a genuine and all-around Russian means to become a brother of all men, a universal man" (quoted in Panichas, 2005, p. 16).

Persons, for Dostoevsky, are transformed by being loved by God in the first place. This, in turn, helps them to love others all the more. This is exactly why (Taylor 2010) remarks that Dostoevsky placed the Christian principle that "people are transformed through being loved by God" at the heart of his oeuvre. However, he adds that first they must be open to his grace at work in the world and in their lives and continues by emphasising that "the ultimate sin is to be closed to that grace" (pp. 451 — 452).

---

<sup>30</sup> "Wonder is the only beginning of philosophy," Plato has Socrates say at 155d of the *Theaetetus*. And at 982b of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle says, "it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophise." See Spalding, J. (2005) *The Art of Wonder* (passim).

All through his novels, Dostoevsky refuses to divorce everyday reality from ultimate reality, that is, for him, all of reality is always open to the mystery of transcendence.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, then, Dostoevsky is at one with Tillich's (1968) definition of "ultimate concern" in his monumental three volume *Systematic Theology* (1951 — 1963) where he uses the term specifically as relating to religious experience. Tillich stresses that this religious concern is "ultimate in that it excludes all other concerns from ultimate significance... The total concern is infinite... no rest is possible in the face of a religious concern which is ultimate, unconditional, total and infinite" (p. 4). As I will argue in this dissertation, Yalom's ultimate concerns are in no sense ultimate in the way Tillich or Dostoevsky would have interpreted them.

Yalom (2017) admits in his memoir, written at the age of 85, that he had unfortunately never considered the role of love and its power to heal a human being in his discussions of the practice and theory of psychotherapy, and stated that he now readily acknowledged it as "a huge omission" (p. 274). Of course, he would have unconsciously shown such love in all his encounters with his patients, but not to have consciously stressed it in his written works as belonging to any adequate foundation for theorising on Existential Therapeutics that amounts to an aporia. Such an omission of love, which I argue is ultimately from beyond the Self, effectively rules out a meaningful spiritual dimension. Briefly then, this dissertation will argue that Yalom's ultimate concerns fall considerably short of offering a therapeutics ultimate enough to effect the deepest healing of the fragmented Self. In the end, love is the very heart of a Dostoevskian literary therapeutics, and, as is illustrated in the lives of Raskolnikov, Shatov, Zossima, Alyosha or in the death of the young Ilyusha, real healing can only be effected, even from the heart of pain or suffering, by an openness to a spiritual

---

<sup>31</sup> It is that abiding conviction that led him to designate his writing style as "fantastic realism."

dimension and a corresponding working-through of an authentic set of ultimate concerns. Only such authentic concerns can prompt the deepest and most complete healing possible of the fractured self.

## Prologue

*The following is a fictional dialogue between the contemporary psychiatrist Irvin Yalom (1931 —), one of the main theorists and practitioners of Existential Psychotherapy and the nineteenth century Russian novelist Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821 – 1881) Though Yalom was born some fifty years after the demise of the popular writer they share major concerns in common but differ greatly as to the interpretation of them. They are both existentialists in the broadest meaning of that term, namely, that they are concerned with core human issues such as freedom and responsibility, with an emphasis on the primacy of the experience of the individual over against any sterile concentration on mere abstractions as to what the essence of the human condition may be. They are also two highly imaginative authors and novelists who see storytelling or storying the Self as a central cultural and personal concern that is at once as healing as it is entertaining.*

*However, their interpretation of these experiences and indeed of the healing power of story when called upon to account for and assuage the suffering and pain that inevitably touches us all, is strikingly different. Dostoevsky's vision of the human condition is firmly set within a horizon of values, moral and spiritual, that makes ontological claims on us that suggest our existence as human beings is somehow embraced by a greater presence that is boundless Being. Dostoevsky's existential therapeutics of text is fundamentally rooted within a horizon that can be experienced at a radical spiritual depth that is key to the deepest healing of the fractured Self. In short, his is a Christian philosophical anthropology. On the other hand, Yalom presents us with a dynamic therapeutics firmly rooted in an existential philosophy that is purely humanist or atheistic, one that does not allow for a spiritual foundation to Existential*

*Psychotherapy. Individuals who come to therapy encounter the disturbing conflicts that arise from what he calls the four “ultimate concerns” of existence, namely death, freedom, existential aloneness, and meaninglessness. What follows, then, is an imagined encounter between two great storytellers whose philosophy of story and healing is widely divergent.*

## Dialogue<sup>32</sup>

Yalom (Y): You are very welcome, Fyodor, to my home. As great lovers and lovers of life, wide readers, good storytellers, equally good writers and we are essentially interested in the same major topic, that is, the wellbeing of the individual.

Dostoevsky (D): I am really looking forward to my dialogue with you as I will learn all the advances there have been in psychology since my time. In fact, from early on in my life I was always fascinated with the mystery than any human being presents us with and indeed with the darker dimensions of that humanity.

Y: Fyodor, and I am sure I will be able to fill you in on the developments in what we call talk therapy and its benefits, and we can discuss where your work coincides with many modern insights. Perhaps, we might start with the simple and obvious question as to why you turned to writing stories, either short stories or novels, in the first place?

D: I will answer your question shortly, but first I must mention something that has been bothering me. It must be a surprise to you that I am willing to enter into this dialogue, given the negative way I often wrote about Jews. I always maintained that I wasn't anti-Semitic, and I still maintain this now. I was always a contradictory, tortured

---

<sup>32</sup> This dialogue is written in the first-person singular which in itself is central to the expression of the existential viewpoint. Furthermore, it is much employed by Professor Yalom who has authored several books using such a method. He has used the first-person dialogue procedure in his two books *When Nietzsche Wept* (1992) and *The Schopenhauer Cure* (2005) and also in his recent memoir *Becoming Myself* (2018) wherein he has inserted such a dialogue with his eighteen-year-old self.

person, and that showed itself in my ambivalent attitude to Jewish people. But ambivalence isn't hatred. And despite all you may have heard to the contrary, I want you to know that I am happy to engage in this conversation with you.

Y: Thank you, Fyodor, for that explanation of your attitude as it was bothering me a little, but now that you have said it, I feel far more relaxed about our conversation.

D: To return to your question, I can say that from a young age story was always part of our family life. Both my father and mother read stories to us as children, with my mother being a fount of traditional stories and especially Bible stories which she recounted for us mostly at bedtime. So, stories always gripped my imagination from the earliest times. Of course, both my father and mother were readers of novels and other books of general interest, and once we had learnt to read, we children began to read on our own. So, from the very beginning stories meant a lot to me. Very soon afterwards, I realised that I probably could compose my own.

Y: Why are stories and story-writing so important for you?

D: Well, stories can capture a lot of truths that straight prose cannot. Straight prose can be awfully dry and readers can, and do, lose interest very quickly. Whereas a story well told, or beautifully written can capture a whole experience, not alone very efficiently, but also very intensely, very movingly and very passionately and thereby hold the reader's attention. A story well told can capture both joys and sorrows, high points, and low points, good and evil, the darkness and the brightness of life and living, and present all of that so vividly and dramatically that the scene is practically re-created in the reader's own mind. In other words, a good story engages the reader's imagination, and it can then move that reader to feel empathy for this or that character, even to shed a tear of joy or grief or express a feeling of delight at someone's triumph or even fall from

grace. We in the literary circles call this catharsis, that is, the process of releasing strong or repressed emotions thereby allowing the reader or listener feel a deep sense of relief. And you value stories in your own professional work, too, Irvin, I believe.

Y: Yes, absolutely, from the earliest days of my residency to qualify as a psychiatrist I found that professors who used a story-based case history of their patient's mental state to be more insightful and professionally more useful than a list of psychiatric pathologies that is just an itemised list of labels. The human story gives real meaning to such pathological diagnoses. The very expression in words by the patient of his or her story is exactly as you describe it in literature, namely that the person experiences a sense of relief in that another person is listening empathetically to their plight. They are putting shape on their suffering under the guidance of the therapist. A suffering patient is always more than a list of his or her symptoms.

Then, later in my career, I began using stories, indeed, like yourself I began to author novels to teach a general readership about the value of good psychotherapy for our mental wellbeing. In fact, my novels became far more popular than my other books which were straightforward prose compositions on certain themes and aspects of psychotherapy. All in all, I realised early in my career that creative literature can teach beneficial lessons in life to an interested readership — indeed, I discovered that such literature can be therapeutic when engaged with seriously by a committed reader but definitely not as effective as the talking cure. Literature, like music and the arts, can be a good back up to the dynamics of talk therapy. Indeed, I have always used literature in my therapy sessions to help my patients understand what they are going through in their own lives. Furthermore, stories at their heart are about the courage to change for the better. I can help patients tell, or indeed write, a better more authentic and integrated story of themselves if they have the courage to change.

D: Ah, courage, yes indeed. Courage is central to existence. We have to rise every morning and face the new day with courage: to keep going in life against all the odds requires it. There is no room for a faint-hearted response to life as such a response leads to our downfall. Taking to the bed in despair is no remedy for the problems life throws in our path. We writers appreciate that it really does take courage to live this life. And then, there are many amongst us who hate the idea of change because they fear the unknown. In my life, which was often turbulent, I learnt not to fear change, and so I always embraced courage from the sheer determination not to let things get the better of me.

Y: Yes, there is a lot of truth in what you say there, Fyodor. We will return later to the need for fortitude in the face of adversity. Can I ask you what was your motivation as a young writer?

D: I set out as a young writer to attempt to explore the mystery that humankind is in its high points and low points, in its excesses and in its inadequacies, in its whole gamut of experiences from its highest ecstasy to its basest torment. In doing that, I wished to present the world as it actually is, but with a depth of vision that was transformative for myself and hopefully for those you have referred to so rightly as the seriously committed reader.

Y: It seems to me that you authored stories mostly about the darker aspects of human nature, rather than stories that show the lighter, brighter, and more uplifting features of that nature? Did you deliberately decide to do that as part of your *modus operandi* as a writer to increase your readership through shock value or because, as some critics have suggested, you are a tormented being essentially?

D: As a psychiatrist, you must be well aware, Irvin, that our motivations are never wholly conscious. I must emphasise that I never consciously set out to be negative or to present the world in its more negative details. I set about representing on the page how I found the world to be in my actual experience, and tried to balance the good with the bad as best I could, though, in my experience the bad occasions often outnumbered the good ones, and often I did experience more darkness than light in my own life, but, if you have read my novels closely and with care, you will have found that I expressed my belief that the darkness would never overcome the light, and that, in the end, brightness triumphs. In effect, my books herald the light, not as the blinding light of truth that overcomes the darkness, but as many candles lit in hope in the small corners of stories here and there, minute, even dim lights, that direct the hero through the darkness of the world as various stories work their way to their inevitable end. My stories were my attempt to engage myself in a dialogue with many different aspects of my personality, aspects which were reflected in my many characters. Essentially, my novels are my dialogue with myself. Everything I encountered and inevitably suffered in life, I distributed among my many characters and so I learnt that in the darkest corners I could find and often indeed light little candles of hope through my deep faith in God.

Y: Indeed, I concur with what you are saying here, Fyodor. Life is essentially about learning the skills to cope with the suffering our daily lives face us with as we make our journey through our allotted span of years, and then gaining the courage to face our own death in the final analysis. As you know, I am an atheist and so really don't accept the more religious contentions in your last comment. But, in general I agree that learning to cope with the inevitability of suffering and death is a 'sine qua non' of both existentialism and of existential psychotherapy.

D: Very interesting, Irvin. Before we get on to discuss the belief/unbelief debate, which no doubt we inevitably will, could you please expand on what existential therapy means for you, and what you see as its goal.

Y: Existential therapy is a process a patient and therapist engage in to assist the person coming for help to throw light on the perennial human issues that have plagued humanity since the dawn of consciousness, issues like suffering, pain, death, freedom, loneliness, anxiety, black despair, and meaninglessness and so on. I eventually broke this almost interminable list down to four central or ultimate concerns that all human beings are forced to face at some time in their lives: (i) death, (ii) freedom, (iii) existential isolation and (iv) meaninglessness.

D: I notice that you are using a terminology here that I am not familiar with, Irvin. Could you kindly expand on what you mean by “ultimate concerns”?

Y: Well, if we reflect deeply upon our situation in the world we inevitably arrive at what we may call the deep structures of existence, and the philosopher Paul Tillich came up with the term “ultimate concerns” to describe those deep structures. I found his terminology useful for my theory and practice of psychotherapy. As a result of my study, I settled on four such ultimate concerns that are highly germane to my kind of existential psychotherapy, namely death, isolation, lack of meaning in life and freedom. I went on to write a textbook called *Existential Psychotherapy* in 1980 and I structured that book around those four ultimate concerns or core conflicts.

D: Are these structures physiological or psychological in nature? Why ultimate? We Russians of the nineteenth century would have used the word “ultimate” to refer to a reality that is of an infinite nature as in the Godhead. I am surprised at your use and interpretation of that word. I would see the issues you mention as being exceedingly

important and central to the human condition, but I would not see your concerns as being “ultimate” in the sense I interpret the word.

Y: Yes, these structures are ultimately physiological structures as the mind is a phenomenon that cannot exist without its origin and home in the physical brain and the whole nervous system. However, I would prefer the term neuropsychological, though, as it is more precise insofar as it takes the human mind into consideration as well as the physicality of the neural network of the brain. As to my use of “ultimate,” I see its meaning as being if you like the furthest human beings can push their big questions about life on a human level. What I am talking about are contingent propositions that depend on the facts.

D: Aha! You say, “on a human level.” Interestingly, too, you say that these structures are “ultimately” physiological. Again, for me your use of “ultimate” jars in my mind. In other words, I see that your philosophical anthropology is pretty much horizontal as it rules out the vertical dimension, by which I mean the divine source and summit of life. Your “ultimate” stops short at the human being’s limits whereas my “ultimate” is open to the gift of life that presupposes a divine Giver, the Ultimate Giver, namely the Creator God or Christ Pantocrator, an “ultimate” that does not stop short of allowing for an openness to a greater mystery. I believe firmly that a good philosophical anthropology becomes a theological one as the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the human being are deeply interconnected, indeed they are summed up in the stark geometry of the cross which is the only way to make sense of suffering.

Y: You are losing me now, Fyodor, in Romantic and theological terminology that is of the order of a fog on the landscape of reason, clouding over and eclipsing the clear highways of empirical evidence and scientific investigation. My concern is with real

human beings in the “here and now” of their existence, not with the flights of Romantic or theological fancy. However, I would like to add that my very *raison d’etre* always was, and still is, to be a midwife to the birth of the patient’s yet unlived life.

D: Lovely words. Irvin, but you are repeating the words of Socrates. He employed that very metaphor to describe his work as a philosopher as he believed that his role helped his hearers to give birth to the wisdom that lay hidden in them. What you say about the universality of suffering in any person’s life is also very much a central point in my written work. All my novels explore how human beings cope with that experience. My writings, if I may sustain your Socratic metaphor, are a birthing of my very soul in the face of the inevitability of suffering.

Y: Yes, indeed your novels do that, Fyodor. You have also put your finger on one of the contributing strands to my approach to therapy, namely my use of the insights of the great philosophers. I believe that all the great thinkers throughout the ages, no matter what tradition or beliefs they professed, belonged to the ancient guild of healers. Following in that tradition, I always believed that it is foolhardy of us to dismiss their wisdom accumulated over the ages. That’s why I always use their insights in my therapy sessions. I suppose I naturally absorbed Socrates’ wisdom into my approach.

D: Do you see a role for dialogue, or argument even, in your therapeutic encounter?

Y: Certainly not argument in the sense of winning an argument or in convincing the patient that they are wrong. It is more a dialogue in which there is mutual respect, allied with empathy and care. In the therapeutic situation, there is always a mutuality in dialogue, just like the reciprocity we are engaged in with this very conversation. The patients who come to me very often experience themselves as fragmented individuals, and together we attempt to unify or heal that sense of brokenness over a course of many

months, sometimes even over the span of several years. It is a non-directive therapy with an emphasis on freedom of choice and on a courageous acceptance of responsibility for one's actions in the world. The goal of such therapy is to enable the patients to establish the best and most holistic sense of their Self, to become, in freedom and responsibility, in effect, the best possible version of that reality they can achieve.

D: You talk about throwing light on the human predicament in therapy, but essentially that is what I have been doing all through my written work. I have always sought to describe the human condition in all its highs and lows and in so doing offer a way, both for myself and my readers, of engaging with those issues. As I have already said my books represent my struggle to find meaning, to dialogue with myself, no, more, to argue with and struggle with myself. In that struggle and oftentimes contentious dialogue, I never sought to avoid any difficult questions, no matter how dreadful or disgusting, and in so doing I enabled myself, and hopefully my readers, to engage with such questions through awareness, and hopefully instil in them a desire to do something about correcting or improving a bad situation. In that way, I believe my writings were, and are, therapeutic. Certainly, my writings were therapeutic for me as I wrote with a passion that embraced and expressed my struggles with all the conflicts I encountered in my own life, especially my sense of guilt at the way I had treated my father as a young man, my addiction to gambling, my unfaithfulness to my first wife, her death and that of my brother and children. I dealt with all of these in that angst-filled dialogue with my Self

Y: So, you believe in the healing power of literature, Fyodor, so do I. You know, there is a contemporary school of thought that speaks about what is termed bibliotherapy, that is, a therapy that involves either storytelling or the reading of specific texts with the purpose of healing. It uses an individual's relationship to the content of books and

poetry and other written texts as therapy. That will, obviously, come as no surprise to you?

D: Truly, it is no surprise. Storytelling, novels, and poetry of all kinds are generally healing. Indeed, Jesus and all the great saints and mystics, not to mention great and inspiring leaders, used stories to lead us in the ways of wisdom.

Y: With such in mind, did you set about purposely to instruct people by way of your written work, that is, in a didactic or moralistic sense, or even in a proselytising sense, which a recent American literary critic Harold Bloom accused you of doing, especially in *Crime and Punishment*. He believed that you were pushing the views of one church, especially those of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is obviously remarkably close to your heart?

D: Please, Irvin, that question smacks of an accusation of dogmatism or indoctrination or even worse, sheer sectarianism. I don't believe for a minute that an astute and dedicated professor of psychiatry could agree with this assessment. Nothing could have been further from my mind. I was a man of my time, nineteenth century Russia, where there obtained extremes in all things: in the social world, the poles of massive wealth and dreadful poverty, and in the political world, the extremes of autocracy and radicalism verging on sheer anarchism. Indeed, in my journalistic work I admit I could be somewhat reactionary, indeed very much so on reflection, but that was always in the context of the turmoil of the time and I was fearful of the destruction of Mother Russia. But, in my novels I always presented every viewpoint fairly. In fact, even my strongest critics, admit that I presented the case for almost all divergent positions often more strongly than I did my own most cherished beliefs. I am probably not my own best critic but on balance my creative work is far from didactic, doctrinaire, and definitely

not proselytising. I wanted every possible voice of every human being I described to have its say, and it is up to the readers to listen to each of them, debate the questions that I always left open and in the end decide for themselves. I force no belief down anyone's throat.

Y: Please continue..

D: I believe, Irvin, that you as a twentieth and twenty-first-century individual, like all your co-evals, are lacking in a sense of wonder, in a sense of mystery. Living, for the most part in concrete jungles, it is easy to see why. From a young age, I was captivated, no enraptured, by the mystery both of the world and of the wonder of living as a conscious being in it. Once I wrote in a letter to my brother, Mikhail, when I was just seventeen, that I wished to dedicate my whole life to being a writer, because I saw it as a way of attempting to what, in the enthusiasm of youth, I then called "solving" the mystery of life. I wouldn't be so arrogant now as to say "solve," rather I'd now say "explore" or "describe" or better "understand" that very mystery. While the arrogance is long gone, the strong enthusiasm of my youth remains. I sought to portray humanity in all its colours and shades, and from my lived experience I crafted stories that were both realistic, very realistic, and fantastic at the same time. This is where you atheists perhaps don't get what I am at in what I termed in a letter my style of "fantastic realism." By that I meant that there is a realism that is transfigured by the mysterious, the fantastic, the mystical, or if you like by the depth dimension to life, a profound presence in all things beyond our rational ken but nevertheless experienced as a phenomenon known to believers as religious experience. You need to discover a new and vibrant sense of wonder, Irvin. Did not Plato say that philosophy begins in wonder? So does theology and so does spirituality.

Y: Whatever about that exploration of the “mystery of man” as you stated in your letter you always maintained that characters like Myshkin, Zossima, Alyosha and Sonya were your heroes, and these were the ones whom you presented as representing a solution to that mystery. Furthermore, you presented these characters as openly Christian believers who sought to encourage others and convert them to their cause. Would that not be fair to say?

D: No, that would not be a fair interpretation as it does not allow for the complexity of human nature or of life in general. The way you have stated your contention is too formulaic and is far too neat and tidy to address the mess that we find before us in life. Even in my own life I went through many different phases from atheist to agnostic to devout believer. Things were never too black and white in my creative world, even in my everyday life. If things were that simple, we would have conquered evil long ago.

Y: I agree with you thoroughly on the question of the complexity of life, and indeed with the mess of life as you put it that we are presented with and, I argue, good therapy will provide anyone who comes for a consultation with skills to cope with that, to put themselves in the control seat as it were, to make life at least bearable and at most a good training ground where they can develop the best possible version of themselves.

D: Ah, now, this is indeed the crux of the problem, and perhaps a key to the mystery and wonder of the human being and the reason we are seemingly at cross purposes here. What I mean is, that you see the goal of therapy as very individualistic, as a continual linear improvement, while I see selfhood and personhood in a different way to you moderns and post-moderns. “Best possible version of themselves,” as you put it, rings of egotism to me, not too far off Chernyshevsky’s concept of “rational egoism,” where no one can, by definition, intentionally follow a path that is bad for them. It also

smacks of narcissism, too, this preoccupation with individuality, with matters that wholly concern the Self, almost a selfishness run riot. There is also a sense of arrogance in this position, too, that rationality is the sole pathway to wisdom.

Y: What then is selfhood or personhood or the reality of Self for you, Fyodor?

D: I, and indeed many writers of my time, would not have really referred in either text or talk to what you term “Self.” That strong sense of individualism did not loom so large for us Russians in the nineteenth century. Our sense of identity was firmly rooted in the soil of Mother Russia, in our sense of nationhood, in our sense of belonging to a huge family embraced by a loving God and protected by an equally caring Tsar. Our identity was primarily rooted in our nationhood. Then, of course, that sense of belonging trickled down to our sense of affiliation to our local community and then essentially to the bonds of blood in our extended and individual family units. To be, for us Russians, is to belong. When I am asked who I am, I reply by listing all the communities to which I belong: my nation, my community of faith, my city, my family, my heritage, my writing circles, my social interests – I belong to all of them and they give me my sense of Self, a Self conditioned and determined by my commitments.

Y: That is really rather akin to what the twentieth century psychotherapist Alfred Adler called *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, or community feeling. Yet in your novels, all your central characters, whether good or bad, have an extraordinarily strong sense of their selfhood.

D: You are correct, but I would prefer to say that all my great characters have a strong sense of belonging or commitment, but not always, of course, for the best. Some of those characters like Stavrogin and Peter Verkhovensky are definitely evil, so they have an evil sense of being someone that power has corrupted to the core. My novels and short stories are indeed a means through which characters story themselves, some for

the betterment of themselves and others, and still other characters for both their own destruction and that of others. What I am saying is that my creative work suggests that the best way to be happy and content in one's life is to develop a strong sense of heart or of love similar to what you argue is the development of the best version of Self. However, I must return to my belief that such a development of heart, or the purposeful development of Self on the part of the individual cannot be done without a deep moral vision that is rooted in a sense of a community, in a sense of belonging to a caring and supporting group. Love or heart is expansive, rather like the sun working on the growing of a plant, making it ever bigger and stronger, whereas best version of the Self puts a lot of emphasis on one's own effort, and, you know, one could end up despairing of the task. You moderns have truly little sense of community – you exist as so many islands. For us, the community supports our individuality. My primary sense of myself, I believe is as a Russian. However, I have a sense of loving and being loved, most especially being loved by significant others in my life and especially by Jesus, my Saviour. That is what I mean by my sense of heart or what you call sense of Self, and fundamentally, my novels were, then, the painful working out of that.

Y: Indeed, we have multiple versions of ourselves as we mature and grow, but we certainly need a stable and integrated core, otherwise we are a fragmented, dissociated Self. That is to say, patients feel disconnected from their thoughts, feelings, memories or even sense of identity. There are several dissociative disorders that need professional treatment like dissociative amnesia and dissociative identity disorder (DID) where the patient is disconnected completely from their memory and sense of Self respectively. To use a Yeatsian metaphor we could say their “centre cannot hold.”

D: Indeed, I agree wholeheartedly with your contention in this matter. However, I believe that the answer to helping that centre of Self to hold is possessing a vision of

humankind, a moral vision of shared values. Such a vision cannot exist unless it is anchored in a source of transcendent values, which is in the final analysis founded on an ultimate source and arbiter of all values, namely God. What you term the growing sense of Self I call the development of heart or of love, which essentially means waking up to seeing what I called already in our conversation the spiritual or depth dimension to all things that now become transformed or shot through with the fantastic or the mystical or the mysterious. It is the dimension recognised through the eyes of love as expressed in the Christian vision of the holy starets Zossima. Without a guiding moral vision, which is also closely linked with a spiritual horizon of values, we are, I believe, cut adrift, and left directionless on a sea of moral confusion. Again, let me emphasise here that my novels and stories were my own angst-filled struggle to work out and follow such a moral vision and spiritual horizon in my own life.

Y: That's where we must differ radically, Fyodor. There simply is no empirical evidence for your claims here, and many of the rational arguments for the existence of a transcendent source of life and values are far from being convincing. I do believe, of course, that self-transcendence exists, that we as individuals can rise above and beyond ourselves to encounter others, to experience the aesthetic, to encounter beauty in all its manifestations whether in music, painting, sculpture or in the sheer magic of natural phenomena, but that is all. Those experiences are completely natural and belong solely to the human phenomenon as it were. We don't need to posit a God to be their cause or foundation.

D: You are too much a captive of your own theories, of your own narrow scientific method, Irvin. You simply are not seeing the whole picture. Your scientific approach to reality, especially to the human phenomenon, is too narrow for my liking, as it reduces the expansiveness of mystery to a shallower reality than I would like.

Humanity is more than your reductionism allows! Why must everything be reduced to what can be proven to exist by the scientific method solely? As I stated in *Notes from Underground* humanity is a far broader phenomenon than what mathematical calculation can explain — we are wondrous beings whose mystery cannot be encompassed by a rigid process that states “two by two equals four.” Surely you must see that.

Y: Yes, I do, of course. I certainly acknowledge the complexity of the human condition, that most of us are engaged constantly in the struggle to make sense of our situation, that communication and connection with others, especially with significant others, is the main way of meaning-making in our lives. I have always concurred with Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living — in fact, it is probably a misery for those who are unthinking, especially when they hit bumps in the road like illnesses, misfortunes of all types and especially the deaths of their loved ones. That’s why I got into therapy in the first place, to make a difference, to help suffering humanity to grow and to heal. It is a privilege to belong to the ancient guild of healers that dates back thousands of years to Hippocrates. But, in the end, do we really need to posit the existence of a God to engage with such healing? We human beings have created what are termed cultures, and all religions with their individual beliefs are but subdivisions of such phenomena. Indeed, I lost all possibility of faith in early life because I could not accept the autocratic, unquestioned truths promulgated by my family’s inherited culture and Jewish faith. Faith, like so many other early irrational beliefs and fears, is an obstruction to real self-actualisation.

D: Come on Irvin, you are being very presumptuous, indeed I sense arrogance in your statement. It is the arrogance of the scientific method itself. How much do any of us really know? Where is the place for humility of learning in all of this? What about

Socratic ignorance, the method of the man you quote often as a hero? Again, what about the relevance of that beautiful phrase from St Augustine ‘docta ignorantia,’ that all we can achieve in the end is a ‘learned ignorance’? You may say, of course, that it is an obstruction to your own personal realisation, but not to that of mine, because you simply cannot make that statement objectively at all, scientifically even, if I may steal your bias momentarily, about my faith being an obstruction to my self-realisation. You simply cannot make that objective judgement as I believe firmly that I have realised myself as fully as is possible as any human being can, and who are you to say I have not? Of course, you can ask me questions to discern how reliable a witness I am to these experiences and am not some crackpot. Like I had my *Underground Man* declare, I can choose to be irrational if I like, and when I wish. Furthermore, I feel like answering you with the words of Hamlet to Horatio that there are more things, Irvin, in “heaven and earth than are dreamt in your philosophy.”

Y: Okay, perhaps I have hit on a sensitive nerve there, Fyodor. What I am getting at is that like all my fellow psychiatric consultants I draw my conclusions from what I see and observe empirically in case studies. I certainly do not mean to upset or annoy you. After all, clinical work is also empirical in nature as we observe and note the data as well as responding empathetically to the patient.

D: Irvin, you have neither upset nor annoyed me. I have dealt with an amazingly broad spectrum of argument and opposition in my life so disagreement does not alarm me whatsoever. It is just that I see life differently. I interpret my experience of it differently to you. I make sense of it at a deeper level, that is all. However, to give credit where credit is due, I believe that the Existential School of Psychotherapy as you have defined it must certainly have deepened the big questions of life by taking the

problem of innocent suffering and evil in the world more seriously than the other schools of psychotherapy before them. Is that not true?

Y: Indeed, it is. I took my lead in Existential Psychotherapy from my mentor and teacher Dr. Rollo May who, along with many other existentialist writers, notably took Rogers and Maslow *et al* of the Humanistic approach to therapy to task on that very point. We take the question of suffering very seriously indeed. Furthermore, it is precisely upon the question of innocent suffering, which I, like your Ivan Karamazov, find it so impossible to posit a loving creator who would allow such horrible things to happen in the world. Therefore, I am content to have faith, in balance, in humankind in general getting their act together to save both themselves and the earth from probable destruction due either to climate change or silly power struggles. Like your Ivan Karamazov, I simply hand my ticket to the carnival of life back to such a creator of a world so mired in suffering and pain.

D: I think you are naïve in your beliefs in this matter, Irvin. I believe where we differ is that you have had a far too comfortable Western life, luckily unvisited by too much suffering. I would argue that had you suffered more and much more deeply in life you would perhaps think and believe differently. We both are astute enough to know that the circumstances of our lives such as the country and social conditions into which we are born, the relative monetary means of our parents, the benefits or lack of education and so on are all factors that colour our outlook on life and our beliefs, our values and presuppositions and dare I say it, even our prejudices. I suppose I am saying that you have had a far too comfortable life and have not experienced the depths of suffering.

Y: Obviously, the conditions obtaining in nineteenth century Russia and twentieth century America, a period of time during which I formed most of my firmly held

contentions with respect to psychotherapy, were vastly different indeed. I am sure you are right that we Americans live sheltered and extremely comfortable lives in comparison to the serfs of nineteenth century Russia, even in juxtaposition to reasonably well-off successful writers like yourself. I presume that is what you mean when you say I have not suffered enough.

D: No, it is not just that alone, though such social circumstances are crucial. I believe that existentially you lived and are living a privileged, professional, and extremely comfortable life with an equally successful and professional spouse and that you both are also lucky enough to have healthy and talented children and grandchildren who grew up to be as gifted as their parents before them. I am acknowledging all these as positive things, incredibly positive indeed and you richly deserve the fruits of your labour. However, on one hand we could say that you are lucky, while I would argue on the other that you were gifted with these successes by a good and loving Creator who would expect much in return. Moreover, because of luck or providence, you were cosseted from or sheltered from deep and anguished suffering which brings with it deeper insights if we are prepared to encounter it.

Y: You can hardly fault me there. Yes, I was both privileged and lucky as well as having enough intelligence to benefit from a good education. I was also a very focussed and diligent student. The idea of a God intervening in any of that I find superfluous.

D: You see, you are essentially answering my question. Belief in a spiritual foundation, based solidly on religious conviction, I argue, derives from several sources, one of which is one's family's deeply held beliefs which have a lot to do with the heart, with a sense of shared love and compassion and essentially all that is rooted in a tradition of values. Outside that, the burdens life throws at us lead us to either embrace a spiritual

dimension or reject it. If life throws little suffering our way, we can become indifferent, or more casual about suffering, as could be your case, Irvin. Given your social and familial situation, you were never rooted in a solid religious or spiritual tradition, were you?

Y: That is absolutely true, indeed, Fyodor. In fact, both my parents were first generation immigrant Jews from Russia who came to the States in 1916 where they opened a grocery store in Washington D.C. I spent much of my childhood helping out in the store and reading books in the family home above the grocery and in the local library. I was always a very studious and bookish boy. I saw my parents as old-fashioned, embracing a tradition that was alien to the new world of America, and I rebelled strongly against everything in that tradition which, to my mind growing up, smacked of impoverishment and regression. In fact, I reacted so negatively to the inherited tradition of Judaism that I utterly rejected it as a religion, refused to learn any Hebrew for my Bar Mitzvah and ended up being expelled from Sunday School because I infuriated the rabbi so much with my negativity. I regret my behaviour now in my old age and that I was then, and for a long period of time afterwards, ashamed of my heritage, cultural and religious. I considered myself a progressive and set myself against tradition.

D: I suppose boys will be boys, but your reaction was very extreme, was it not? You rejected your heritage in an extraordinarily strong way, an incredibly angry and outright way, indeed.

Y: As I say, I am remorseful now. However, none of us can turn back the years and change our script. Can we?

D: Indeed not, Irvin, but did that rejection of your past not involve a rejection of your parents for whom their religion would have been part of their identity and of that heritage they were gifted by their close relatives who perished in the Nazi concentration camps?

Y: Yes, indeed that rejection was painful to them and to me, though I denied it at the time. I got on relatively well with my father, but very poorly with my mother. In fact, my relationship with her persisted thus for the remainder of her life, again something I regret to say I had neither the awareness of at that time, nor the opportunity to correct before she passed away. Undoubtedly, these rather negative experiences of rejecting what I saw as an alien tradition and my poor relationship with my mother, coupled with my wide reading in literature and science, coloured my stance in life and my religious outlook, or rather lack of such a viewpoint. I gradually became materialistic, indeed wholly atheistic in a very scientific way. My favourite philosophers were, and still are, Schopenhauer, Voltaire, Nietzsche, and Freud – all those heavy atheistic hitters. As a young man growing up, I refused to be influenced by the irrationality of religion, and anyway my parents were not of the overbearing religious type so spiritual ideas or involvement in the rituals that emanated therefrom were never part of my experience. Having given you a sketch of my childhood, Fyodor, may I ask what your relationship with your parents was like?

D: My father was a kind man who always sent me money at college to meet my unreasonable adolescent demands, even to the extent of going into debt for me. I felt guilty and ashamed over my behaviour alright. He had so loved my mother that he never really got over her death and so he took to alcohol and was often very cantankerous during his final years. I became angry at him over his drunken and reckless behaviour... an anger I still very much regret. But he was a good man of

whom I asked too much. He was not as close to me as my mother, with whom I had a wonderful relationship. She was a well-educated woman who was deeply religious and very committed to the Russian Orthodox Church. It was she, as I have already stated, that inspired me not alone in my religious beliefs but also in the power of stories to move the heart and heal the soul.

Y: Did you ever waver in your beliefs or have doubts?

D: For sure, I did. My novels are chock-a-block with a wide range of beliefs as you well know, from theism to atheism, from spiritualism to materialism, from Slavophilism to Westernism, and from conservatism to radicalism. As a young man I was a radical, an ardent follower of the 1840s Russian intelligentsia with all its westernising influences. I was atheistic in outlook at that stage and I looked to the likes of Belinsky and Herzen for inspiration. I naively swallowed their ideas whole. My novels recount my angst-ridden struggles with my early atheism through characters like Ivan Karamazov, but they also portray my painfully-worked-out religious faith in characters like Zossima and Alyosha.

Y: Fyodor, listening to you now, I believe that you have very honestly faced up to the changes that were brought about in your character and beliefs through the harsh encounters you experienced in your life. I admire a person who has the courage to change. In my own life, I feel at times that I live in such a relativistic world that is shape-changing, that from time to time, I feel I am somewhat lost. Indeed, at times, I feel that I'm a raging relativist and perspectivist insofar as I believe my perception, my experience, even my reasoning may change according to my relative perspective and interpretation. Such feelings lead me to ask you the question: How can you be so certain of your values, Fyodor?

D: This is a deep and important philosophical question, Irvin, and I am no philosopher. However, I will attempt to answer it as best I can. Perhaps the real choice is not between absolute relativism on the one hand and perfect faith on the other. I believe the real choice is between the dictates of the narrow paths of reason and the powerful allure of the broad avenues of love.

Y: Indeed, yet we are highly conflicted creatures. Making such fundamental decisions is no easy matter.

D: I agree, Irvin, decision-making is a highly serious and responsible business. Let me first take the existential notion of the resulting conflicts that ensue from such differences in value in the “here and now” of our lives as you existential psychotherapists put it so often. My novels deal with the internal quarrel of human beings as they attempt to come to grips with what they value in life, with what makes life meaningful for them. Indeed, as I have underscored a few times already in this dialogue, Irvin, my novels reflect my own internal dispute with myself. Take my character Dmitri Karamazov, for example. I present him as deeply conflicted. In fact, I go into detail describing his anguish at the “broadness of man” and how he is sorely conflicted on the one hand between the Ideal of the Madonna, that is the desire for the truth, to do what is right and fitting, and, on the other, the Ideal of Sodom, that is the desire to follow human base instincts. He has to work that conflict out for himself as well as dealing with the grief at the loss of his father. Ivan, his brother, is conflicted between following the values of his head (atheism and nihilism) and those of his heart (his love for his brothers, the desire for peace of mind). It is a life of conflict for all my characters, great and small. Faith or belief is no antidote to conflict. In fact, I believe that faith is born as a personalised answer to discord. Even Jesus Christ went through much conflict between the temptations of the Devil in the desert and his agony in the garden and his thoughts about

having been forsaken by his Father. No faith or belief can rule out suffering and doubt. We are not promised an easy and simple ride in this life, Irvin. Indeed, I believe we learn much through our sufferings. It is what I have learnt through my own sufferings that I present creatively in my novels and short stories. I had my Underground Man argue that we owed our consciousness to the fact that we suffer, that consciousness is born of that deep wound. Whether that is true or not is obviously debatable, but certainly we humans are cursed with the consciousness of our own vulnerability to pain and death unlike the dumb animals. In a sense we each work out our own truth, but that working out in full of it is not as individual or as relative or perspectivist as you might suggest since we find common ground with others in shared belief and truth, common ground in shared values like the decalogue of the Jews and Christians or the Golden Rule that is common to all great religions and even humanist philosophies. Indeed, many of us, like myself, believe we may be in conversation still with loved ones long departed from our lives.

Y: You say that you naively swallowed whole the teachings of Belinsky and Herzen when you were in your twenties. And yet later, when you were in your thirties you would swallow whole the beliefs of the reactionary Slavophiles, a childlike belief in the divine right of kings and the doctrines of the Russian Orthodox Church. Was this not a total about-face? Did these changes not show you how utterly unreliable faith is if you can change your beliefs at will?

D: Of course, faith can be unreliable by its very nature if we judge it solely by the light of reason. But we have to judge it by the lights of love and hope as well as reason. Faith and love work hand-in-hand, and with hope, they form a triad of strong virtues. Reason comes in as a very human aid to these three sisters. Did not St Paul define faith as the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen? Paradoxically, I

learnt so much more about my deeper Self in times of trial and tribulation and I found that there was a greater strength promised me through my faith than my own weakness alone could ever allow me. For instance, I was arrested and thrown into prison for 6 months before an eventual trial which condemned me to imprisonment with hard labour and exile in Siberia. That period in my life was transformative as my views were to change radically for me. You spoke earlier in our dialogue, Irvin, that the goal of your therapy was the development in the patient of the best version of Self he could be, and I responded that the development of heart or of loving and being loved was the nearest equivalent of that in my nineteenth century Russian mind. Let me tell you of my radical change of heart. For me, my many near brushes with death, especially my experience of a mock execution, brought about a transformation in my heart, Irvin, a transformation that led me to see light in the blackest darkness and hope beyond hope in the most desperate of situations. I was filled with a new love for life and a deep hope that all manner of things would work out in the end if I genuinely believed. It was an epiphany or a theophany where God blessed me with the gift of grace to see the deep meaning and beauty in life, even in the simple things, most especially the simple things and that the unconditional love of God for me would never be withdrawn.

Y: A dying man will clutch at any straw, Fyodor. This is akin to what we moderns call a “near death experience,” a phenomenon that is wholly psychic and easily explained scientifically as a result of biochemical processes in the brain.

D: Ah, here again, Irvin, you are a prisoner of your narrow science. Would you not see an unfathomable mystery in the sophisticated and complex response of the human being in such times of trauma and crisis as I have just outlined? Surely as an existential psychotherapist you would be more attuned to the phenomenology of the encounter you experience with this or that patient, with what it’s like to meet another person in

existential space. In modern theology I am told that they now speak of a turn to experience rather than the content of doctrine. Likewise, surely in psychotherapeutic encounter the experience *as* experience must be taken seriously as a phenomenon in itself? For me, it was the sublime nature of the experience of facing my impending death, no, more than that, the mystical nature of the experience itself that struck me. As I counted down the minutes before I would hear the roll of the drums and the ever so short report of the guns before my hearing would vanish instantaneously as death consumed my body, it seemed like those few moments were raised to the level of infinity, that the finite now had intersected with the infinity of eternity. It was for me a depth experience, a religious or spiritual encounter with a power that was awesome and sublime, at once awe-inspiring and frightening. For me it was the grace of God touching my heart. From that day on I began to live my life more fully, to treasure each moment as if it were my last, to drink deeply of the bounty that is life, and to write with a passion that would reflect this transformation in my outlook. From that moment on, I had left the radical and atheistic period of my life behind forever and entered upon my pilgrim pathway to a greater authenticity as the existentialists put it, or to a heart open in love ready to embrace the world as I have depicted in the personage of the old starets Fr. Zossima. Would you not see that there is a place for a spiritual dimension or foundation to your practice of existential psychotherapy at all? Are you not closing off a doorway to deeper healing? When you strip everything away, what truly matters to you, Irvin?

Y: I suppose, what matters to me in the end is the “core Self” that can relate authentically to another “core Self”, like I do to my wife Marilyn. In the end, it is my relationships with my loved ones that matter.

D: I would certainly agree with you here, Irvin, but I would go further. I would see relationships with my loved ones in the broader context of family and community in the light of the Christian tradition and especially that of the Communion of Saints. Spirituality, at the end of the day, is all about experience, indeed it is rooted in experience. As a writer I know how difficult it is to express any encounter, no matter how superficial, in words. How much more complex, then, is the task of attempting to capture in words a deep religious encounter where the human spirit communes with the divine? Again, we are talking about levels of discernment in reflecting on the experiences we have in life. On one level we can judge that the experience of having eaten a lovely meal or having gone for a pleasing walk by the sea or having put in a taxing session at the gym are all physical experiences — fine positive experiences at that. I won't enumerate negative physical experiences here as I have documented so many of them in my novels. On a deeper level we can readily acknowledge that viewing a golden sunset, seeing young lambs gambol in a field against a beautiful mountainside view or listening to Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* as aesthetic experiences. These two levels of awareness are open to every human being and readily acknowledged. What is not readily acknowledged by many is a third level or depth level of experience where the subject of the experience becomes enraptured spiritually, that is, where the subject believes he is experiencing a sense of presence beyond his own sense of Self, a sense of being touched by a presence beyond him. This is very much the sense of presence that St Augustine of Hippo spoke about in his famous autobiography, *The Confessions* where he stated that after a long and tormenting search for the elusive God, he found him eventually in his own soul where the divine presence was nearer to him than he was to himself. There are depths to humanity, Irvin, that you have, I fear, closed yourself off from.

Y: Again, Fyodor, I find I cannot go that deeply into what you are describing as I have never been able to experience that sense of the presence of the divine you describe there in those words. I suppose we therapists are liable to speak in our own specific jargon like “unconditional positive regard” as Carl Rogers describes love and acceptance of the client. So, there is possibly some mystery there. Yet my complete fascination with science, which has been a lifelong preoccupation, keeps niggling away in my conscience that all can be explained chemically, that is by the biochemistry of our brain cells.

D: Again, I repeat, why confine yourself to narrow empirical evidence? You are leaving no room for an aesthetics that moves our emotions; for a moral vision that cries to heaven for justice for those that are oppressed by the greed and violence of others; for a desire for meaning in our lonely cries of despair; or for thanksgiving in the times of bounty or in times of escape from oppression or death.

Y: Fyodor, while I find it hard to believe in a personal God, I do, of course, know what it feels like to love another person. Such experiences are real and our connection to them and to their efficacy cannot be examined through the objective scientific lens, any more than you can explain love to an outsider. I have dealt with many believers in therapy and I try my utmost to help them to inner healing. I am always careful never to argue for or against belief. Instead, I am deeply committed to that person’s mental health and overall wellbeing and appreciate that such may require their spiritual happiness as well. I am open, therefore, to religion or spirituality as a legitimate stance towards meaning but find that I cannot take that leap of faith myself. Yet, at the same time, there may be a contradiction, or rather an inconsistency in my approach as it is true that I take my wife Marilyn’s love for granted, that I end up taking it on faith.

D: Your openness in this regard is laudable, but if I may, let me quote the great French scholar Blaise Pascal: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.” Though obviously the believer can advance many legitimate intellectual arguments for his or her beliefs or faith after the fact. Like Pascal, I railed against the narrow Enlightenment understanding of reason and, like him, argued for a broader comprehension of it, and with him argued that the whole human being is involved in a faith stance towards life, not just the intellect. It is a matter of heart as well as head, love as well as reason. Pascal taught that we come to know God through the heart rather than through reason. The heights of rationality need to be balanced with the depths of love. Fundamentally, that is what I was doing in my novels and short stories, expressing the power of love to redeem humanity. If you feel love towards your wife, and then towards your patients is this not indicative of the very mystery life is for us, a mystery that is both beyond and within us?

Y: Indeed, here I am in my eighty-fifth year and, as I admitted in my recent memoir, I have never considered the role of the heart, or the role of love and its power to heal a human being who is suffering. It was a huge omission in my theoretical and written work that I now readily acknowledge. We therapists regularly experience love and compassion in our work and it is a great vehicle for healing. Such healing lies in the love and compassion that are experienced in the therapeutic situation. The atheistic bias of my reason struggles with the passion of my heart and so often declares that we do not need a divine foundation to validate the healing that occurs. Again, having listened to what I can only call the authenticity of your witness I am moved to say that I cannot explain love scientifically without slipping into crude biologisms.

D: Irvin, that has been the big lesson of my life of trials and tribulations, that love is the power that fuels the healing process and this is essentially what I storied in my novels.

It was Sonya's love that led to the promise of Raskolnikov's redemption just as the deep love of my wife Anna provided the balm for my sick soul when I so much needed it. Without her love I would not be here. Omitting love from your theory, though undoubtedly you used it unconsciously in practice, was a great omission, indeed, but even so your idea of love is still too shallow for me. Let me put it this way, Irvin, as I have said I would prefer to put the goal of the development of the best version of the Self, which for you is a purely human enterprise, in terms of developing the perspective of the heart on life, which to my mind and sensibility, helps us deal in a more profound and helpful way with what you have termed the four ultimate concerns facing every thinking and feeling human being. The heart as I see it is an attitude of profound love for all of life, fauna, and flora, for the very fact that we exist in the first place. In that sense, it is a mystery that enfolds us. Indeed, I summed up in my novels my passionate belief and deep conviction of the power of love or the power of the heart to transform us if we only had the courage and faith to allow it to do so. I expressed those sentiments in the last words I gave to the holy starets Fr. Zossima in my *Brothers Karamazov*. Your idea of love resides in the healing relationship between therapist and patient, or between you and Marilyn, while my idea of experiencing the heart in any human encounter also abides in the power of the healing relationship with a loving God, the profound feeling of gratitude to a Creator who formed us in the womb and loved us first. My faith is a response to that love, a love that comes from beyond us and yet we are mysteriously and intimately connected to it. That love is the ultimate and unconditional gift to us by a loving God. This is where what is commonly called faith comes in, because it is not just a deep inner conviction but also an intimate knowledge born of love.

Y: Love is a profound mystery for sure, Fyodor, just like life. I have always tried to encourage people to story themselves by facing squarely what I have called the four

ultimate concerns and in so doing I released them from their fears of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. But you are saying that I did not go far enough in that process, that I should have allowed them the deeper healing flowing from love. I can allow for the deep human mystery of love and am somewhat frightened to allow that such love could be anchored in a greater love, the love of God.

D: Faith can be frightening. You used stories to help heal your patients. I argue that I pushed stories further to open up the profound mystery life really is, tales from my life to express the healing I experienced as essentially the overpowering and all-embracing love of God. For instance, when my second wife Anna and I lost two little children our world was torn apart twice, the very foundations of our being, our united being, were more than shaken. When you lose children at such a young age it is tantamount to an earthquake. One rails against the world and against God — one becomes a modern-day Job demanding justice from an unseen God. This level of suffering is the mental pain I believe you have not experienced, Irvin. At that depth, the darkness of disbelief descends on the heart and one is lost in a fog of confusion. There seemed to me to be only two possibilities or two pathways out of that fog of bewilderment — the surrender to sheer despair and hopelessness on the one hand with its worst possible outcome in suicide, or on the other hand the embracing of hope beyond hope that there is a meaning to all this loss and pain on a spiritual level, that in the end “all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well” as the English mystic, Julian of Norwich put it. For, indeed, we know not what is being wrought in us through this suffering and in this again we are at the very heart of mystery. To dwell as a lost soul in the middle of that polar dyad is to be condemned to a hellish uncertainty and hopelessness. The only sure exit from that existential hell is to move towards mystery, to surrender to faith, and to trust in the healing power of God in our lives. It is a leap in the dark that one is driven to take

when one is totally distraught and without any apparent way out of one's misery or if you like the "leap of faith" about which Kierkegaard speaks.

Y: It must be extremely hard to lose a child, and worse to repeat the experience.

D: That experience of hell brought Anna and me on our pilgrimage to Optina Monastery. You probably have never heard of it — it was the most important spiritual centre of the Russian Orthodox Church at the time. A famous and saintly starets or elder, Fr. Ambrosius, lived there. He was a great comfort to Anna and me in our torment and confusion. When there seems to be no consolation against the death of such little beings as Sonya at three months and Alexey at three years one must dig ever deeper into life for some hope, some hope beyond hope. Here was a wise and saintly man, who brought us some consolation. He was especially helpful to Anna and that, of course, doubled my own solace. You talk about therapy to form the best version of the Self while what we received was a therapy for the broken heart, a therapy which opened our hearts to the fragile beauty of all life. What we received was a therapy of love, not simply a therapy to improve ourselves. We were very much receivers of the gift of healing love rather than being the creators of a stronger version of our own selves. It was not something we achieved, rather it was something received, and something which could be lived by and passed on. Or to put it another way, our strength to face the dreadful suffering came from outside of ourselves rather than from inside. In fact, my Fr. Zossima is based on Fr. Ambrosius and much of what I have my gentle healer say is based on his very words to us at our retreat with him. He was a tower of spiritual strength, that is why I called my heroic character Zossima, which means "strong in life." In essence, this is the experience of the spiritual, Irvin. This is precisely the transformative power of healing that rests in characters or at least works through characters like Ambrosius or Zossima or Alyosha.

Y: I envy you that strength of belief, Fyodor. I wish I could say that I knew such an experience, but it is alien to me, I'm afraid. Perhaps I am too rational about the question of belief in God as you have pointed out. I have, of course, counselled some deeply religious people and one Catholic religious sister, whom I named pseudonymously, Sr. Miriam whom I effectively helped out of a desert experience of the absence of a sustaining relationship with Jesus. As a humanist or atheist, I respect all expressions of authenticity, and I reunited her with her Jesus. To each her own. However, I admit that I was moved by her joy of finding her faith anew. Furthermore, I must admit that I am now scathingly critical of my attitude to my parents, whom I loved very much, as a young man growing up and how brazenly and stubbornly I rejected their faith. I even wrote an imaginary dialogue between my present Self as a psychiatrist in a therapy session with me as an eighteen-year-old student about to go to college in my memoir. Intellectually, I was always interested in astronomy and, in short, I was blown away, and still am, whenever I look at the night sky by how insignificant we are in the great order of things. The ancients invented religion to deal with that experience which science can now explain better. I saw religion, then, as the world's longest-running con game. In that imaginary dialogue I realised my deep shame about my origins, my cultural inheritance, and my home. I'm not filled with that shame now, but it remains one of my greatest regrets. While I was vehemently against religion as a young man, I am now accepting it as an option among options, as a stance among stances that people, like my mother and father, take with respect to life. Therefore, It is important for you to understand, Fyodor, that I am "nonreligious," not "irreligious." There is a big difference there that you must understand.

D: My goodness, Irvin, you are too careful by far. In trying to be fair to all sides of the debate, you are reluctant to be really decisive in your atheism, you like sitting on the

ditch, afraid to make the leap into one position or another. Perhaps you can still be swayed to dig deeper or reach higher in search of the source of healing? But that is a matter for you to mull over for some time. Still, I suppose the description “nonreligious,” while an incredibly careful designation, is a position, too. What you mention about astronomy and the vastness of the night sky can obviously provoke two very dissimilar and opposite reactions. The night sky, while it made me very aware of the littleness of humanity never led me to believe that science could explain its sheer mystery better. I illustrated this attitude of wonder at the expanse of the universe at Alyosha’s break from the scene where I describe his long vigil over the corpse of his mentor, Fr. Zossima. I, like my Alyosha, am always overcome by the mystery of the night sky which makes me wonder at its infinite expanse and often fall on my knees in reverence and awe at its creator.

There are deep feelings of beauty, awe, reverence, and love for all of creation bound up with having faith in a loving creator, Irvin. As I said in the words of Zossima’s young brother, Markel, who died painfully from galloping consumption — “we are all in paradise, but we will not see it; if we would, we should have heaven on earth in one day.” This represents my own belief, too. Life is a wondrous gift, Irvin. With a faith vision like that of Zossima or Markel, or Ambrosius, we become transformed and we see the goodness, the truth, and the beauty in all things. Such a vision of faith is, to my mind at least, a mystical or fantastic experience. That is why we must let life in its bounty, both in its good and bad experiences, teach us humility and pray for discernment to see this truth and this beauty. I definitely over-egged my Myshkin with too much goodness, too much understanding and thereby rendered him as a character too unbelievably good that everyone called him an “idiot.” My Zossima is more rounded with real manly and not-so-good experiences from his time in the army

and I thereby rendered him a more realistic and attractive a character. He is flawed for sure, but because of these faults he becomes a great spiritual director, a wonderful “wounded healer,” or in your terms, Irvin, a great counsellor, and therapist. I would say that his awareness of his past sins and his sincere sorrow and repentance of them led to his greater self-acceptance because he knew he was loved unconditionally by God, and, therefore, he could love and heal others.

Y: Carl Jung would have said your Zossima had integrated his “shadow Self.” However, I am still confused, Fyodor. And, again as I said in my memoir that more and more as I help patients re-construct their early lives, I grow increasingly convinced of the fragile and ever-shifting nature of reality. Perhaps even my memoir is far more fictional than I might like to think.

D: Yes, life is complex. That is a given, but if we approach it as a problem, we simply will not get a neat solution. The intellect finds problems everywhere, in fact it seeks them out for the thrill of unravelling the puzzle. It is an important part of our lives, an especially important part as it drives our human progress. But we are more than intellect, Irvin, and as a brilliant psychiatrist, you know that all too well. The problem with a one-dimensional, intellectual approach to the truth is that it will find insoluble intellectual problems everywhere, most notably by applying its method to the complexity of the human situation. In short, Irvin, you are confusing the concept of problem with that of mystery. A problem is something objective, out there, outside our personal involvement which we can solve with ease if we have the intellectual and maybe physical strength, whereas a mystery is something with which we are so involved that no such separation can be made, like the love for another person we have spoken about above. The death of my two beautiful children was just such a mystery. Yes, the fact of innocent young deaths on one level could be an intellectual problem in

the philosophy of religion for an unaffected believer, but for a sufferer of grief like Anna and me, it was an abyss of mystery into which we fell. And that was an abyss of suffering, too, a chasm out of which we could not crawl on our own. We needed the healing power of another, or the Other, the healing power or grace of the Ultimate *Other* who is none other than our Creator God, or Christ the Pantocrator, to pull us safe. The only way out was through the acceptance of His graced presence in our life. It was that healing presence that pulled us out of our slough of despair. Now, that healing, then, came gradually and was mediated through an inspired and authentically loving minister, Fr. Ambrosius.

Y: Thank you, Fyodor, for sharing at such a deep level. Such sharing is the very meat of therapy. I often find myself in a deep conversation like this falling into my role as therapist. However, I am sure you will forgive me that often unconscious habit. In fact, it is the relationship between therapist and client that is ultimately the healing power in all consultations. Indeed, the therapist, by helping a patient examine the patient-therapist relationship will allow the patients in their turn to examine in like manner their relationships with others. Furthermore, I soon learnt through my practice that a therapist's chief professional tool is his or her own person and that self-disclosure by the therapist of his or her own feelings, even one's own weaknesses and strengths help the patient to trust the integrity of the therapist and open up. Such self-disclosure is at the very heart of good therapy.

D: You are welcome. I believe you wish to continue...?

Y: Yes, I am in flow now... I am learning a lot through our dialogue, Fyodor, and even as an octogenarian I still have much to learn. However, I have no regrets because I have lived a long life to the fullest, having confronted my own mortality many times in

therapy. That was the starkest of my four ultimate concerns as I called them, with the other three constellating about it. Freedom is another important ultimate concern, but it generates such anxiety about exercising the right choices, doing the right thing, authoring our own lives, choosing the right values that it leaves us dizzy at the prospect. In a universe bereft of what I call “inherent design” we are condemned to freedom as Sartre puts it. I love Sartre’s term that we are all “uncontested authors” of everything we have experienced. If that is so, Fyodor, our most cherished ideas, our most noble truths are all undermined by our awareness that the universe is simply accidental, there by pure chance, and indeed it is wholly indifferent to our welfare.

D: What you are saying is absolutely true intellectually, Irvin. And indeed, I wrestled with the same turbulent issues in my own life and indeed gave expression to those intellectual conundrums in my many novels and presented to my reading public a vast array of characters who expressed those many contradictory and tormenting ideas. So, I can empathise with how you feel here, and indeed with the confusion patients experience who come to therapy. However, I must take issue with your belief that we are the ‘uncontested authors’ of everything we experience. Philosophically, in a rigid intellectual sense, within the confines of a neat, ordered way of thinking, solely in that narrow rational way of reflecting, your arguments are correct, especially on paper. But we are not paper beings, Irvin. I would argue against that phenomenologically and existentially we experience life as a “gift,” as something we receive. I did not create my own being. Being or life was thrust upon me. I received it as gift. And here is where I must return to how we interpret our experiences in life. Again, I would argue along with Newman, with Zossima and Ambrosius and Alyosha that all of life is sheer gift that presupposes a beneficent Giver, namely God. The mystery is the bounty, beauty, and plenitude that life offers us amidst even the worse horror which more often than not

evokes a greater love and caring in us human beings. That is why therapy must be open to a spiritual foundation, because such a foundation opens up the possibility of a deeper healing, a healing that allows the heart to break open in grief initially but to be transformed by the unconditional love and concern of others and the sheer bounty and beauty of the world in its plenitude.

Y: What you say is said with passion and with conviction, indeed with integrity and authenticity. What I have always loved about your novels, Fyodor, is the hard-won acceptance of heartbreak and the deep trust and hope you have in the redemption and healing of love. Such openness requires much courage. I must admit that I have always been somewhat afraid to open myself up to such childlike trust you describe here. Indeed, I grudgingly admit that once when with Marilyn, my wife, I visited the Greek Amphitheatre at Dodona that I had a faint intimation of the sacred. So, while I am still an unbeliever, I can of course leave the door open for others to declare their firm convictions that Existential Psychotherapy can have a spiritual foundation. I am, if you like, an unbeliever who lacks both the trust and the courage to believe.

D: What is peculiar to authoring novels and to telling stories is the wide range of experiences and encounters we have with others and with sheer circumstances we meet in life. There is much heartbreak in the world and by storying it we authors give it shape. In giving it shape and expression we allow healing to take place. Stories can lead us ever deeper into healing. In that sense, everything becomes grist to the writer's mill and with that in mind brute reality is transformed by a deeper healing presence I sought to portray through a style I called "fantastic realism." In faith, hope and love, Irvin, everything is transformed for us.

Y: It is likewise with therapy. An openness to such plurality on the part of the therapist helps the client to reflect upon the significance of those experiences and encounters, and furthermore integrate them as best he or she can into a meaningful whole. After all, when patients come to my consultation rooms, they are trying to resolve conflicts in their lives, conflicts arising out of their experiences and encounters, many of which are exceedingly painful, or at least, in some cases have been interpreted as such. We meet our patients in a fragmented state, to a greater or lesser extent. It is the therapist's job to help the patient become whole again.

D: And therefore, Irvin, there are no boundaries to the range of experiences and encounters that patients who come to therapy may have experienced. After all, the panorama of human experience is so vast and diverse that it is impossible to cover it in its entirety, or anything like it, in any writer's output. My *modus scribendi* is such that I presented my many characters at all levels of experience, and consequently readers were required to be open to those levels whether, atheist, agnostic, theist, or materialist. I described the world and its inhabitants as I found them from the angriest atheist in Ivan to the most ecstatic believer in Fr. Zossima and a host of other shades of belief and unbelief in between. However, my strong conviction is that the most profound healing can only be brought about on a spiritual or religious level. That I showed in the witness to love and truth in the character of Fr. Zossima and in the prospect of the continual healing of such a vision in the future life of his protégé or disciple, Br. Alyosha Karamazov. Such a vision of life requires great courage and daring as we mentioned near the beginning of our dialogue. Courage is one of the virtues that goes hand-in-hand with faith and it is only through its strength of purpose that healing gradually occurs.

Y: Thank you, Fyodor, for a truly illuminating and fascinating dialogue. I must confess that at the beginning of our interview I thought that I could have treated your condition, which I had naively diagnosed as generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), during the course of our conversation, but, alas, I see now that there are fundamental differences between us and our approaches to life. These differences, which were articulated so clearly by you in our conversation have challenged greatly my interpretation of the role of story in the therapeutic process leaving me with deeper questions to explore. You have left me pondering whether my method of elucidating for the patient their encounter with what I call the four ultimate concerns actually goes far enough in their healing. Furthermore, you have called into question my own concept of the Self and whether it has a spiritual foundation or not. These are all big questions that the scientist in me is at once suspicious and sceptical of as well as frightened and awed before. I still have many questions about selfhood to ponder. Indeed, you have truly reinforced my belief that we never cease learning.

D: Yes, indeed, no true pilgrim of the truth ever does. And, Irvin, story will always be at the very heart of it, at the very core of our growth in self-knowledge and at the very nucleus of our true healing.

Y: And our shared Russian roots will provide much rich ground for a future conversation.

D: I look forward very much to that encounter, and to sharing many more stories.

*Postscript to the conversation*

And so, the conversation which had gone on well into the night, gradually tailed off. Had there been some agreement? Yes. Certainly, there was agreement. But the

difference opened like a chasm. In what follows, the narrator will through the acknowledged academic conventions, attempt to bridge this chasm, if only for one traveller... or two.



# Chapter One

## Existential Psychotherapy: Confronting the Core Concerns of the Self

### 1.1. Introduction

Can there be such a thing as “existential psychotherapy”? This is an important question to engage with both philosophically and in practice. Firstly, the term “existential” is so wide in its ambit and so deeply experiential and personal in its import that it would seem to be practically an unchartable and incommunicable terrain. Furthermore, if existentialism is essentially monological in character can it be employed in a dialogical setting?<sup>33</sup> I will argue that it can, for the Self of the patient will see its own deep human concerns reflected in the Self of the therapist as they existentially share the same journey to authenticity and wholeness and are very much “in the same boat” facing life’s concerns and challenges. Secondly, in practice there is no specific undergraduate college course that will prepare a prospective candidate for this specialty.<sup>34</sup> Its leading exponent and author of its foundational textbook, Irvin Yalom (2017) advises such potential applicants that they should first become trained as a general therapist in any well-known field, and then “in postgraduate programs or supervision to familiarise themselves with the specialised material of existential psychotherapy.” (p. 200)

Existentialism is one of those concepts that can often be too loosely applied to

---

<sup>33</sup> Traditionally, most experts have understood existentialism to be monological in form because it is a philosophy based on radical individualism, alienation, and despair. This is essentially why philosophers like Iris Murdoch (1998) stressed that Sartre’s “individual consciousness” is nothing short of a “solipsistic picture” (p. 134). However, Charles Taylor (1991) insists that since human life is essentially dialogical in character that there also exists a dialogical strand in existentialism, too: “No one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us — what George Herbert Mead calls “significant others.” The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not “monological,” not something each accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical” (p. 33).

<sup>34</sup> In his autobiography, the leading exponent of existential psychotherapy, Irvin Yalom (2017) stresses that he never intended to create a new field of therapy as his sole intention was “to increase all therapists’ awareness of existential issues in their patients’ lives” (p. 199). He continues by welcoming the growing amount of professional organizations in this field today.

writers and not at all to ordinary people who never publish anything of literary or philosophical merit. Such a delimiting of its application is flawed and short-sighted. Indeed, existentialism is a term that can be described as showing a sharp sensibility and a particular sensitivity to human issues and what it means to be human in the actuality of living. As such — and here I am deliberately unyoking it momentarily from the philosophical school *per se* — it can be applied to authors who have shown such attributes throughout the history of civilisation as well as to any reflective human being who walks the streets of our modern world.

However, from the outset I want to underscore the fact that existentialism is an extremely broad movement that embraces and emphasises the free and responsible agent determining his or her own development, and consequently philosophers and thinkers of all hues of belief belong to its number from believer to agnostic to unbeliever. In keeping with my aim in this dissertation, I want to stress that a spiritual foundation to existential therapy is not merely a legitimate contention alongside other more agnostic and atheistic arguments for a more humanistic foundation, but that it provides a depth dimension and a consequent deeper healing than the humanistic version of the same might offer. In short, I contend that a spiritual foundation to therapy may be seen as a deepening and an enrichment of the individual's full human potential.

It is commonly accepted that the existential movement can trace itself back to the nineteenth century to the Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813 — 1855), who emphasised “angst” or “dread” or “anxiety” experienced in our living and that there are no guarantees beyond the certainty of death. Kierkegaard's thought was deeply rooted in religious belief, a belief into which in the end one could not argue oneself by either reason or logic but solely by taking the risk of leaping into faith

through sheer trust in a personal God. More recently, and arguably more narrowly, the term has been used to identify a specific cultural movement that came to the fore somewhere around the beginning of World War Two in a Europe on the brink of self-destruction and gained a common currency right up until the late fifties and early sixties of the twentieth century. The sheer angst or “nothingness” or abandonment or emptiness experienced by many on the continent of Europe both immediately before, during and in the aftermath of the Second World War fuelled the sudden rise in existentialism. The philosophers mainly associated with this international change in sensibility and sensitivity to human issues, sharpened by ever-present possible extinction, were headed up by the avowedly atheistic Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in France. These latter two philosophers stressed the individual’s freedom by emphasising that we must choose our own values and that failure to do so results in emotional problems.<sup>35</sup> They argued that when we invent excuses to avoid facing up to the hard choices forced on us by freedom, we show “bad faith” in ourselves. In Germany, the Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber stressed the dialogical nature of human encounter and that we humans actually live in a state of being in relation with others where he emphasised the priority of “I—Thou” (individuals being truly present to one another) over “I—It” relationships (where the other is reduced to an object). Another major philosopher in Germany, Martin Heidegger recommended that humans return to their actual experiences in the here and now, avoiding “talk of humanity, man, mind, soul or consciousness, because of the scientific, religious or metaphysical assumptions such words conceal.” (Bakewell, 2016, p. 60). Heidegger

---

<sup>35</sup> In this, they were following an argument heralded by the nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 — 1900) who was vehemently atheistic, irreligious, even antireligious, and stressed that we are not just rational creatures, that we are, in fact, irrational and very fickle creatures who follow our own will. He also stressed that we must author our own values as “God” (or ultimate value) is dead. In short, then, we are the locus of our own values and the authors of ourselves. Furthermore, all truth claims are acts of interpretation.

stressed that we are “Dasein” or “there-being” or “being that is there.” In short, his emphasis is on the priority of Being where every individual is an entity who wonders at his/her very Being. Karl Jaspers, a German-Swiss psychiatrist and philosopher emphasised the fact that humans often encounter what he called “limit situations” (see Bakewell, 2016, p. 82). In other words, they experience crisis moments where they find that they are faced with “border or boundary situations” (see Yalom, 1980, p. 31) that cannot be avoided like life-and-death choices or moral dilemmas of all kinds. This then, in brief, is the broad background to the existential tradition: freedom, choice, and our earth-bound human predicament.

## 1.2 Existential Concerns in Psychotherapy

There are as many existential issues in psychotherapy as there are themes in existentialism. Grimsley (1969) adverts to the fact that existentialists give “a large place to certain important affective states” (p. 6). Macquarrie (1977) lists the following themes or issues: freedom, decision and responsibility, finitude, guilt, the tragic elements of human existence, as well as boredom and nausea as themes in existentialism (pp. 13 — 33). Other themes listed by Lavine (1984) are nothingness, absurdity, and death. Flynn (2006) maintains that the existentialists can be viewed as “reviving a more personal notion of ‘truth’” (p. 2). Existential Psychotherapy strives to help the client acknowledge and accept all these elements as legitimate parts of human existence and in so doing emerge with an integrated Self and all these themes or issues are inextricably linked with each other.

The existential approach to philosophy or therapy, consequently, is not interested in mere abstractions unrelated to a person’s lived experience, a concern that was central to phenomenology as expounded by Edmund Husserl who emphasised that we should

return as near as possible to “the things themselves”<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, it was after reading the phenomenology of Husserl that Sartre and de Beauvoir launched their specific take on existentialism. For them, existentialism and existential therapy are all about what it means to be a human being in the “here and now,” and then there follows a deep reflection on that experience whether in a philosophy tutorial group at a university or in the privacy of a therapeutic situation or even in the local restaurant or club over a drink or two. In more philosophical terms we may say, with Sartre (2009), that “existence precedes essence” (p. 802). In other words, we are averring that the human person is a feeling, thinking and willing subject and is not an object that has to be diagnosed narrowly or manipulated mechanically. The subject is the patient, that is, the existing, feeling and thinking unity that is the person. What, then, does it mean to be a subject? What, then, does it mean to be a conscious being? Lavine (1984) argues that “existentialism says I am nothing but my own conscious existence” (p. 330). And that is as good a definition of existentialism as any.

Furthermore, the abiding feeling of *angst* (as highlighted by Kierkegaard) or anxiety (Tillich and May) or dread (Yalom) is a central concern of existentialism — these three words mean one and the same thing in the present context. This theme of anxiety was at the very heart of existentialism from its very origins. It refers to a feeling of anguish which can be defined as a sense of dread at the nothingness of human existence. This theme goes back as far as Kierkegaard (1813 — 1855) in modern existentialism though it stretched way back further into ancient philosophy, too. In fact, anxiety as a theme pervades the Danish philosopher’s work as it does that of all the existentialists.

Another theme or concern of existentialism is that of alienation. Marx's theory of

---

<sup>36</sup> See Steinbock (1997), pp. 127 — 135.

alienation refers to the separation of things that should naturally belong together, or to an antagonism between things that are properly in harmony one with the other. For example, workers, Marx contends, are alienated from the product of their labour and from the rich who make money from the weary and unstinting efforts of the former. Furthermore, social alienation refers to the individual subject's estrangement from his community or society or surrounding world. Parental alienation would refer to hostility between a child and its parent. In psychiatric medicine, alienation is the medical term for the splitting apart of the faculties of the mind, faculties that should, of course, work in unison. What's behind all this alienation then, all this separation or internal breakdown, the reader may ask? Well, in short, the problem is all about the "otherness" or "strangeness" of everything outside myself, all that lies outside my conscious thinking subjectivity. In this sense, all other things are somehow opaque or impenetrable to me except the lively presence of my own subjectivity. However, as persons we may become alienated from our very Selves thereby experiencing deep loneliness, cold abandonment and, in some cases, severe despair at being cut off from ourselves, our friends, our world and all that can give our lives some meaning.

Ruth Murphy (2021) highlights other issues as distinct from these undergirding existential concerns, which she sums up as the "messy reality" (p. 248) of everyday living, which she sees as a particularly feminine contribution to a philosophy of intimacy inspired by the philosophers Murdoch and Nussbaum. In this, she is referring to the "ordinary emotions" experienced by each one of us in our daily relations with others and in our moral choices that deserve a place in philosophy versus a philosophy based almost wholly on the "criteria of cognition" (p. 250). These more feminine concerns, I argue, are more vividly to the fore in literature than in academic philosophy by the narrative nature of the former which stories such emotions in gripping detail. In

short, I argue that Dostoevsky embraces Murphy's "messiness of life".<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Being aware of the apparently overriding male perspective of this dissertation, I would like to stress that neither I nor the male scholars I quote are in any sense oblivious of the feminist insights into life in general and into Existential Psychotherapy in particular. Indeed, I quote liberally in this chapter from a book written by a woman, namely, Ruthellen Josselson who is co-director of the Irvin D. Yalom Institute of Psychotherapy. It is a simple historical truth, as Simone de Beauvoir and others have pointed out, that women are defined in relation to men while men are simply never defined in relation to women. It is all too apparent that the male is regarded as the norm in humanity. Ruthellen Josselson, whom I quote quite often in this chapter and frequently in chapter two, has written much on the ethics governing psychotherapists and other experts in the mental health field as they attempt to communicate the stories of others in either academic journals or at conferences. Josselson, (1996) states her concerns thus: "No matter how gentle and sensitive our touch, we still entangle ourselves on others' intricately woven tapestries. When we write about others, they feel it in some way. Yet I would worry most if ever I stopped worrying, stopped suffering for the disjunction that occurs when we try to tell an Other's story" (p. 70). How much more must we worry and suffer when that Other is a woman, as once again since de Beauvoir pointed out that women are essentially defined as the "other" in relation to men. With respect to Irvin Yalom, it is important to be aware that his wife, Professor Marilyn Yalom, was a prolific feminist author and cultural historian whose books included the history of women as partners in marriage as well as the history of the female breast. In his memoir (2017, p. 318), Yalom acknowledges his wife's great scholarship, her contribution to feminist studies and notes that each of them was the other's first reader. That means, by implication, that Irvin is open to and certainly would deeply understand the ideas and concerns of feminism. Furthermore, it is important to note that I quote Emmy van Deurzen several times in this chapter, a woman who is internationally recognised both as an existential therapist and a professor at the University of Sheffield, having founded the Society for Existential Analysis (SEA) and its journal called *Existential Analysis* on the search for meaning that is central to existential psychotherapy. It is also salutary to note the cautionary advice of Russell (2003), in writing specifically on the theme of feminism and counselling, against subscribing to the simple equation of "woman = feminist" (p. 255). She further points out that if feminism is a perspective based on certain values that men, too, can be feminists. Furthermore, she mentions the considerable contribution of van Deurzen to the on-going study and practice of psychotherapy. With regard to Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*, de Beauvoir (1997) acknowledges some feminist sympathy in the Russian writer and shares with us the following insight: "Raskolnikov sacrifices at Sonya's feet the arrogant masculine pride that led him to crime" (p. 266). Whilst she acknowledges Sonya's saving role, she laments that in her portrayal as a prostitute "she exists (like all women) at the margins of the masculine world." Further on in this magisterial work, de Beauvoir praises the "richness of experience" to be found in Dostoevsky's work, while lamenting the absence of such richness in the work of his contemporary female authors, stemming from their lack of experience, attributable to their subordinate role to men (p. 718). With regard to prostitutes, and Dostoevsky's books portray several as heroines, she remarks that they are "scapegoats" through whom "man vents his turpitude" and are treated as "pariahs" (p. 569). Also, many of the translators of Dostoevsky's books into English and other languages were women, which allows for a feminist influence if only secondary and somewhat subservient to the more obvious male output. For instance, Constance Garnett (b.1861) translated into English 70 volumes from Russian, including all Dostoevsky's baggy monsters. Finally, in respect of the thought and work of René Girard, who supplies the second strand of my double hermeneutic in reading the work of Dostoevsky, it is crucial also to acknowledge his acute awareness of feminist issues. In an interview with Golson (2002, p. 132), he emphasises that he discovered the "greatness" of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* a while after he had written *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. This work would have undoubtedly added a feminist touch to that book which contains no reference to works by women authors. In the same interview, he acknowledges that in "all cultures without exception" women are mistreated and are "relegated to subordinate roles" (p. 141). Furthermore, Golson challenges Girard directly about the feminist critique of his work insofar as there was a perceived "negligence of the feminine" in his texts. This, the French scholar argues is a misunderstanding of his work and that there is "a tendency with Shakespeare [about whom Girard had written a book], as with many other great novelists, to make women generally the voice of truth" (p. 142).

### 1.3 Choosing Yalom

In a recent survey (Correia, Cooper & Berdondini, 2014), over 1,300 existential therapists were asked to name the practitioner who had most influenced them, and Dr. Yalom ranked second on the list, following Dr. Viktor Frankl. While it is a given that Yalom is held in high regard within the profession of existential psychiatry and psychotherapy, it is his wider appeal to the general public that won me over to considering him the greatest living influence on existential therapeutics today. In fact, he has written far more books for the general public than Dr Frankl ever did, and he would be more generally known through popular media as he is a contemporary psychiatrist whereas the latter died in 1997. He has also authored what is still considered one of the seminal textbooks on the subject, *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980), many academic studies in his field as well as several novels and other reader-friendly books on therapy and wellbeing. He has also lectured widely and many of his interviews appear frequently both in written and broadcast media. Having read his books, it was natural that as a part-time counsellor and researcher in psychotherapy that I should choose Yalom as a major contributor to the field of existential psychotherapy and as a lens to examine how the Self is storied in the fictional works of Fyodor Dostoevsky. I also chose Yalom as he is a self-declared atheist with a strong scientific and empiricist bias<sup>38</sup> while Dostoevsky has a distinct Christian vision that underlies what I am calling in this dissertation his literary or textual therapeutics.

---

<sup>38</sup> In his latest book, Yalom (2021) still asserts that he is a “nonbeliever” (p. 68). His dying wife also affirms that she does not “believe in an afterlife” and can accept the idea that she shall “no longer exist” (p. 102). With the Stoics, Yalom declares with equanimity that human life is “a minuscule crack of light between two eternities of darkness, one before life and one afterwards” (p. 122). And, on the penultimate page of this book he declares that as “an ardent materialist,” he on occasions entertains the daft idea of being buried in the one coffin as his wife (p. 221).

#### 1.4. Irvin Yalom's Approach to Existential Psychotherapy

Yalom has a somewhat unusual and unorthodox approach to therapy where he uses the insights he has gained from a wide range of reading matter, not alone in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy but also in the seemingly (at first and superficial glance) the unrelated fields of literature and philosophy. Indeed, we may declare that Yalom is not alone a practitioner and theorist in his chosen field but also one of its most adept popularisers and communicators, able to write phenomenally successful novels (in his writing and his practice he is the storyteller *par excellence*) that embody many of his theories, practices, and beliefs as well as more academic texts.

In *Staring at the Sun* (2009), Yalom quotes May, his mentor and life-long friend, again and again: “Anxiety about nothing is really anxiety about death” (p. 22) and he underscores the fact that he had a memorable encounter with three of his mentors, the most significant being with Rollo May, at the time of their deaths (p. 165 ff.). Of the latter, Yalom declares that he “mattered to me as an author, as a therapist and, finally, as a friend” (p. 172). Moreover, significantly he declares that it was particularly the influence of Dr. May that led him to his deep interest in existential psychology, philosophy, literature, and the power of story to heal and how these could all be used purposefully and caringly in the therapeutic encounter. It is worth quoting in full here his account of this mentor's influence as it played such a significant role in Yalom's later theorising and practice of psychotherapy:

When May's book *Existence* was published during my second year of residency, I devoured every page and felt that a bright, entirely new vista opened before me. I immediately embarked on an education in philosophy by enrolling in an undergraduate survey course in the history of Western philosophy. Ever since, I have continued reading and auditing courses in philosophy and found there more wisdom and guidance in my work than in

the professional literature in my field... Many years later when I developed death anxiety during my work with patients dying with cancer, I decided to enter therapy with him (pp. 172 — 173).

In his now classic book *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980) Yalom offers the following working definition of his topic as being “*a dynamic approach to therapy which focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual’s existence*” (the author’s own italics), (p.5). A further emphasis is that this type of therapy is a dynamic or psychodynamic one in so far as it deals with powers or forces or drives that lie innate within the individual, and he emphasises that many of those powers or forces or drives are unconscious (p. 6). It is the job of the therapist to help the patient to become conscious of those drives in the temporality or impermanence of the here and now. However, he is quick to point out that existential therapy emphasises a different type of conflict than those suggested by other schools of therapy (p. 8).

In a recent interview with Ayca Duffrene (2004) of the BBC World Service, Yalom declares that he has long been a great reader of fiction and that one of his earliest ambitions was to write a particularly good novel and that he had always sought to tell stories that were rooted in real life experiences even in his academic books to make them more accessible to the reader. In responding to the question of his unorthodoxy of approach the following is what Yalom says:

I never felt that a straight, orthodox view was really complex enough to encompass all of our motivations and desires. During my training — I was at Johns Hopkins and in a training analysis with a Freudian analyst — I always felt that a great part of the human being was left out. I gradually turned more and more to accumulated wisdom in the fields of philosophy. After all philosophers have been thinking of some of the same issues that we

have for the past 2,000 years and I've drawn a lot from philosophical insights (p. 8).<sup>39</sup>

In the same interview, in answer to the question as to which novelists influenced him the most, Yalom lists Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Sartre, Camus, Kafka, and Cervantes whom he calls “philosophical novelists” and whom he declares interest him the most (p. 9). In this present study Yalom’s optic on psychotherapy is being used to read the novels and short stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky in order to paint in the existential backdrop of modern or even post-modern life — that reality against which we all try to creatively survive the life into which we have been thrust or thrown as Heidegger so vividly puts it.<sup>40</sup> He intimates in the same interview that the process of psychotherapy is a form of education and, like the latter, it is on-going, even life-long. Again, he emphasises, as indeed do practically all schools of counselling and psychotherapy, that the relationship between the therapist and patient is of central importance:

I think the idea that you have to do therapy in some mechanistic way following some sort of technique is exactly the opposite of what you actually want to do — which is to form an authentic relationship, let the relationship unfold, and as the patient begins to develop trust in this relationship, change will occur simultaneously to that. These are certain things that can't be rushed (p. 10).

---

<sup>39</sup> This unique combination of integrating more philosophy into psychotherapy could be considered as being akin to what some call “psychosophy,” that is soul or mind wisdom. First used by the philosopher J. J. Becher (1635 – 1682), this term implies that ideas like forgiveness and redemption can be freed from their religious context and understood and practised as a method or technique in a solely humanist or non-religious way in psychotherapy. Certainly, this would be the intention of Irvin Yalom’s approach to Existential Psychotherapy. See <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-biographies/johann-joachim-becher>, accessed 27/12/2019.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Heidegger used the word “Dasein” which literally means “being there” or “presence,” a word which is often translated into English with the word “existence.” Peculiar to humankind’s “Dasein” or existence is “Geworfenheit” (thrownness) or that felt sense of “being thrown” into the world in a rather arbitrary or random way. Thus, it is a form of being that is aware of such arbitrariness and that it must confront such issues as Yalom’s four core conflicts.

Again, and again in his writings, Yalom underscores the fact that it is the process of existential psychotherapy rather than any rigid methodology that counts. In an interview with the Danish professor and practising existential psychotherapist Dr. Bo Jacobsen (2003) they agree that there is a huge difference between “content” and “process” and that “it is not the content that defines existential therapy.... No, the defining element is the process” (p. 345). In that crucial interactive process with the therapist, the patients will, of course, talk about relationships, loss, dying, death, aloneness and many other existential crises and choices and their consequent struggle for meaning in coping with all of that. It is in his appreciation of the profundity of these existential crises that Yalom (1991) avoids “the powerful temptation to achieve certainty (which is impossible) through embracing an ideological school and a tight therapeutic system....” (p. 13). In this way, he is open to the immediate which is a defining feature of existentialism and the reason behind his advice to the aspiring therapist to keep bringing the patient back to the “here and now.”

### 1.5 Yalom’s Ultimate Concerns

For all its openness Yalom’s process shows a clear set of co-ordinates. He describes in detail what he considers to be the four main features of what he terms existential psychodynamics, having highlighted the shortcomings of both the Freudian and Neo-Freudian approaches (Yalom, 1980). On the one hand, the Freudian school had proposed that clients or patients presented with symptoms that emerged from a conflict with repressed instinctual forces or drives: “The whole flux of our mental life and everything that finds expression in our thoughts are derivations and representatives of the multifarious instincts [drives] that are innate in our physical constitution” (Freud, 1932, p. 221). On the other hand, the Neo-Freudian group who followed Freud,

namely, Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, and Karen Horney, decreased the emphasis the founder of psychoanalysis had put on sex and focused more on the social environment and effects of culture on personality and they proposed a scenario where the symptoms that patients presented with had their origins in the quality of their interactions with significant others in their upbringing as children. However, Yalom (1980) suggests that there is a different kind of conflict involved for the client or patient who presents for therapy:

The existential position emphasizes a different kind of basic conflict: neither a conflict with repressed instinctual strivings nor one with internalized significant adults, but *instead a conflict that flows from the individual's confrontation with the givens of existence*. And I mean by “givens” of existence certain ultimate concerns, certain intrinsic properties that are a part, and an inescapable part, of the human being's existence in the world (p. 8). (The author's own italicization).

Here, Yalom has pointed out a crucial distinction, namely that conflicts emerge or “flow” from the confrontation of an individual with certain “givens of existence” or ultimate concerns. Yalom then proceeds to outline his four givens or ultimate concerns of the human condition as (i) death or mortality (ii) freedom, (iii) isolation and (iv) meaninglessness, and discusses ways in which the human person can respond to these ultimate concerns either in a functional or dysfunctional fashion. These four concerns often result in a unified dynamic conflict where the patient will experience some or all at the one time without necessarily distinguishing between them. In short, the four concerns are, more often than not, inextricably linked and experienced as such.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, as corollaries of these four ultimate concerns, Yalom maintains that all psychopathologies are derivatives of the anxieties generated from the action of these four conflicts — either unconscious or conscious — and that a vital task of any therapy, and indeed of human development in general, is to confront them head on and come to terms with each of them by accepting their consequences in our lives. [See May (2009) p. 27 and Quinlan (2013) p. 8.] Moreover, it is here that existential therapy is at its best and most realistic as it is unafraid to challenge the evil and tragedy that may be at the very heart of life

The book *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980), from which the long quotation above is taken, took some ten years in the writing and it vividly describes Yalom's experience of his therapy sessions and his professional and clinical reflections thereon. This work is the result of such reflections on deep personal encounters with others who have come face to face with the four ultimate concerns I will outline below. It is, accordingly, a handbook for therapists of any school of psychotherapy because it deals with the universal problems of life as summed up in those four major concerns. Before I proceed to describe in detail what Yalom (1980, *passim*) calls the "four ultimate concerns" that he believes are central to the therapeutic encounter along existential lines, it is important to distinguish between the two sets of terms "ultimate concerns" and "core conflicts," because the former formulation is one with roots in existential philosophy and theology and the latter term brings us into the heart of the dynamics of the therapeutic encounter that roots the therapy in a tradition that began with Freud who was the founding father of the Psychodynamic School of Therapy.

### 1.5.1 Ultimate Concerns not ultimate enough: Outlining My Central Argument

Yalom (1980 *passim*) declares that central to his approach to existential therapy are what he regards as four "ultimate concerns," which I have enumerated above. Furthermore, he states in his italicised sentence in the above quotation that "a conflict... flows from the individual's confrontation with the givens of existence" (p. 8). These "givens" are the four ultimate concerns. With attentive reading of the text, it becomes clear that what he terms conflicts and I term "core conflicts" in this dissertation flow from engaging with or encountering the four "ultimate concerns."

---

along with all the more positive experiences we have as human beings, positive qualities which were essentially heralded by Maslow and Rogers et al of the humanistic school of psychotherapy as a balance to Freud's more mechanistic and instinctual approach.

The term “ultimate concern” is one coined by the German American existential philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1886 — 1965) in his monumental three volume *Systematic Theology* (1951 — 1963). Therein he uses the term specifically as relating to religious experience and states (Tillich 1968) that this religious concern is “ultimate; it excludes all other concerns from ultimate significance... The total concern is infinite... no rest is possible in the face of a religious concern which is ultimate, unconditional, total and infinite” (p. 4). Irvin Yalom’s mentor, fellow therapist and friend, Rollo May (1909 — 1994) authored his doctoral thesis in psychology, called *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1949), under the supervision of Paul Tillich at Columbia University. It is my inference here that it was through interaction with his friend and mentor that Yalom would have come up with the term “ultimate concern” with which he went on to describe each of his core descriptors for his model of existential psychotherapy.<sup>42</sup> My criticism is that Yalom nowhere defines what he means by either “ultimate” or “concern,” nor indeed does he enlighten us as to why he chose these terms. Furthermore, Tillich used his term in a well-defined way and in a specific faith context as we have seen and always in the singular. It is also somewhat unusual that Yalom, a convinced atheist, would use (most likely unconsciously) a term that derives from a Christian theological context with regards to encountering the ground of Being, the ultimate cause of reality, namely God. However, it will be argued that his four descriptors are not “ultimate” in the sense that Tillich uses the word, namely in the sense that they are open to a spiritual foundation. In Yalom’s usage, they simply are not that ultimate and therefore do not do justice to the wellspring from which they flow.

---

<sup>42</sup> Yalom (2002b) acknowledges this provenance of the phrase in his acceptance speech for the Oscar Pfister Prize which he won that year, while underlining stridently that he regards himself as “a practising atheist” (p. 301). In his latest book (2021) he calls himself “a nonreligious believer” (p. 68) and wonders why he had gone out of his way “to shock religious believers” in one of his books (p. 186). Finally, he declares himself “an ardent materialist” uncomfortable with all his irrational feelings on the death of his wife (pp. 220 – 221).

### 1.5.2. Death as an Ultimate Concern

With respect to death, Yalom (1980) considers that it is an ultimate concern that becomes “a core existential conflict” (p. 8) as every human being is aware of its inevitability and yet strives to avoid it for as long as possible. In other words, the central conflict here is the struggle between our desire to live life fully over against the sheer inevitability of our death which we try to deny and repress as much as possible. Early on in this classic textbook, Yalom outlines three important fundamental postulates with respect to death as an ultimate concern in therapy (as in life):

(a) The fear of death, even when repressed, “rumbles continuously under the surface.”

(b) To cope with these fears, “we erect defences against death awareness.” Such defences, mostly based on denial, “result in clinical syndromes” and all types of psychopathologies.

(c) He contends that “a robust and effective approach to psychotherapy” can be based on the “foundation of death awareness” (pp. 20 — 21).

Novelists like Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, and Samuel Beckett among many others, have dealt with the philosophical and existential aspects of dying and death in their creative writings, in their journals, diaries and novels because it is such a universal theme in the experience of every single human being. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky also dealt with the spiritual and religious aspects of death and life after death. Our mortality is at the very heart of literature as it is of life itself. What is the meaning of our little lives if after all our efforts to build an identity and establish ourselves in the world we must crumble into dust? Where is the meaning in such a life? Does the positing of or the belief in a life after the grave give our lives meaning as believers contend?

Moreover, religions and spiritualities recommend that dying and death should be meditated upon as doing so will wake us up to the value and grace of being alive in the first place. Most religions believe in the persistence of the spiritual life of the individual after death and that the “soul” of the individual lives on in some divine space. We read in the Old Testament, in a text aimed at all humanity: “for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19) and it is one that has been incorporated into Christian burial services. The moral of the tale is that life is short, and, therefore, should be lived to the fullest extent in the most authentic and moral way possible. The next life was seen as a reward for good living as well as a gift from a gracious and forgiving God. Yalom (1980), a self-declared atheist of Jewish background, sees awareness of our mortality as essential to existential psychotherapy because he argues that “life and death are interdependent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively,” and that death itself is a “primordial source of anxiety (p. 29)”.<sup>43</sup> For these two major reasons this core conflict is a very central issue in existential therapy.

Perhaps, the richest insight Yalom (1980) offers us here is one from the philosopher Heidegger, who in 1926 explored the question of the importance of meditating on our death and who, he declared, “arrived at the important insight that the awareness of our personal death acts as a spur to shift us from one mode of existence to a higher one” (p. 30). Heidegger argued, Yalom informs us, that while there were two modes of existing in the world, namely (a) a state of complete forgetfulness of our actual being and (b) a state of mindfulness of our being and that the latter was a far

---

<sup>43</sup> Again, Yalom (1980) quotes May on the centrality or universality of the malaise of modern anxiety (or dread as Yalom often calls it) as attacking us “on all sides at once” (p. 43). However, May (2009) does see a positive in anxiety, and a great one at that, namely that anxiety can and does lead to awareness (p. 26). This has long been one of the clarion calls of the Eastern religions, that is, to wake up, to become aware of our very life, our very being, our very soul or *psyche* — to be aware that I am breathing right now at this very moment.

more wholesome way to be in the world. Such awareness or mindfulness of our being or existing in the now of life is the direct result of our ability to be able to meditate as objectively as possible upon our dying and death. It is the very heart of the existentialist approach to handle life's problems and engage with its mysteries head-on and to equip the client or patient with the skills to cope with and handle these gripping concerns in the supportive atmosphere of the therapeutic encounter.

In his novel *When Nietzsche Wept* (2003), Yalom offers us some little consolation with respect to the benefits of confronting our dying and death head-on by placing the following words in the mouth of the nineteenth century philosopher as he is counselled by Dr. Breuer:

My illness has also confronted me with the actuality of death.... The spectre of imminent death has been a great boon: I have worked without rest because I feared I would die before I could finish what I need to write.... The taste of death in my mouth gave me perspective and courage. It's the courage *to be myself* that is the important thing. Am I a professor? A philologist? A philosopher? Who cares? (p. 96). (The author's italicisation).

Furthermore, it is interesting to ponder how Yalom deals as a therapist with questions of loss, bereavement, and death. He emphasises, as indeed do many psychotherapists, that truly little often needs to be said, or indeed can be said when confronting the shock of such loss. He tells us (Yalom 2009) that "One can offer no greater service to someone facing death... than to offer him or her your sheer presence" (p. 130). By this he means that when a counsellor or therapist, or indeed a compassionate friend actually journeys with the person in his/her loss, often without saying much, and very frequently just sitting quietly there alongside the one who is mourning, their very presence is an indispensable and healing support. The strength of

Existential Psychotherapy lies in its courage to face head-on the stark realities of dying and death. In that way, it avoids what the scholar Ivan Illich and others called the “medicalisation” of death thereby denying the individual’s right and need to deal with “pain, sickness and death” in as conscious and as human a way as possible.<sup>44</sup> For Yalom “the sting of death” is final and there is no possible light at the end of life’s tunnel. Neither is there any ultimate change or transformation into a new spiritual existence as is promised in St Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians (see 1 Cor 15: 50 – 56).

### 1.5.3. Freedom as an Ultimate Concern

With respect to freedom, Yalom (1980) sees this ultimate concern as being linked with dread or *angst* as the individual knows that he or she is ultimately responsible for their own being in the world, for their own choices and acts, and their consequences. Even while individuals choose in freedom to create their own selfhood or personhood, they realise all too soon that “beneath us there is no ground — nothing, a void, an abyss” (p. 9). The essential and powerful conflict here is between the sheer uncertainty of life and our experience of groundlessness where everything is unsure over against our innate desire for certainty, surety and clarity which essentially drove Camus (1977, *passim*) to believe in the absurdity of the human endeavour that is life. Here, I might stress again a point made earlier in this chapter that the core conflicts that flow from the ultimate concerns, are not mutually exclusive, as the attentive reader will note that this ultimate concern called freedom overlaps with the existential conflict, I will be discussing under the heading of meaning versus meaninglessness.

Yalom would wholeheartedly agree with Berlin (1958) who makes an important

---

<sup>44</sup> O’Mahony (2016) quotes Illich as declaring that modern medicine “constitutes a prolific bureaucratic program (*sic*) based on a denial of each man’s need to deal with pain, sickness and death” (p. 48).

distinction between “positive freedom/liberty” and “negative freedom/liberty” where the former refers to our responsibilities and the latter to our rights as human beings. Indeed, this is a very traditional distinction first adumbrated by the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle who stressed that to every right there corresponds an equal duty or responsibility. If I have a right to free speech, I have a responsibility to protect it in society at large, and the same holds true for every other right I am entitled to as a human being. In the “negative sense” of freedom, Berlin (1958) argues that we can enjoy our rights “without the interference of any other person,” while the exercise of the “positive sense” involves:

.... the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer — deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realising them (p. 2).

In line with Yalom and Berlin, the contemporary Catholic theologian Hans Küng (1968) refers to Berlin's “negative sense” as “freedom *from*” and his “positive sense” as “freedom *for*” (pp. 160 — 161). In another book, Küng (1978) refers to this latter form of freedom as “freedom *to*” (p. 598). Yalom (1980) sees freedom very much in the “positive sense” as “freedom *for*” (p. 216) and notes many instances in therapy where the therapist encourages the patients to take responsibility for their statements, opinions, or actions. For example, an existential therapist will interrupt a patient who avers that “I can't do X or Y” by asking them to restate their contention as “I won't do X or Y.”

Again, he notes that every existential therapist's goal is that the patient "makes a free choice." Furthermore, therapists will also get their patients to rephrase "s/he bugs me" by "I let her/him bug me." All along, the goal of every therapist is to get the patient to "own" what happens in their lives, that is, to take responsibility in freedom for their decisions and choices.

Yalom (1980) who, as I have already stated, is a self-professed atheist, bases much of his thinking on freedom on the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre whom he quotes at length. For Sartre, it is individuals who constitute their own world and who make their own meaning. This is what Yalom means when he speaks of positive freedom where we are challenged to do both these very things. He quotes what he considers a moving and seminal passage from Sartre's novel *Nausea* and then comments that for the character at the heart of that paragraph "[t]he world acquired significance only through the way it is constituted by the human being; in Sartre's terms the 'for-itself.' There is no meaning in the world outside of or independent of the 'for-itself'" (pp. 219 — 220). In short, we are responsible for creating our world, that is, for imbuing it with meaning or significance. However, there is a still more cutting edge to our exercise of freedom than this imaginative creation of our world, and here Yalom stresses his point by italicising his and Sartre's contention that we are all "*entirely responsible*" for our own lives, not only for "*our own actions*" but for "*our own failures to act*" (p. 220). Hence, freedom comes with a heavy price, a price imbued with dread or angst as the individual knows that he or she is ultimately responsible for their own being in the world, for their own choices and acts, and for the consequences of those choices and acts. Being ultimately responsible for one's own being is to see life as one's own creation, one's own project.

#### 1.5.4. Existential Isolation as an Ultimate Concern

Regarding his third ultimate concern, existential isolation, Yalom (1980) underscores the point that this is neither a feeling of personal isolation from others with its attendant loneliness, nor even an ongoing experience of isolation from parts of oneself. It is, in fact, he points out, far more radical, far more fundamental: “for each of us enters existence alone and must depart from it alone.” It manifests itself, in this existential context, as a tension between “our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish for contact, for protection, our wish to be part of a larger whole” (p. 9). To state this major conflict in more dynamic terms, we could say that this is the conflict we experience between our essential desire to belong, to be part of something greater than ourselves<sup>45</sup> over and against the experience of sheer isolation. On the one hand there is a desire for fusion with an Other or Others, and on the other hand a desire for growth which implies separation. Therein lies the existential conflict.

Each of these ultimate concerns with its resultant core conflict overlaps with another as, for instance, when we contemplate our “absolute isolation” we immediately can also associate it with the sheer “aloneness” of our dying and eventual death which we can only do alone. Once again, in a specific work dedicated to this topic, Yalom (2009) mentions this linking of isolation and dying by alluding to both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and to the latter’s wonderful book on the isolation of the man Ivan Ilyich (p. 35) as he deals with his dying from a painful form of cancer. This is a journey he can only make alone, and no matter how compassionate people are for him he must learn to have compassion for himself for the first time in his life and indeed he learns to show such concern for all forms of life, not just its human incarnation, as this painful experience of

---

<sup>45</sup> The psychiatrist, Alfred Adler, an early disciple of Sigmund Freud referred to this desire for unity as “Gemeinschaftsgefühl”: a compound German word meaning “feeling-for-community” or simply “the desire to belong.” Such a feeling was at the very heart of the individual’s drive to socialisation.

dying makes of him a new, transformed human being.

However, it is also insightful to note that the British psychologist Dan Jones (2008) reports that recent scientific studies using brain-imaging equipment suggest that “the pain of social exclusion is more than metaphorical and recruits the same brain systems that register physical pain .... Surprisingly, it is not just exclusion from our preferred ingroup that can cause existential distress: in a recent experiment (quoted and referenced at source) even ostracism from a despised group (the Ku Klux Klan) produced decreases in self-esteem and in a sense of meaningful existence” (p. 580).

Furthermore, we all have a deep need to feel connected to others, on the one hand, and to cope with any experiences of rejection we may encounter on the other. Deep down in our heart or soul we are faced with the realization that our own subjective experience of reality can never be fully shared with any Other, though needless to state our partners and/or friends or significant others will get as near as is humanly possible to that, and, in a very real sense, this may be as near as we ourselves may ever get. Indeed, here is where the sheer “unknowability” of ourselves at a very deep level meets what the Catholic existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel calls the very mystery at the heart of life itself.<sup>46</sup> Here also is where the major concern of existential isolation overlaps with our very quest for identity, our quest to get to know the truth of our very own soul. Many of these concerns are, of course, addressed in many stories in literature in general and in philosophy in particular.

Considering his clinical practice, Yalom (1980) highlights that the therapist encounters three different types of isolation, namely interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential. The first of these, the author argues is “generally experienced as loneliness”

---

<sup>46</sup> “A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity.” Marcel (1949), p. 117.

as it refers to “isolation from other individuals.” The intrapersonal form or type refers to a process whereby patients essentially “stifle [their] own feelings or desires, accept ‘oughts’ or ‘shoulds’ as [their] own wishes, distrust [their] own judgement, or bury [their] own potential (p. 354). While these two categories are important types of isolation, Yalom points the reader to the relevant literature on those areas and proceeds to elaborate on the meaning of a third and more primordial type of isolation, namely that of the existential variety. He proceeds to define it as being “an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being. It refers, too, to an isolation even more fundamental — a separation between the individual and the world” (p. 356). Here the previous two human core conflicts both lead inexorably to the realisation that no one can die for me and that my dying is “the loneliest human experience” (p. 356). The second core conflict, namely our realisation of our fundamental freedom in life to create ourselves also leads inexorably into the feeling of existential isolation: “To the extent that one is responsible for one’s life, one is alone... Deep loneliness is inherent in self-creation. One becomes aware of the universe’s cosmic indifference” (p. 357). In sum, then, existential isolation lies at the core of the human condition as one of our four major concerns or “human givens.”

#### 1.5.5. Meaninglessness as an Ultimate Concern

The fourth ultimate concern is that of the meaninglessness of existence as it hits us full on. Given all our strivings to create a fruitful, happy and, in that context, a meaningful life; given all our struggles in and for freedom, many of which are fraught with pain and suffering; and finally, the fact that at the end of everything we must die, how is life meaningful at all? Once again, we will be aware that this ultimate concern overlaps with the death struggle explicated above, reminding us that these four ultimate concerns

and their ensuing four conflicts are inextricably linked with one another.

In short, then, this core conflict relates to a core struggle all humans engage in between the desire for meaning and significance in confrontation with the seeming meaninglessness of life and of the very universe itself. Yalom (1980) asks the pointed question, one which we, too, often ask: that if each of us must construct our own meaning, can “a meaning of one’s own creation be sturdy enough to bear one’s life?” (p. 9). We are all meaning-seeking, indeed meaning-making creatures in a seemingly meaningless universe.<sup>47</sup>

Meaninglessness lies at the heart of existentialism — at the very core of the absurdity which is life. A synonym for meaninglessness is absurdity and Camus (1977), among many other modern thinkers, wrote much about it, despairingly declaring his inability to gain any knowledge or illumination into the solution of the problem he is to himself:

... that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd... (p. 20)  
... the mechanical aspect of their gestures [human beings], their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them (p. 21)  
... For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers ... This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me ... Forever I shall be a stranger to myself (p. 24).

The very heart of that absurdity or meaninglessness, according to Camus, lies in our innate desire for complete clarity and lucidity in the face of a patently illogical and absurd world. It is in that very clash that the essence of meaninglessness resides: “But what is absurd [meaningless] is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing

---

<sup>47</sup> It is important to point out that there are therapists in the broad existential and humanistic school who would be open to the spiritual/religious dimensions of the human person like Viktor Frankl and Brian Thorne, though they are much fewer in number — just as there are theistic as well as atheistic existential philosophers. Existential psychotherapy like existentialism itself is an extremely broad movement indeed.

for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as it does on the world” (p. 26). Nowhere did Camus express this deep existential angst and despair more effectively and trenchantly than in his reflections on the story of Sisyphus in a book with the same name that is the source of the above quotation.

Camus, according to Yalom (1980) concluded from his lived experience and from his reflections thereon that the question of the meaning of life is “the most urgent question of all” facing each human being (p. 420). However, it is our sheer inability intellectually and emotionally to answer that question satisfactorily that is the cause of our deep experience of meaninglessness in our encounter with life’s problems. Yalom (1980) reports on a small clinical survey (through self-report, therapist’s report, objective observations of video tapes of the interviews by other professionals) of forty consecutive patients applying for therapy in a local hospital outpatient clinic that found that the desire for meaning in life to be an abiding goal of nine of them and their quoted responses indicated this: “lack of purpose in life,” “need for meaningfulness in my life,” “my problem is drifting without a goal,” “there is a lack of direction in my life,” “I am lost,” and so on. Furthermore, “of forty patients, twelve (30%) had some major problem involving meaning (as adjudged from self-ratings, therapists or independent judges” (p. 448).

A lot of the above sentiments on meaninglessness owes much to the writings of the existentialists mentioned above and, once again, especially to his mentor, Dr Rollo May (2009) who writes that he attributes this modern malaise and spiritual alienation to what he terms “emptiness,” a synonym for meaninglessness (p. 3 ff.). In a further insight into absurdity, this important mentor, describes this feeling of emptiness as being such that his clients just do not know what they want from life, and further they seem not to know what they are feeling in the first place. The emptiness modern human

beings experience, or meaninglessness as Yalom designates it, can also be designated as being “lost,” “hollow,” “fake” or “phony”.<sup>48</sup> May (2009) quotes one of his clients as having said that he was “just a collection of mirrors, reflecting what everyone else expects of me.” He refers to the mind-numbingly boring lives lived by a lot of moderns called “suburban” residents. He sees much unacknowledged frustration and much repressed hostility there. Many suburban men die of boredom, this author believes, when they retire (p. 9). Then, he follows these observations with the following warning, still true, alas and alack some 60 years later: “The human being cannot live in a condition of emptiness for very long: if he is not growing toward something, he does not merely stagnate; the pent-up potentialities turn into morbidity and despair, and eventually into destructive activities” (p. 11). The author also uses other words for this emptiness, viz., “vacuity” and “powerlessness.” These sentiments are reflected strongly in Yalom’s fourth ultimate concern of meaninglessness.

In a more recent compendium on approaches to psychotherapy (Wedding and Corsini, eds., 2015) Yalom and Josselson<sup>49</sup> stress the “meaning” and “meaning-making” nature of the therapeutic encounter which supplements the theory outlined in Yalom’s (1980) early and classic textbook:

---

<sup>48</sup> May quotes T.S. Eliot’s famous poem “The Hollow Men” in his text and relates its theme directly to this universal feeling of “emptiness.” Also, the word “phony” became quite a popular one in the 1950s in America where the young sought to be authentic human beings against the backdrop of a society that insisted on conservatism, if not sheer reactionism as shown in Senator McCarthy’s Communist witch-hunts. Hence, we had such films as *Rebel Without a Cause* and novels like J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* where the hero/antihero Holden Caulfield excoriates the “phonies” of this world.

<sup>49</sup> Josselson is co-director of the Irvin D. Yalom Institute of Psychotherapy. On her approach to therapy, she writes: “I work from a psychodynamic and an existential psychotherapy perspective. I think of psychotherapy as a project that two people undertake together to try to better understand the problems of living in order to make changes that serve growth and personal fulfilment. I work primarily with conflicts concerning relationships, work and identity, and these often underlie symptoms of anxiety and depression.” See <http://ruthellenjosselson.com/> accessed 17/01/2020. Hers is a feminist approach to existential psychotherapy that differs somewhat from the more obviously masculine one presented in this dissertation. See footnote 37 for an elaboration on this theme.

Existentialists regard people as meaning-making beings who are both subjects of experience and objects of self-reflection. We are mortal creatures, who because we are self-aware, know that we are mortal. Yet it is only in reflecting on our mortality that we can learn how to live. People ask themselves questions concerning their being: Who am I? Is life worth living? Does it have a meaning? How can I realize my humanity? Existentialists hold that ultimately each of us must come to terms with those questions, and each of us is responsible for who we are and what we become (p. 266).

Moreover, in encountering any, some or all the four ultimate concerns in our daily life logically and existentially implies the search for identity on the part of the individual. This present dissertation is essentially about that, about making sense of life, about meaning-seeking and meaning-making. Such meaning-seeking and meaning-making is given a more vivid and concrete expression in what I am terming “authoring” or “storying” the Self in this current dissertation, a subject which I will deal with in detail in chapter two. Moreover, it is insightful here to point out that another famous existential psychiatrist/psychotherapist, Viktor Frankl made the search for meaning/identity on the part of the patient the cornerstone of his approach to psychotherapy which he called logotherapy and, unlike Yalom he would have emphasised the importance of a strong spiritual dimension to both therapy and life.<sup>50</sup> Again, it is the argument of this dissertation that an open-minded critical reflection on the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky will provide us with ample evidence that such an

---

<sup>50</sup> Viktor Frankl (born, 1905) was an Austrian Jewish psychiatrist who survived the hell of several concentration camps, including Auschwitz. He is noted as a world-renowned psychiatrist and psychotherapist who founded a therapeutic approach called “Logotherapy” which is based on the premise that the human person is motivated by a “will-to-meaning,” an inner pull to find a meaning in life no matter how extreme his/her existential situation may be, even if it be in the midst of the hell of a concentration camp. Frankl (2004) states: “... I speak of *a will to meaning* in contrast to the pleasure principle or *the will to pleasure* on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centred, as well as in contrast to *the will to power* on which Adlerian psychology, using the term ‘striving for superiority’ is focused” (author’s italics), (p. 104).

exploration of meaning can only be fully investigated and appropriated when a spiritual dimension of Existential Psychotherapy is embraced.

Furthermore, the eminent contemporary existential psychologist and psychotherapist Emmy van Deurzen (in W. Dryden, 2006) has this to say on what clients coming to existential therapy might expect:

Clients who come specifically for existential therapy usually already have the idea that their problems are about living and are not a form of pathology. This basic assumption must be acceptable to clients if they are to benefit from the approach. A genuine commitment to an intense and very personal philosophical investigation is therefore a requirement. A critical mind and a desire to think for oneself are an advantage. People who want another's opinion on what ails them and who would prefer symptom relief to a search for meaning might be better referred to other forms of therapy (p. 175).

From the above quotation, we see how deeply rooted in the immediate concerns of actual living that existential psychotherapy finds its focus. Its concerns are with the problems of living and not with pigeon-holing a patient through a diagnosis of any type of mental illness. The inference of van Deurzen's comments is that the prospective patient must be open to both personal improvement and deep questioning of the Self which she calls "philosophical investigation." Once again, we could fittingly call this an openness and willingness to story and dialogue the Self by engaging with another in a therapeutic existential encounter. Indeed, our intuitive narrative intelligence helps us realise that we relate to one another by story and that all our relationships with Self and Others are built on shared stories.

#### 1.6 Conclusion: Confronting the Barriers to Self-Discovery through the Talking Cure

No sooner have those big questions about the meaning of the individual's life begun to

surface than the therapist must begin gently to help the patient or client confront the barriers to self-discovery. Carlson (2013) observes that the two major barriers to self-knowledge are “(i) informational barriers (i.e., the quantity and quality of information people have about themselves) and (ii) motivational barriers (i.e., ego-protective motives that affect how people process information about themselves)” (p. 173). The therapist then will help the clients to increase their self-knowledge through establishing a relationship that respects their authenticity in the “here and now” by being totally open and present to them in the therapeutic encounter. Such authenticity inevitably means facing some unpalatable truths like living in a “romantic bubble” which Yalom (1991) illustrated in his “tales of therapy” by the example of the 70-year-old woman Thelma’s eight-year obsession with a former lover. In short, he had to face her with the truth of “living a lie or an illusion” (p. 47) that prevented her from facing the truth of her situation. The solution that emerged after much struggle required the therapist to help the patient to burst the bubble of love’s illusion and become what Yalom graphically calls “love’s executioner” (pp. 15 — 67). Thelma had to retell her story in such a way that the real truth of her situation had to be acknowledged. Such authenticity is at the heart of all real therapy, not just its existential incarnation. In other words, Yalom sees the task of the psychotherapist (and indeed ultimately the patient) as that of “executioner” of the lie of “romantic love” and of liberating human beings from obsessions with old love affairs of which they simply could not let go. This, as we will see, is a significant parallel to Girard’s contention, which I will describe in chapter two, that persons must face up to the “romantic lies” they have swallowed if they are to become authentic human beings. Such a “waking up” to reality is essentially “opening up” an avenue to self-discovery and self-creation for the client by surmounting one big barrier. In short, the client or patient is enabled to discover the Self anew and can now

take on the world with a greater sense of confidence and self-belief.

In this chapter, also, I have introduced in detail the central concerns of existential psychotherapy. The “ultimate concerns” or ultimate issues in life that lead to conflict that of necessity must be addressed and dealt with in such existential therapy according to Yalom have been explicated. I have also stressed its openness to meaning-seeking and meaning-making. However, I have also suggested that the openness to healing implied by the process of confronting these ultimate concerns owes a theological debt to Tillich. When properly acknowledged and set in this light, we can begin to see why Yalom’s ultimate concerns may not be ultimate enough. It will be the work of the remainder of this dissertation to spell out exactly why this is the case.

Furthermore, when this case has been made it will be seen that Yalom’s existential concerns do not allow for a spiritual dimension, and I shall go on to show that its recovery is foundational to the psychotherapeutic enterprise. In other words, while Yalom’s theory might allow for a spiritual dimension in an individual patient’s life, it only does so as a dimension among dimensions on an equal footing with other possible bases whether scientific, agnostic, atheistic and so on.

In summary, then, existential psychotherapy is a form of therapy that is so comprehensive that it can be profitably integrated with any other approach utilised in the counselling room. We have seen that it is not, and never claims to be, a totally independent, set-in-stone, school of therapy. It is more a basic approach to the human condition that accepts all its highs and lows from, on the one hand, the whole gamut of the more negative human experiences from anxiety to despair, from grief to loneliness, from isolation to the feelings of emptiness and so on to, on the other hand, the high points and joys gained through human contact, marriage, success, and ambition and so forth that are encountered throughout the lifespan of all individuals. It embraces, also,

the possibilities and potential for healing and flourishing that lie in the therapeutic encounter and in the power of individuals to shape and tell their own authentic stories in any humanising context, whether that be the consultation rooms of a psychotherapist or over a cup of coffee with a significant other or close friend in the local restaurant or even in the healing pages of literature when engaged with at any level of depth.

In conclusion we can say that Yalom's work in existential therapy deals with the selfhood and identity of the client, not as an essential gift or given to be discovered, but as a project for each person who comes to therapy — or indeed for anyone who deeply reflects on their life's purpose — to formulate and shape for themselves in freedom. In this dissertation I will go on to argue that both Dostoevsky's philosophical anthropology, which is essentially a theological one, along with his therapeutics of text, imply that while the clients may shape themselves to some extent that they also encounter a deeper spiritual foundation of their personhood or selfhood within their very selves. In other words, while Yalom's ultimate concern of the existential encounter with meaninglessness does not go far enough, Dostoevsky's therapeutics of text and his philosophical anthropology deal more comprehensively with the confrontation with meaninglessness in the deep spiritual context of a geometry of the cross enlightened by the experience of the mystical, and especially of the mystery of the resurrection. Finally, to return to the practicality of any patient's particular encounter with any kind of therapy, including that of the existential variety, Carl Rogers' three core conditions<sup>51</sup> are always central to the process. Existential therapy through the long-established talking cure also encourages its clients to engage in what Yalom calls storying themselves along with the help of the self-revelation of the therapist that encourages such self-storying in the accepting and confidential atmosphere of the consultation

---

<sup>51</sup> Rogers' (1957) three core conditions are well-known: (i) congruence (genuineness), (ii) unconditional positive regard and (iii) accurate empathy.

room. It is to that storying or authoring of the Self through talk and text that I now turn my attention in chapter two.

## Chapter Two

### Authoring our Lives through Talk *and* Text: The Power of Story

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss how it is that the so-called “talking cure” is not unlike what Kearney calls “the writing cure”. The talking cure, which I referred to at the end of chapter one, finds its origin in the work of Dr Josef Breuer (1840 — 1925), a mentor and colleague of Sigmund Freud and it was the latter who popularised it through his method of psychoanalysis.<sup>52</sup> Therapy is normally understood as a real time process between the therapist and client. However, before we can bring Dostoevsky into an academic conversation with Yalom, I need to address the matter of therapeutic space and how it is that both he and Yalom deal with that therapeutic space as a process of healing: the former through a writing cure the latter through a talking cure. In other words, until we see how both thinkers, and not only Yalom, are involved in existential therapeutics we won’t perhaps appreciate how powerful and relevant Dostoyevsky’s life and works are to Yalom’s approach to storying the therapeutic process. This chapter is principally concerned with showing how the biographical aspect of the therapeutic process applies to both thinkers.

Yalom’s existential method as we have seen employs story to help the patient to connect his or her experience to that of others and hence to feel part of something beyond the singular Self. This method, therefore, allows the patient to encounter an Other in a positive and meaningful way through language, hence establishing trust and a

---

<sup>52</sup> Dr Josef Breuer, physician and one of the early pioneers of the science of neurophysiology, was one of the founders of what his patient Bertha Pappenheim (1869 — 1936) called the “talking cure,” and later Freud called Psychoanalysis. As I mentioned in chapter one, Yalom authored novels as well as academic texts in the field of psychotherapy and one of his historic novels deals with the imagined “talking cure” of Nietzsche under the direction of Dr Breuer.

corresponding ability to “open up” to life which I also highlighted as the goal of existential therapy in chapter one. In this way, story addresses the more isolating aspects of the human condition. Briefly then, I am arguing that story relates back to the patient or client and thereby establishes the conditions of self-revelation and its connection to the self-disclosure of the therapist. It is this connection that is so critical for Yalom in creating the conditions of encounter in the therapeutic relationship and he spends much time and effort emphasising the crucial importance of therapist self-disclosure in helping the patient express his or her story.

The problem with story as autobiographical in this way is one of criticism and authorial voice. How much of the author’s writing can be traced or linked back to his or her own subjective experience and intentions, to his or her own Self? In other words, how much personal truth can we attribute to the author’s “fiction?” This problem is part of the challenge of interpretation that is nowhere explicitly addressed by Yalom the practitioner and author.<sup>53</sup> Today, however, it asserts itself everywhere in literature and philosophy. In addressing the storying of the Self, or what is often called the “storied self,” I propose to address the challenges of existential therapy with a double hermeneutic that does not limit the self-awareness of the author in question to either text or talk but rather includes both as mediums of expression and meaning-making that ought to be taken seriously (as they may each shed light on one another to help us better understand the significance of language for the therapeutic relation). To develop this double hermeneutic of “talk and text,” I will employ the theory of both Irvin Yalom and René Girard who, in different ways, relevant to our discussion, confront the matter of overcoming existential psychological conflicts through story.

---

<sup>53</sup> For a relevant discussion regarding the “otherness” of the text and the problems of interpretation, see Hans-George Gadamer *Truth and Method* (1989).

It is important to keep in mind that the power of story is not limited to either “oral” or “written” form but, in fact, encapsulates both. Essentially, I am discussing where the two dynamic fields of literature and psychotherapy meet in a shared space of existential therapeutics. This point becomes relevant as I make the case that Dostoevsky’s literary works are also therapeutic. Those dynamic fields, I have argued can be represented by two clear images, viz., that of the “text” and that of the “talk” respectively. In writing about how literature and psychotherapy interact, one is engaged in the particularly important task of interpretation. On the one hand, literature is the result of the fine interweaving of great feats of imagination with moving storytelling by the authors in question who seek to perhaps entertain or in Yalom’s case inspire the therapeutic process. On the other, literature can educate, and indeed uplift. In its reading and its writing, literature can also be therapeutic when engaged with at a deep level or in Dostoevsky’s case be transformative. Such a complex picture of storying requires a double hermeneutic that takes account of both talk and text, that allows us to firmly link story back to the subject relating his or her account of Self in the first case and links author to text in a dynamic way in the second. In other words, it can both be a talking cure and a writing cure.

In the first context, I shall advance the Yalomian approach to therapy<sup>54</sup>, that takes account of the power of story (which of its existential nature includes the encounter with the four ultimate concerns and the client’s experience of the corresponding existential conflict in their everyday lives). Secondly, I shall introduce another existential method that applies to Dostoevsky, one that takes full account of the

---

<sup>54</sup> It is important to understand that I am not calling into question that Yalom’s writings don’t engage in a process of textual therapeutics nor that he uses to great effect both stories and dramatics in his literary oeuvre. Furthermore, I am not reading Dostoevsky’s work through a Yalomian lens. Rather, I am highlighting the fact that Yalom is not primarily a novelist or creative writer like Dostoevsky and that when he does compose stories he is not engaged in a biographical or autobiographical process like Dostoevsky is in his great literary oeuvre. My double hermeneutic principally shows that Dostoevsky is engaged in such a biographical therapeutic process.

Girardian theory of “triangular desire,” and highlights the therapeutics at work for the author whereby a spiritual transformation results. I contend that the issue of transcendence is not sufficiently treated in Yalom’s therapeutics to allow for a faith or ontological perspective, such as the one I argue that can be inferred from Dostoevsky’s existential texts, one that facilitates a therapeutic encounter that allows for a spiritual dimension. This double hermeneutic is one effective working tool with two projecting points for interpreting the therapeutic process at work in both the familiar therapeutics of the couch and also in the less familiar but no less therapeutic space of literary structure. I will argue that what Girard calls the dialogue of the author with himself, and by extension the dialogue of the reader with himself or herself, permits us to see a more nuanced view of existential therapeutics that includes Dostoyevsky’s life and work.

## 2.2 Authoring our Selves through Talk: Therapeutics in the work of Irvin Yalom

The two major pillars of Yalom’s approach to psychotherapy are: (i) the elucidation of the four core conflicts that spring from his ultimate concerns as explicated in chapter one and (ii) the power of story to heal in the therapeutic encounter which is inextricably and dynamically linked with the four core conflicts. In this section I will discuss how the “ultimate concerns” described by Yalom result in four core conflicts that he helps his clients encounter in the therapeutic space of the consultation room.

### 2.2.1 The Four Core Conflicts

While these core conflicts are often at the heart of our life’s journey, we will find that the creative dealing with them through the power and therapeutics of story helps us to cope with their existential challenges. In short, facing these core conflicts in and

through story leads us to the heart of Yalom's method, namely the power of story to heal. Furthermore, these conflicts are experienced, often unconsciously, in the here and now of life, and patients are encouraged to face them squarely in his form of therapy. Consequently, Yalom insists that his clients attempt always to remain in the "here and now" of their life's experience. These conflicts we experience are energies or forces that spring naturally from anguished issues that lie at the very heart of human existence. In short, Yalom's (1980) ultimate concerns lead to conflicts that are encountered at the heart of existential therapy which, he states, is very much part of the psychodynamic tradition that began with Freud (p. 6). Also, it is essential to point out that these conflicts are not mutually exclusive — in fact, they all are inextricably bound up with one another.

Furthermore, the four conflicts work in a dynamic and dualistic manner. For example, the ultimate concern with death issues in a conflict or fight between the desire for life versus the core reality of death; the second concern results in a conflict between our desire for freedom versus our fear of taking responsibility for our decisions; the third concern of isolation leads to a conflict between the desire for communion with others versus our fundamental existential isolation; the final concern leads to a conflict between our innate desire for meaning in a world where apparently absurdity and meaninglessness abound.<sup>55</sup> A person struggling to cope with the reality of terminal cancer in themselves or a loved one is embroiled in a core conflict between the desire to live on and the harsh reality of an inevitable death. It is similar for each of the other

---

<sup>55</sup> The dynamic tension of opposites has always been central to the Romantic take on life, and in this context, I note with interest Mullens's (1995, pp. 28 – 29) contention that it was a firm belief in this dynamic principle that explained Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel's far too neat formula of the synthesis that reconciled the polarities of thesis and antithesis. All conflict in the last analysis, for Hegel, is unreal and exists only because of incomplete development. In contrast, the dynamism of such polarities of life is central to the very forces that make life possible in the first place. The Romantic poet and philosopher, Coleridge would have seen faith and reason as being an example of such a dynamic pair of opposites. The Existential School of Psychotherapy is at one with the Psychodynamic School in acknowledging this dynamism in the lived experiences of the individual.

descriptors — they, too, are existential conflicts that cut to the very core of the human soul.

Yalom has restated his ultimate concerns in many different formats over the years, but perhaps no more clearly than in a much later book (Yalom, 1991) as: “the harsh facts of life,” the ‘givens’ of existence” (p. 4). It is in reaction to these “harsh facts” that the four core conflicts emerge for Yalom. Moreover, and I must underscore this, he is convinced from his long experience as an existential therapist and as scholar reflecting on that experience that confronting these conflicts is fundamentally healing (see Yalom 1980, p. 14). Furthermore, it is the task of the therapist to face the patient head-on with these conflicts within the caring and supportive context of the therapeutic situation. Yalom’s four ultimate concerns face each of us squarely with four core conflicts should we be brave enough to take up the challenge. Having recapped the four ultimate concerns in the context of the four core conflicts, I will now examine the power of story through which these core conflicts are encountered, brought to consciousness, and effectively dealt with in and through the therapeutic process.

### 2.3 The Power of Story to Heal

One hallmark of existential therapy as understood by Yalom, according to Josselson (2008) is the power of story in the healing enterprise:

In some ways, his work... has been about telling stories about his encounters with people as a therapist, stories that instruct us about how to connect meaningfully with others. He has retained his humility — he still allows others to teach him about their reality as he tries to encounter them in

their deepest being and offer them a relationship in which they can heal (pp. 15 — 16).<sup>56</sup>

As a newly qualified psychiatrist and soon thereafter a therapist, Josselson (2008) informs us that Yalom ceased to see the patient as a “carrier of symptoms and pathology” as the then prevalent theories and practices of psychiatry and psychoanalysis would see him or her (p. 18). Patients were real persons who had a story or stories to tell, tales of their engagements with life and how they made sense of it. Josselson tells us that he loved reading Freud whom he saw as a master storyteller even though “he never won the Nobel prize... but he did win the Goethe prize for his literary abilities. Freud told great stories and I loved reading him...” (p. 24).

Moreover, as a psychiatry resident two of the young Yalom’s influencers were great storytellers, Dr Otto Allen Will, Jr.<sup>57</sup> and Dr Lewis Hill who both entranced the young resident with their presentation of the psychiatric and psychotherapeutic encounter in terms of the healing power of story. Neither of these two psychiatrists sought to reduce the patient to a pathology or to a rigid narrow diagnosis: “There was no reduction of their patient in any way. They told the story of two people relating. I liked that very much” (p. 25). Yet another significant role model was Professor John Whitehorn, the chairman of the psychiatry department at Stanford who, in Yalom’s

---

<sup>56</sup> The American psychologist, Pennebaker (1999) conducted a study into the health benefits of narrative at the University of Austin, Texas and his findings showed how effective writing a narrative around trauma was to its reduction in intensity: “Forming a story about one’s experiences in life is associated with improved physical and mental health across a variety of populations... Whether in written or spoken form, putting personal experiences into a story is associated with both physical and mental benefits across diverse samples” (Pennebaker, 1999, p. 1252). The Australian, Michael White, a social worker and family therapist developed an innovative and highly practical technique using storytelling to help patients of all ages deal with childhood traumas. His method of therapy helps the client come up with stories and metaphors to re-evaluate the situation, usually from a more positive perspective.

<sup>57</sup> Dr Otto Allen Will established an international reputation for his work with schizophrenic patients using intensive psychotherapy instead of biological or psychopharmacological treatments. In this regard he followed a path similar to that of Dr Ronald Laing in the U. K.

words “started out with each patient with a blank slate and figured out each person’s story separately” (p. 26).

Throughout all his years of practice, Yalom acquired a fine body of wisdom like his belief that every good therapist must trust the relationship built up between therapist and patient and that to expect an immediate response from the patient is generally to have expectations that are far too high and far too naive. In short, he believed that good therapy was very humane and accepting of patients, that it lacked all reductionism and sought to appreciate them in the fullness and intricacy of their being, a richness and complexity that could effectively be communicated essentially through story, even if that story in its fullness took time to emerge.

This awareness was enhanced by his wide reading on the one hand in psychiatry and psychotherapy and on the other in general literature and in the history of philosophy. In the former, he read voraciously everything written by Sigmund Freud, Harry Stack Sullivan, Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, and Otto Rank. Most especially, Yalom read and digested the work of his friend and mentor, Rollo May. He particularly praises May’s definition of existentialism in his scholarly textbook *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980) for its lucidity, namely that existentialism is “the endeavour to understand man by cutting below the cleavage between subject and object which has bedevilled Western thought and science since shortly after the Renaissance” (Yalom, 1980, pp. 22 — 23). Further, he praises May’s definition for highlighting the very essence or ground of existential psychotherapy, namely, the reality of the healing relationship of the therapist with the client in the here and now of lived experience. It is important to note that none of these mentors was reductionist.<sup>58</sup> In the field of general

---

<sup>58</sup> Yalom (1980, p. 443) quotes Victor Frankl’s disdain for a reduction of the human being to drives (sexual or otherwise) as proposed by Freud and the mainline Freudians. This, Frankl argued, was to the detriment of the search for meaning, truth, beauty, human altruism, and self-transcendence. See footnote 49 for more information on Frankl’s approach to existential psychotherapy called logotherapy.

literature, he read the novels of Camus, Kafka, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy among many others. Literature is anything but reductionist, revealing, as it does, the heights and depths of the nature of humankind. In short, his breadth of reading material enhanced his appreciation of the power of story as a means of healing in the therapeutic process.

Yalom drew extensively from the great thinkers and novelists he had read in the interim in later therapy sessions, with Dostoevsky being one of his favourite authors to draw upon (Josselson, 2008):

I drew from great thinkers. If a patient were talking about self-loathing, for example, I would have talked to them about Kafka's story of *Metamorphosis*. That's quite typical of my approach — one of the things I want to convey is that the great minds have dealt with these same problems. Right now, I have been reading a great deal of Plato and Epicurus and I find that over and over again I bring many of their thoughts into my therapy sessions. The idea that great thinkers have struggled with the same unanswerable questions is reassuring for a lot of people (pp. 33 — 34).

Sharing such ideas, often couched in the form of stories from novelists and philosophers, helps the client to tell their own story and to put some shape on it in the very act of sharing it. Yalom puts it more succinctly still further on in this interview: “We live in a universe without inherent design in which *we are free to author our own lives*” (my italics), (p. 53). Indeed, much of Dr Yalom's work is written in the form of stories as is one of his more popular novels *When Nietzsche Wept* (2003), a brief account of which will illustrate his *modus operandi* in therapy: namely the dynamic and powerful sharing of one's story in a supportive and confidential environment.

This novel recounts the fictional encounter between Dr Josef Breuer, one of the founders of Psychoanalysis, who was then (the 1880s) at the height of his career and Friedrich Nietzsche, perhaps, then, Europe's most famous philosopher. Yalom presents us with a Nietzsche, who is on the brink of suicidal despair, unable to find any cure for

the interminable migraine headaches and other ailments he is scourged with. This fictional experiment is simply amazing in its imaginative leap into the nature of the therapeutic process as it might have happened in the late nineteenth century, leaving its theoretical aspects to more academic texts. The best truths, according to Nietzsche were always “the bloody truths, the ones ripped out of life's experiences” (Yalom, 2003, p. 196 ff.) and in this respect the author spares us none of life's *angst*. The two characters share their anguish in their experimental talk-therapy.

This book can also be read philosophically as it imaginatively traces the encounter between two great minds in their attempt to heal one another and tease out life's meaning. It raises both deep philosophical questions and deep psychological ones about the mystery that life is and as such is a wonderful artistic representation of a healing philosophical psychology, which is a central concern of the current dissertation. Dr Breuer agrees to treat Nietzsche with his experimental "talking cure," but he never expects that he, too, will find solace and comfort in their sessions. Only through facing his own inner demons will the gifted healer begin to help his patient. In this inspiring, if challenging, novel, Yalom weaves fact and fiction, period atmosphere and dramatic suspense together in an imaginative *tour de force*. In short, he comes up with a story that underscores the redemptive power of real relationships. The point of the novel is that it is the therapeutic relationship that heals, and that relationship is always two-way because simply therapist and patient, counsellor and client, friend and befriended are in the ship of life together and will help one another to steer the craft through the often-choppy waters they encounter on their onward journey. The story that Yalom creates in this novel *When Nietzsche Wept* captures clearly the two-way journey of existential therapeutics and in doing so it provides us with a good example of storying the Self.

It should be pointed out here that storying the self is perhaps more about “untelling” than telling or a creating, as it has to do with confronting the limits of our freedom at least as much as with expressing our freedom. In this regard, it is worth acknowledging the nuanced commentary of Mulhall (2011) as regards one of the limitations of the narrative structure of selfhood, namely that individuals are not entirely free to live out whatever story they please as their stories are necessarily limited by the circumstances of their birth and society. Therefore, he argues that “individuals are only co-authors of the narrative in which they are their own heroes, in so far as they enter upon a stage that is not of their own design...” (pp. 30 — 31). He goes on to highlight that the author’s relationship to his characters can never be the same as the author’s relationship with himself because a human being is not absolutely free with writing his own story whereas the author is in his creative pursuit: “Human beings have no such absolute freedom in relation to their own lives as the author has with his characters” (p. 33). In the light of Mulhall’s comments we can infer that, in the context of Yalom’s existential therapeutics of storytelling, the Self can never entirely break free from his or her own life’s story however much it explores its limits through creative writing.

Yalom’s method employs storytelling which is a form of “fiction.” He sets up a scene or story from his own life that mirrors that of his patient’s conflict. In so doing, he does not shrink from revealing his own thoughts and feelings about what is happening in the “now” of the process of therapy. In short, he reveals himself as a vulnerable and searching human being, or as a “fellow traveller” as he calls himself, with the rest of humanity and especially as being “in the same boat” as it were as any of his patients.<sup>59</sup> It is, therefore, in the courage of his self-revelation that he empowers his patients to have the strength to open up and reveal their own pressing issues and

---

<sup>59</sup> This concept of being a “fellow traveller” occurs throughout all Yalom’s recent writings and in many of his recent interviews and represents an encounter which is essentially dialogical. See Yalom (2002) *passim*.

concerns, in short, the elements that shape their own story. Such a process involves a form of self-authoring whereby the therapist draws on stories by others who have authored themselves, while, often simultaneously in this process telling a story about him or herself. This corresponds to my own experience as I have effectively used stories from my own life in coping with clinical depression when I worked over some twenty years as a part-time counsellor in a secondary school setting when helping certain students suffering from either clinical or reactive/situational depression. The dynamism of the therapeutic engagement, I found, was thereby enhanced as the modelling of “storying the Self” by the therapist/counsellor encourages clients to share their story in a warm and accepting atmosphere. The clients thereby begin to realise they can trust the hearer who is authentically present in the “here and now” of a real human encounter. Josselson (2008) summarises Yalom’s approach most succinctly as being rooted in the connection thereby set up between therapist and client:

He makes his thinking about his patients, and his efforts to treat them, transparent, exposing his doubts, reservations and struggles as well as his insights. He has written two textbooks, two volumes of case history stories, three novels about therapy, a guide for therapists and one book of counsel for the masses confronting death. Across all his work, he explores the limitless and complex possibilities of the healing inherent in genuine human connection and authentic awareness of the dilemmas of human existence (pp. ix — x).

In other words, given that, in therapy, it is the relationship between therapist and patient that is crucial to healing, the self-revelation of the therapist is key to the establishment of connection; the real encounter that allows the patient to embark on the journey to inner self-healing. This overlaps with the power of story to heal — that is, essentially, therapists who share some of their story at appropriate times empower their

patients to open up in confidence and trust to them. In short, the point is that it is the vulnerability in self-disclosure that is an important but necessary risk on the part of the therapist in the therapeutic relationship.

It almost goes without saying, though it can never be too often reiterated, that confidentiality is a crucial key to any therapeutic situation, as indeed, it would be in any genuine human relationship. The power of the therapist sharing his/her story with the patient, then, can never be underestimated. This fact is substantiated by the research of the clinical psychologists Koole S. L., Greenberg, J and Pyszczynski, T (2006) where they demonstrate that feelings of isolation are temporarily relieved when people encounter others who appear to share their subjective experiences, “a phenomenon known as I-sharing” which “can be experimentally manipulated by having individuals share a subjective reaction” under clinical conditions. They go on to emphasise that “consistent with the existential function of I-sharing, people who are reminded of their existential isolation are especially attracted to I-sharers. The desire for shared subjective experiences thus leads people to feel a deep existential connection with others who appear to share their subjective experiences” (p. 214).

The self-revelation of the therapist, naturally enough, links potently as we have seen with the power of storytelling as a natural way of genuine communication and as an equally natural way of unburdening the mind. As soon as therapists reveal some little of their story, or indeed share how they really feel in the “here and now” they empower the patient to share their story, too. Yalom (1975) comments on therapist disclosure of feelings in their written summaries of group therapy sessions as a positive practice, provided, of course, that it is always in the patient’s best interest and indicates that “it is a vehicle to disclose a great deal of personal here-and-now feelings (of puzzlement, of discouragement, of irritation, of pleasure) and of his [the therapist’s]

views about the theory and meaning underlying his behavior (*sic*) in the group” (p. 442). Later, Yalom (1980) underlines the central importance of therapist self-disclosure to the therapeutic process thus: “There is no way around the conclusion that the therapist who is to relate to the patient must disclose himself or herself as a person. The effective therapist cannot remain detached, passive, and hidden. Therapist self-disclosure is integral to the therapeutic process” (p. 411). Moreover, he points out in a more learned discussion in Jacobsen (2003) that the therapist is what he calls “a fellow traveller” with the patient, that is, that they, too, share a common humanity with their client that includes one or other (or perhaps more) of the problems encountered in the therapy session. He continues “In existential psychotherapy, the relationship is characterized as being a relation between fellow travellers as I write in my new book [*The Gift of Therapy* (2002)]. Both patient and therapist have to confront the same deep existential issues in life. So, we are more equal than not. And the therapist should not hide anything from the patient but be open. It is not the content; it is the changes in the relationship that defines existential therapy” (p. 346).

If the existential approach to life and therapy is about anything, it is about encounter, about meeting with the other in as real and as authentic a fashion as possible. For Yalom, then, the existential encounter in therapy is essentially one between equals insofar as both being persons share the same human condition, what he calls here “the same deep existential issues.” Therefore, it is not the “content” of what the so-called “professional” might say that is the most important aspect of the therapeutic encounter — it is rather the process or dynamics of the relationship that is formed between therapist and client. In other words, telling our story makes us vulnerable and this task is made easier when we encounter someone who can genuinely take the same risk, or who models authentically that very task.

When we refer to the trust that springs from this genuine encounter, we are essentially referring to the power of the relationship itself. In other words, the self-revelation of the therapist is undoubtedly central to the healing power of the therapeutic relationship. It is this relationship that sustains the story, and indeed the on-going storying builds up the relationship. Self-revelation and healing are essential characteristics not alone of the therapeutic encounter but also of real storytelling as we author our own stories. Girard (1997) calls a novel the “dialogue of the novelist with himself” (p. 102). Yalom (1980) states succinctly and simply a similar conviction with regards to the talking cure or therapeutic encounter: “We author our own lives” (p. 281). As Atkins (2004) puts it so aptly and succinctly, “the narrative model of identity provides a more inclusive and exhaustive account of identity than the causal models employed by mainstream theorists of personal identity. Importantly for ethical subjectivity, the narrative model gives a central and irreducible role to the first-person perspective” (p. 341). The storied Self (most often from this “first-person perspective”) finds rich soil in the healing power of the therapeutic relationship, or indeed the equally bountiful ground of authentic human encounters.

Yalom in Rabinowitz, (1998) states that any narrowly understood approach to psychotherapy that makes no allowance for the Rogerian axiom that “it is the relationship that heals” (p. xii) is doomed to failure. Rogers (2003) advocated training in person-centred techniques for such individuals and stated that all therapy is an ongoing process “closely related to the therapist’s own struggle for personal growth and integration” (p. 21). Therefore, it is the person of the therapist rather than specific techniques that Rogers and Yalom regarded as the agent of change. Regarding this power of healing that resides in the therapeutic encounter, Yalom (1977) has this to say:

It has always struck me as an extraordinary privilege to belong to the venerable and honourable guild of healers. We therapists are part of a

tradition reaching back not only to our immediate psychotherapy ancestors, beginning with Freud and Jung and all *their* ancestors, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, but also to Jesus, the Buddha, Plato, Socrates, Galen, Hippocrates, and all the other great religious leaders, philosophers and physicians who have, since the beginning of time, ministered to human despair (pp. 397— 8).

It is no wonder, in our present focus here — storying the Self — that practically all the luminaries mentioned above by Yalom were powerful storytellers who fully appreciated the healing power of an individual’s personal story to liberate the human mind or soul and bring healing to a much-burdened heart. The power of the story also captivated the imagination of one of the major pioneers of existential philosophy from its inception, namely Jean-Paul Sartre who chose to write a major part of his philosophical work through the medium of novels such as *Nausea* (1938) and *The Age of Reason* (1945) and plays like *The Flies* (1943) and *No Exit* (1944) among many others. He even wrote a screenplay *The Chips are Down* in 1947. For Sartre, the human condition from an existential viewpoint was so complex that it needed as many genres as possible to do it justice. I have now discussed in detail the storying of the Self through what is termed generally the “talking cure.” It is to the complexity of the human condition as expressed through what we are calling “text” that we now turn our attention at this juncture. In other words, we are about to engage with what Kearney (2016b) calls the “writing cure,” a process “which translates wounds into scars, flesh into fiction,” and is truly “a working through of trauma” (p.143).

## 2.4 Authoring our Selves through Text: Therapeutics in the work of René Girard

The Italian novelist and scholar, Umberto Eco (2004) argues cogently that “stories that are ‘already made’ teach us how to die” (p.15).<sup>60</sup> Here he is referring to all the great stories from mythological sources to nursery rhymes to fairy tales to the great metanarratives right down to the modern stories contemporary novelists weave. The American novelist and biographer David Shields (2013) states that literature and death are “intricately intertwined” (p.180). Tolstoy has contended similarly some hundred years ago both critically in a book he wrote near the end of his life on the nature of art, and creatively in his short novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, that the one crucial fact about life is that we all die and that the real role of literature is to help us face the fact of our own impending mortality sooner rather than later and in so doing live our lives more fully.<sup>61</sup>

In this regard, then, our very desires for what we consider the best things in life force us to consider its extinction or negation, and this argument is in line with the contention of the scholar, philosopher, and literary critic René Girard whose academic work and insights have much to contribute to an existential therapeutic psychology.

---

<sup>60</sup> In doing this important task, Eco cautions that “hermeneutic truth” must not stray too far from the “literal truth” (p. 7) while hammering home significant “lessons about fate and death” (p. 15). Arguably, stories also teach us how to live, but Eco does not mention that salutary point here. Plato had also stated that philosophy is a preparation for death in the dialogue called the *Phaedo*. Practically all the World Religions recommend their adherents to ponder the reality of death in their own lives so that they will become spiritually awakened to all the gifts and values that life affords them in the here and now of existence: the beauty of the world, the mystery of the universe, the sheer gift to them that life is, the very mystery of their own being, the beauty and challenge of all new life, the call to responsibility for Self, others and the future of the planet, the causes of justice and peace and so on. It is only by reflecting on the reality of death, they argue, that we can learn to appreciate the value of living our lives to the fullest. The classical work *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (2009) and T. Rinpoche’s (1998) *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* are good examples of such a reflection on the topic from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

<sup>61</sup> In contemporary terms, we could argue that Tolstoy saw novels, like art, as capable of being a form of therapy for the human soul. Art, Tolstoy (1904) contends, is “not the production of pleasing objects; and, above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and (is) indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity” (p. 50). It is also interesting to note that Heidegger followed Tolstoy in his contention that one of the roles of literature is that of helping us in facing our mortality and, in consequence, helping us to live all the better. See Yalom, I. (1980) p. 30.

Indeed, his mimetic theory has been employed in psychology, as well as in cultural studies and literature, an engagement which he and some collaborators have called “interdividual” psychology.<sup>62</sup> His criticism symbolically charts not only the death but also the rebirth of the author by effectively mapping the discrete connections between the author and the work, an emphasis which complements and expands Eco’s and Tolstoy’s concentration on death only with respect to the role of literature. For instance, Girard (1976) argues that the deathbed scene at the end of the “great novel” represents the symbolic death of the author and the emergence into a new and deeper life and selfhood on the part of the true hero of the novel, the author, who is now shorn of all her illusions. For example, Girard argues that in the second part of *The Brothers Karamazov* “little Ilusha (Ilyusha) dies for the sake of all the heroes of Dostoyevsky’s novels” (pp. 313 – 314). O’Shea (2012) elucidates this point by stating that the “structure” of death and rebirth is employed in much of Girard’s work (p. 27) and further that the latter’s understanding of the “novelistic experience” is shown in “the symbolic death and resurrection of the principal characters” (p. 55). In light of this, all the other crises and tribulations, or symbolic “little deaths,” suffered by the main characters point to this gradual emergence of selfhood and the shattering of illusions; a therapeutic process wrought through writing.

Central to Girard’s thought is what he terms “triangular desire,” which he argues is the main, albeit unconscious, motivating factor in the life of any individual and consequently of any main character or hero portrayed in any great work of literature. What Girard emphasises is that not alone do we imitate or copy the behaviours or actions of others as Plato had long pointed out but that we also imitate very deeply and

---

<sup>62</sup> In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* René Girard and Jean-Michel Oughourlian (together with Guy Lefort) introduced interdividual psychology, the first major attempt to formally apply mimetic theory to psychology.

primarily their desires so that the objects we follow do not spring from our own unique desires but from the mediation of an influential other's desires.

Girard's now famous text appeared in France under the rather more forceful and punchy title *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque* which translates as "Romantic Lie and Novelistic (= fictional) Truth." This title when placed side by side with its English title *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* and taken together with it, effectively captures both the argument and the method of Girard's thesis. In other words, Girard is arguing that characters (or the heroes and in consequence the authors) are subject to what he terms "the romantic lie" (what Yalom and other psychotherapists would call delusions, or what Rogers would designate as the "ideal self" or Laing as "false self"). That "romantic lie" is, in short, our belief in our own originality, that we are what our egos dream us to be, like Raskolnikov's believing for a certain period that he is a character on a par with Napoleon or Willy Loman's warped view of the "American Dream" that caused tragedy in his family because he stressed the importance of popularity over hard work and risk-taking over perseverance. That "romantic lie" or the "romantic bubble"<sup>63</sup> must be burst through the onward development of plot and the personal realisation *contra* their illusion by the protagonists that they are merely imitating a model and shaping their desires on that of the other. It is in this realisation that the romantic lie dies and the novelistic or fictional truth wins out where the hero is forced to face this harsh reality as for example where Raskolnikov admits he is no Napoleon, that he is just a rather pathetic human being who needs another to hear his confession and meet him in his brokenness.

Williams's (2008) critical assessment of Dostoevsky parallels Girard's and Yalom's concern respectively with unmasking "romantic lies" or bursting "romantic

---

<sup>63</sup> Yalom (1991) talks about bursting the "romantic bubble" with his patient Thelma (p. 49), while Girard talks about facing down "romantic lies" – in both cases these authors are pointing up the battle we face against inauthenticity as we grow as persons.

bubbles,” but he states his metaphor in theological terms, namely insofar as he sees the author as attempting to face with harsh truths the “devils” that certain characters embrace. Traditionally, the Devil has been called “the prince of lies,” and the only way of unmasking his lies is to face him with the harsh truth. Williams, in a Heideggerian register, calls the engagement of characters with the lures of these fallen angels “Being towards Death” which is the title of his second chapter (p. 63). He goes on to point out that Fyodor Karamazov, the paterfamilias, in malicious fun, describes how a “stupid devil” had made him attack his hosts (the monks) once when he visited a local monastery (p. 64). In this sense, the old man, and indeed his sons have to struggle, with varying degrees of success and failure, with the Devil, the “prince of lies.” The old man, the illegitimate Smerdyakov and the negative Fr. Ferapont who sees “devils” everywhere and is not short of projecting his demonic suspicions onto others, even onto the holy starets Fr. Zossima are all pointedly “sons of the lie.” The major point here in Dostoevsky’s theological anthropology is that the greatest lie is surely the lie to the Self, the refusal to face one’s own inner demons, or what the psychiatrist Carl Jung calls the archetype of “the shadow.” In a sentence that succinctly sums up the thrust of good story-telling and self-creation in Zossima’s answer to the “devil” in Karamazov senior, Williams quotes the old mystic’s answer: “Stop telling lies, not least because lying to your self makes you easily offended” (p. 65). Worse still, it is poor story-telling that sells the Self short in favour of easy answers and superficial endings that are unwilling to face the realities of life. Furthermore, this correlates well with Girard’s contention that the romantic lie leads us to the illusion that our own desires are unique to ourselves alone and not imitated or borrowed from a perceived powerful rival.

We can say, then, that there is a dialectical tension or a dialectic of desire operating upon the main protagonist of any novel according to Girard, where this main

protagonist or hero is actually the author. The underlying reasoning runs like this: The heroes of novels are motivated by the desire to be a certain person and consequently to act in a certain way. They begin to regulate their actions in accordance with some sort of model, a process Girard calls mediation. He describes this process as “triangular” where at one corner of the triangle we have the desiring subject (corner 1), at another the mediator or model (corner 2) and finally at the third the desired object (corner 3). This “triangulation,” Girard argues, constitutes the fundamental structure that he pursues throughout his book, beginning with Cervantes and continuing through Stendhal to Proust and Dostoevsky. This dialectic of mediated desire in the novel is absolutely fundamental to the novel as an artistic structure. Thus, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* provides a technique for handling the novel and we can employ it as an extremely useful and effective hermeneutic tool for our task of interpreting the inextricability of the life and work of Dostoevsky in an existential setting relevant to the enterprise of modern existential psychotherapy.

Girard (1976) outlines three ways by which such desires are mediated namely: (i) External mediation — where, in the case of the great classical novelist Cervantes, whose novel *Don Quixote* he advances as a classical example of his theory, that Amadis of Gaul is for Don Quixote “the most perfect knight errant” and thus the perfect example of the external mediator upon whom the hero desires to model himself. Indeed, Don Quixote believes that whoever imitates Amadis best will come closest to “perfect chivalry.” Amadis and Don Quixote are characters on different planes — they will never meet and so they never become rivals as “the distance [between the two] is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of possibilities” (p. 9). (ii) Internal mediation — where there is truly little psychic distance between the subject (the person mediated) and the mediator (internal mediator) that they become strong,

even bitter rivals by desiring the same object. Here we can say that for Dmitri Karamazov, his father Fyodor Pavlovich becomes his rival (internal mediator) for the love of the woman Grushenka (object of desire). Such rivalry often has tragic consequences, and Girard considers this a major theme in modern novels. Indeed, practically all modern novels illustrate how internal mediation holds centre stage in a democratic world where differences between people are gradually diminished and even abolished. In other words, the more egalitarian a society, the closer the mediator and the greater the rivalry. (iii) Metaphysical desire is an obsessive version of the internal form of desire — where the subject desires to be the very mediator himself or herself. Consequently, in this last form of mediation the desire of the subject is transformed into obsession and even resentment by its very strength.

Early in the same book Girard argues that “novelistic genius” is seen when “what is true about others becomes true about the hero, in fact true about the novelist himself” (p. 38). The other here is the mediator, the “hero” is the desiring subject in the novel while the third is the novelist himself or herself. Metaphysical desire, as we have seen, is desire that is so totally obsessive that the subject or “hero” wishes to become the mediator himself or herself, but the real hero, according to Girard is one who garners enough courage, or indeed painful awareness to see through and beyond the futility of their obsessional desire. The hero or subject by his painful journey through the various encounters with others and with Self throughout the novel eventually goes beyond or transcends this metaphysical desire and is converted to a higher truth that acknowledges the boundary of death, the illusions of his ego and the possibility of value in and beyond his own being. In other words, he has arrived at the realisation that his desires are not his own at all but are rather imitative of another’s. Girard argues that “the novelist is a hero cured of metaphysical desire” (p. 233). In our case, Dostoevsky becomes the hero

who is transformed into an author capable of authoring great novels that reveal authentic truths. One could argue that the hero's journey, as he outlines it, mirrors somewhat the trajectory of a medieval passion play, though our author never mentions that comparison at all by name, but we can sense it in the undertones: "The career of the hero is a descent into hell which almost always ends in a return of the light, by means of a metaphysical, non-temporal conversion" (p. 253). Indeed, as I shall relate in the next chapter, Dostoevsky had in his own life descended into his own "hellish despair" at least twice in his life.<sup>64</sup> His novels reflect that experience as well, of course, as the return of the light.

Girard argues that we as readers are so possessed by our desire to imitate others that we are completely unaware of it. We don't even realise that our heroes are false — that they have feet of clay — and Girard contends wisely that we have fallen for their tricks because they "flatter our illusion of autonomy." Again, this illusion of autonomy is our belief in our own illusory originality. He continues his *tour de force* here by returning to his major contention we have mentioned at the start of our account on Girard, namely our belief in the "romantic lie," by stressing his conviction that "our heroes are just romantic lies destined to prolong the Promethean dreams to which the modern world desperately clings" (p. 258). As we shall learn in this dissertation, put succinctly in Girard's words: "Dostoyevsky does not justify Promethean ambitions, he expressly condemns them, and prophesies their failure" (p. 279).

In short, then, we may say that the truth of the novel is at one with the knowledge of the author's own lack of originality. The "greatest myth of all," according to Girard, and one to whose allurements we are all in danger of succumbing is our vain desire to convince "others and especially of convincing oneself that one is completely and

---

<sup>64</sup> See Briggs (2010) p. xxi.

divinely autonomous” (p. 271). This, then, is our illusory divinisation of our Self and of the Other. For “myth” above read “illusion.” The struggle of the novelist and the goal of the novel is the shattering of that illusion or the “bursting of the bubble” that we have spoken about above in Yalom’s terminology, or the unmasking or admission of the “lie” in the terminology of Williams. Once our illusions of autonomy or originality have been shattered like those of Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy’s novel of the same name, the hero has conquered his metaphysical desire and is transformed into a new and deeper authentic human being. If the interpreter of these words is religious or spiritual, he or she will speak about this being a conversion to a higher spiritual truth or a transformation into a new spiritual reality. In such a case, we can identify with the hero in his struggles to escape the pull to destruction of our base instincts, accept with him the futility of such mistaken desires, and acknowledge the inevitability of our mortality. In like manner, we can be at one with the novelist in conversion away from these not-so-subtle illusions, in acknowledging the more authentic truths of our existence: our mortality, the transience of life, the giftedness of simply being, the higher values of beauty, the openness to spiritual possibilities beyond our ken and so forth. We can, likewise, agree with Girard that “the hero is always he who desires most intensely,” which at the last is a desire deeply rooted in his own heart for the full truth of authenticity in the human context or for divine meaning in a religious frame of reference (p 269).<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Early in Christian thought St Augustine of Hippo (354 — 430 A.D.), much influenced by Plato and the Neoplatonists, spoke of the burning desire within the human being for the divine. He believed that God was closer to him than he was to himself. Moreover, he saw the deep desire for truth/God as an experienced-based argument for the existence of the Divinity. One might call this the “way of desire” based on what Augustine called “capax Dei” (a capacity/desire for God) making it an avenue to encounter the mystery of the Divinity. On the first page of his *Confessions*, we read the famous sentence that “our hearts are restless” until they find peace in God. (Augustine of Hippo, 1979, p. 21) He wrote widely of the deep desire within the human being for the divine. His biographer, Peter Brown (1969) adverts to this fact: “All a man could do was to ‘yearn’ for this absent perfection, to feel its loss intensely, to pine for it... ‘it is yearning that makes the heart deep’” (p. 156). If God did not exist, as it were, how would we have such a deep interior longing for Him in the first place? Many modern psychotherapists see the

Girard (1976) expressly concludes that the “title of hero must be reserved for the character who triumphs over metaphysical desire in a tragic conclusion and thus becomes capable of writing the novel. The hero and his creator are separated throughout the novel but come together in the conclusion” (p.296).<sup>66</sup> In other words, here we have the identification of author with the authored, a complex intertwining of both after much existential struggle along the way. The struggle of the author to write the novel is, consequently, a struggle with himself whom he meets in and through the very characters he creates in the novel and this struggle results in the shattering of illusions of hero-worship (what Girard calls the “triumph over metaphysical desire”<sup>67</sup>) and the consequent conversion to the truth of authenticity, or in the words of Carl Rogers, the truth of self-congruence. The dialogue or struggle of the author with himself has been necessarily therapeutic as he is transformed, renewed, and redeemed through the creative act of writing.

#### 2.4.1 Dostoevsky: The Quintessential Author of Self

I have chosen to concentrate on Dostoevsky as the quintessential author of Self in this dissertation. I contend that his authorship is a form of Existential Psychotherapy that

---

meaning of life in terms of fulfilling one’s desires. Viktor Frankl, a great existential psychiatrist sees that desire in terms of the quest for meaning and his therapy is based on that desire. The concept of desire is also at the centre of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a theoretical, ethical, and clinical point of reference. What is a surprise for us, though, is that an early Christian thinker from the fourth century could sound so modern. Augustine saw human beings as desirous of a meaning and he realised that such a desire could be all-consuming. This yearning movement towards God needs satisfying if we are to be genuinely happy, he believed. Indeed, according to St. Augustine, we do not have to pray for what we need because God already knows what we need before we even ask. Instead, we ought to pray, he suggests, to increase our desire for God and, also, that we might be enabled to receive his bounteous gifts. The modern Celtic spiritual scholar O’Donohue (1998) sees this primal need in humanity in terms of our “huge need to belong” (p. 10) without which we are “either paralysed or utterly restless.” It is very much in this Augustinian sense, I believe, that Dostoevsky is progressing in his novels and stories, and he sustains this investigation throughout his writing career especially in his last great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

<sup>66</sup> Girard asserts that “all novelistic conclusions are conversions” (p. 294).

<sup>67</sup> The big conflict is inherent in metaphysical desire, and our understanding of this sets up our exploration in this thesis of the existential conflicts in the novels of Dostoevsky.

parallels in the written or textual space (what Kearney calls writing therapy) what Yalom is doing in the clinical space of his consultation room (talking therapy). In other words, there is a therapeutics going on in Dostoevsky's oeuvre that explores the depths of human existence, an exploration that deepens the task undertaken by Yalom, in so far as it posits a spiritual dimension not alone to humanity, but essentially to the therapeutic enterprise itself.

Girard (1997) describes this emphasis in Dostoevsky's work as being the result of the "dialogue of the novelist with himself," because with this novelist the Self is engaged in its own discovery<sup>68</sup> or in finding his or her true identity (p. 102). Furthermore, Girard's painstakingly logical elucidation of his theory of "triangular desire," when brought to its conclusion by this shattering of twisted truths and illusions, sustains this deeply held belief in the Self's quest.

In short, Girard's solid criticism provides a firm precedent for acknowledging the deep connection between the author and the authored or between the novelist and the novel. Or to state this in terms of my double hermeneutic, the literary space we enter upon when engaging with the works of Dostoevsky is the space traversed in the quest for selfhood. Girard succinctly states this contention in these words: "Victory over self-centeredness allows us to probe deeply into the Self and at the same time yields a better knowledge of others. At a certain depth there is no difference between our own secret and the secret of others. Everything is revealed to the novelist when he penetrates the Self, a truer Self than that which each of us displays" (p. 298).<sup>69</sup> In other words, Girard

---

<sup>68</sup> The pursuit of selfhood is a spiritual quest that long predates the Romantic period discussed by Girard in this work of criticism. John O'Donohue (1997) sounds a timely warning with respect to selfhood that this dissertation respects fully: "We need to develop a new sense of the wonderful perplexity of the self. We need thought models or patterns which are fair and appropriate to that complexity" (p. 147).

<sup>69</sup> The "truer Self" alluded to here by Girard parallels what Carl Rogers, one of the founders of Person-Centred Counselling, calls the "Real Self." Rogers (2003) saw that the task facing the human being who wished to grow, with or without a therapist's help, was to get rid of any incongruence between a concept of Self that is based almost entirely upon the evaluation of others — The Ideal Self — and that of the

contends that plumbing the depths of the Self in pursuit of an authentic selfhood requires much hard personal reflection that entails the overcoming of self-centredness or the illusions of the ego. In so doing, he maintains that such an exploration allows us not alone to get to know ourselves but also the nature of others. Indeed, when we go deep enough into our inner world, we realise that there is no difference between our secret world and theirs. Use of the verb “penetrate” obviously implies that this is no easy task and that we must dig down to reveal not alone a deeper, but what he deliberately calls a “truer Self.”

When we engage with the stories of Dostoevsky we are involved in a dialectic where the author is at once storying himself and we as readers are invited also to adequately story ourselves in our own lives. In other words, we are engaging not just with a bare text at the cerebral and emotional levels, but with a dynamic therapeutics that invites us to get to shape our very selves in authenticity. Following Girard (1976), we realise that the real hero of a great novel is the author himself and the diligent critic, and if we are brave enough to engage with the therapeutics of the text, we, too, can become our very own heroes. In a more profound sense, then, the author and the reader through the dynamic interplay with characters in the narrative are engaged in a therapeutic encounter. At the end of such an encounter, we may be lucky, in Girard’s words to find a “profound Self” or “universal Self,” shorn of “metaphysical pride” who has conquered “self-centeredness and other-centeredness” as the true novelist the likes of Dostoevsky has done (pp. 298 — 299). In sum, I am essentially stressing the point

---

person’s actual inner experiences — The Real Self. Girard’s “truer Self” also parallels what R.D. Laing (1990), the existential psychiatrist, calls “the true self,” where he argues controversially that psychosis is not a medical condition, but an outcome of a “divided self,” or the tension between the two personas within us: one our private, authentic, true identity or “true self” and the other the “false self” that we present to the world. Rowe (2001) would see this search for the “true self” to be very much in harmony with what William James, one of the founding fathers of psychology, saw as the desire to “assert one’s deepest self” (p. 8). In so doing one had to let go of a more superficial form of Self. In the example that Girard gives us, this is the Self, riven by internal mediation.

that this Girardian approach has allowed me to make the case for an otherwise divergent approach to therapy as I will be uncovering and revealing in my reading of Dostoevsky's texts as therapeutic.

### 2.5 Conclusion: A Double Hermeneutic: The Talking Cure and the Novel Revealed

In summary, then, I have argued for and described a double hermeneutic that takes account of both talk and text in the psychotherapeutic process. In the first case, I advanced what I termed the Yalomian approach that takes account of the power of story (which of its existential nature includes encountering the four ultimate concerns and the consequent engagement with the four major existential conflicts explicated above and in the first chapter). Secondly, I have explained in detail another existential approach that allows me to read Dostoevsky's text as the author's therapeutic encounter with himself. This double hermeneutic is one effective working tool that will address the many concerns that arise from engaging with both literature and psychotherapy. It also allows me to bring both Yalom and Dostoevsky together into a shared therapeutic space.

I have examined how Yalom's existential method employs story to help the patient to connect his or her experience to that of both Self and Others. It is that connection through story that is crucial to the therapeutic process. The patient or client begins to feel part of a shared enterprise beyond the isolated Self when the therapist shares a relevant aspect of his or her story. This method I have shown allows the patient to encounter an Other in a positive and meaningful way thereby establishing trust which is essential to all good therapy. It also allows the client to open up and reveal the Self in a warm and accepting atmosphere. In this way, we have seen that story addresses the more isolating aspects of the human condition. I have argued that

story relates back to its author and thereby establishes the conditions of self-revelation and its connection to the self-disclosure of the therapist in the consultation room. It is this association, so critical for Yalom in other respects in creating the conditions of encounter in the therapeutic relationship, that is also critical for Dostoyevsky in the workings of his writing cure. In short, the healing power of story reveals itself in existential therapy as something alive in both talk and text.

In the following four chapters I will offer a close reading and interpretation of the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky as being in themselves a form of existential therapy for the author, and indeed for the committed reader should he or she choose to engage with his novels at a deep level. In other words, I will show in detail how there is a therapeutics going on in the oeuvre of this Russian writer that explores the depths of human existence that parallels and indeed deepens from a spiritual point of view what is going on in Yalom's talk therapy. With respect to story or stories as we encounter them in any author, or in the oeuvre of Dostoevsky as is the case in this dissertation, a major and critical question arises for us — How much of the author's writing can be traced or linked back to his or her own subjective experience and intentions, to his or her own Self? In other words, how much personal truth can we attribute to the author's "fiction"? We answered that question through stating that we author our Self through the actual narrative and accounted for that assertion by explaining how the therapeutics of the text works according to Girard's principle of aesthetic transformation. Central to his thought is what he terms "triangular desire," which he argues is the main, albeit oblique, motivating factor in the life of the protagonist or hero portrayed in the great works of literature. We have seen that what Girard emphasises is that not alone do we imitate or copy the behaviours or actions of others but that we also imitate very deeply and primarily their desires — his main thesis being that desire, like the process of

becoming a Self, is socially mediated. Furthermore, it is my argument, using Girard's theory as explicated above, that we may profitably interpret the texts of the novels of Dostoevsky as storying the author's existential concerns and as delineating his own struggles to make sense of existence; a labour that lies at the very heart of existential psychotherapy, not to mention life itself when lived questioned and interrogated. The struggle of the author to write the novel is, as we have seen, a grappling with himself whom he meets in and through the very characters he creates in the novel, and this struggle results in the best of cases with the shattering of illusions of hero-worship, and the consequent conversion to the truth of authenticity, or in the words of Carl Rogers, the truth of self-congruence which is the result of what Girard (1997) calls the "dialogue of the novelist with himself" (p. 102). This second strand of our double hermeneutic has revealed the novel as embodying the existential struggle of the author to story himself by way of his narrative and if we are brave enough to engage with the therapeutics of the text, we, too, can become our very own heroes. I have argued, also, that the author and the reader through the dynamic interplay with characters in the narrative are engaged in a therapeutic encounter. I have shown how the relevance of this becomes clear when we see how Dostoyevsky and Yalom are both involved in a therapeutic process, the former through text (or a writing cure) the latter through talk (or a talking cure).

Equipped, then, with this double hermeneutic as a firm basis for examining "the man and the work," I will turn my attention in chapter three and following to dealing directly with the power of existential therapeutics in the work of Dostoevsky. Fundamentally, such an existential therapeutics will mirror or parallel the author's own spiritual trajectory as this is manifested in his oeuvre. Essentially, this means that I will trace through the following four chapters this author's gradual "dialogue with himself"

— often a very painful struggle indeed. I will start with the “fragmented Self” of chapter three that parallels the state of the client or patient at initial encounter with the therapist (what is termed generally “the presenting problem” in the field of psychotherapy) and continue on to the “therapeutic presence of the Other” (i.e., the therapist or trusted Other) of chapter four. Then, I will trace the author’s encounter with his “personal demons in talk and text” through encountering the stark existence of evil in the world and in all human beings in chapter five.

Finally, I will describe in chapter six the consolation that his deep spiritual vision offers a much-troubled human being when he or she encounters the mystery of innocent suffering, the pain of grief and loss, the trauma encountered through illnesses and personal tragedy and so on. Only an openness to a divine or spiritual principle in life allows for the deepest healing possible, according to Dostoevsky. This trajectory of both personal and creative development expresses powerfully his deep conviction that there is a spiritual foundation at the very heart of our human identity. When we set this trajectory in the context of what Yalom describes as the ultimate concerns of existential psychotherapy we can’t but find wanting the latter’s coordinates for healing the Self. In what follows, I will be defending and illustrating the argument that it is only through recovering, and indeed accepting the existence of a spiritual foundation that the deepest healing of the human person can be brought about. Bearing all this in mind, then, I turn now to Dostoevsky’s attempt to “pick up the pieces” of his fragmented Self in chapter three.

# Chapter Three

## The Fragmented Self in Dostoevsky's Life and Early Work:

### 3.1 Introduction: The Presenting Problem: The Fragmented Self

I am examining the search for Self, which is essentially a spiritual quest, in the literary works of Dostoevsky. It is worth restating at the outset that it is my contention that this writer's authorship is a form of existential therapy, an argument I will defend in detail in this dissertation. I will be arguing in this and the following chapters that there is a therapeutics going on in Dostoevsky's oeuvre that explores the depths of human existence that both parallels and deepens from a spiritual point of view what Yalom and other therapists are doing in their talk therapy.

Let me start with a definition: a presenting problem is an initial symptom that causes a person to seek professional help from a doctor, therapist, or another mental health provider. Douglas and James (2014) list the major presenting problems as anxiety, depression, trauma, PTSD, bipolar disorder, psychosis, borderline personality disorder and eating disorders (p. 2). The characters in the two novels I will be discussing below, Mr Golyadkin and Mr. Goryanchikov, would present to the reader, as they might to a psychotherapist a century later, as exhibiting at least anxiety and depression, and in the case of Mr Goryanchikov the added layer of trauma.

This dissertation, as I have explicated using Girardian principles, admits a compelling relationship between the author and his work — one that takes seriously the idea that the novelist's own existential hopes, fears and dreams are played out in and through the characters in the novels he writes. In that context, this chapter presents the first shoots of Dostoevsky's "dialogue with himself" by mapping out what I contend is his early grappling in his work with the fragmentation of Self, which is a more

imaginative and existential way of expressing the more prosaic term “presenting problem.” Such an experience of being shattered is essentially the result of an initial inability to cope with what Yalom calls his four ultimate concerns and the resulting core conflicts that emerge for the patient (in “talk”) or the author (in “text”) as a result. Not alone do the characters engage with the core conflicts but also, they are enmeshed in the negative fragmentary side of what Girard calls mimetic desire. Every client comes to therapy in a state of fragmentation or in a conflicted condition. When a client comes first to therapy, this state of fragmentation takes the form of what therapists call the presenting problem or conflict. This is the starting point on the journey to wholeness which is variously termed “self-actualization” (Maslow and Rogers), “self-realization” (Eastern religions especially Hinduism), “individuation” (Jung) or “integration of self” (Laing and Storr) or “completeness” (Kübler-Ross), and these can be expressed in more creative and more vivid and down-to-earth terms such as “finding the Self” or “authoring one’s story.” However, this state of wholeness or integration cannot be reached except by acknowledging one’s fragmentation and lack of integration in the first place. Yalom puts this point succinctly early on in his *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980): “The confrontation with the givens of existence (the four ultimate concerns) is painful but ultimately healing” (p. 14). Therefore, in tracing the trajectory of Dostoevsky’s self-storying and eventual healing it is necessary to start with his confrontation with initial breakdown and fragmentation. This, then, as I have described above, is in clinical terms called the presenting problem or crisis that the patient has come to therapy to deal with. At the outset, a brief look at Dostoevsky’s biography will be helpful before I explore this theme in two of his novels: *The Double* (1846) and *The House of the Dead* (1861).

### 3.2 Dostoevsky's Life

Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in Moscow in 1821 at the Hospital of the Poor where his father was the chief medical director. While the elder Dostoevsky had been an army surgeon who had witnessed the horrors of the battlefield during the French invasion, his mother came from a relatively wealthy merchant family. Although the father Mikhail was a rather distant authoritarian figure, his mother Maria was a caring cultured woman of great faith. It was she, rather than her husband who had a more intellectually and spiritually stimulating influence on the family, especially on Fyodor, her second born child. Mikhail was an ambitious man who wished to improve his social standing and consequently taught his sons Latin and hired a tutor to teach them French. Though his relationship with his father was strained, Dostoevsky never reports any physical abuse of the children by the older man.<sup>70</sup> From his mother the young Fyodor learned many passages from the Bible, familiarised himself with stories from the lives of the saints and, influenced by her, he attended church ceremonies, pilgrimages to monasteries and engaged in other practices associated with the Russian Orthodox Church. His father did manage to fulfil his ambition for promotion in society by achieving noble ranking in 1828 and this advancement allowed him to buy a small country estate around a small village called Darovoye in the Tula region about 200 km south of Moscow.<sup>71</sup> This fact is important as it allowed the young writer witness both the simplicity of country life and experience the companionship of the serfs (peasants who were in reality slaves) as

---

<sup>70</sup> Freeborn (2003) reports that “there can be no denying that for Dostoevsky the father-son relationship became of supreme importance,” being “mirrored in his fiction from his earliest work to his last” (p.12). Frank (2010) reports that the father, after his mother’s death from consumption, supported both his sons, who were at different schools, to the best of his ability and always generously sent Fyodor whatever sums of money he wanted to enable him to keep up socially with the richer students at his military school. He argues that this selfishness was actually the source of Fyodor’s guilt as he knew his father’s country estate was in crisis due to crop failures and that the older man could barely afford such demands (see pp. 45 — 48).

<sup>71</sup> The Dostoevsky House at Darovoye can still be visited today and is a popular tourist attraction in the town.

well as experiencing the more hectic lives of the poor patients in his father's city hospital. Consequently, Fyodor would become a writer extremely interested in people, in their lifestyle and habits, and especially in their behaviour and the motivation that lay behind it.

Unfortunately, his mother Maria died from tuberculosis in 1837 when Fyodor was only sixteen and this had a devastating effect on the family. Indeed, it marked the end of his youthful life in Moscow and his transfer to the Academy for Engineers, a prestigious military school, in St Petersburg. While there he had time to read widely and reflect deeply on his life as well as learning the military aspects of engineering. He also wrote much to his elder brother Mikhail to whom he was remarkably close, and it was to him he divulged his earliest literary leanings.

The contemporary literary critic and philosopher Nikolaj Nikolaevich Strakhov (1828 — 1896) captured the appeal of this great novelist and writer best when he wrote that "All his attention was directed upon people, and he grasped at only their nature and character" because he was "interested by people, people exclusively, with their state of soul, with the manner of their lives, their feelings and thoughts" (quoted in Mochulsky, K. 1973, p. 229). Berdyaev insisted that Dostoevsky's novels are composed entirely of people and human relationships: "This is clear to anyone who carefully reads his astounding anthropological treatises. Dostoevsky's characters are constantly visiting, talking, and delving into the tragic abyss of human destinies. The only serious actions of Dostoevsky's heroes are their interactions, their passionate attraction and repulsion" (quoted in Kantor, V.K. 2015, p. 324). This affection for people, coupled with his desire to represent in words and in moving stories their attempt to come to terms with and make sense of the vicissitudes of life, lies at the heart of Dostoevsky's oeuvre. He is willing to deal with human pathology in an open way, even with the psychology of

murderers and rapists and, as a result, can expose the human soul deeply and broadly to many serious problems and disturbing conflicts. In other words, his literary preoccupation was no mere superficial depiction of what contemporary life was for him, but rather was an in-depth exploration of the human person's highest aspirations and hopes as well as his deepest and most disturbing pains and fears.<sup>72</sup> Panichas (2005) tells us that Dostoevsky's literary world is one where his characters "confront each other's broken souls" (p. 11). My argument is that the writer is in essence confronting his own broken soul. This is essentially, then, what makes Dostoevsky one of the first great existential writers, one who wrote of his lived experience from the Christian perspective as a Russian Orthodox believer. In an early letter to his brother Mikhail, who was one year his senior, he wrote the following rather idealistic and romantic thoughts about his future as a writer, yet they are shot through with an amazing depth of spiritual vision for a youthful army cadet of a mere seventeen years:

My soul is not subject to my former violent upsets. All is calm within it, as in the heart of a man who has harboured a deep mystery to learn "what life and man means" — I am reasonably successful at this; I can study characters from the writers with whom the best part of my life is passed in joy and freedom; I can say no more about myself. I am sure of myself. Man is a mystery. The mystery must be solved, and if you spend your whole life trying to solve it, then don't say you have wasted your time; I am preoccupied with this mystery because I wish to be a man (quoted in Freeborn 2003, p. 19).<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Berdyaev (2009) asserts that the question of man does not torture Tolstoy, only the question of God, while for Dostoevsky the question of God is always connected with the question of man. "Tolstoy is more the theologian, than is Dostoevsky" (p. 198). In this regard, we could say that Dostoevsky is more a philosopher than a theologian, and in that sense most definitely a Christian existentialist writer.

<sup>73</sup> The Integrative Therapist Patrick Nolan (1995) speaks of his clients or patients as being "essentially a mystery and no model of therapy can adequately capture this mystery. I assume that the human being is a psychosomatic unity with both an instinctual and a spiritual nature" (p. 270). Nolan founded The Irish Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy (IIIP) in 1990 and is still (as of December 2018) its director.

These passionate words appear in a letter the youthful Dostoevsky wrote to his brother Mikhail that also mentioned the effects the death of his father had on the young writer, and in connection with that, Frank (2010) comments perceptibly that nothing could be as powerful as the death of one's father to drive home "so intimately and starkly the enigma of human life... It was this enigma that he was to spend the rest of his life trying to solve" (p. 50). In short, Dostoevsky had encountered early in his life in the untimely deaths of both his mother and father the stark reality of Yalom's first ultimate concern. It is, of course, for every individual reader to determine how successful the author was in achieving these youthful desires, but one thing is certain, and that is, that Dostoevsky produced an oeuvre that encompassed an amazingly wide range of human attitudes, indeed a body of work that embraced the whole gamut of human experiences from the most saintly and pure to the most pathological and criminal — from the most sublime emotional experiences to the most perversely evil. This broad approach to humanity is paralleled in the context of religious belief by the fact that he scaled the heights of the most sublime faith in a loving God and plumbed the depths of the angriest atheism in his work. While Dostoevsky could fairly be taken to task for being very conservative and reactionary in his later life, especially in his journalistic articles and for nailing his own convictions and prejudices to the mast, as it were, one could never criticise him for not presenting the many different and opposing views of life in the wide spectrum of characters he ably describes in his novels.

At the age of 28, he was arrested for his involvement in an underground society that espoused socialist and utopian aspirations <sup>74</sup> — ideals that appealed to the young

---

<sup>74</sup> This underground society was called the Petrashevsky Circle. It was mainly a Russian literary discussion group of progressive-minded intellectuals in St. Petersburg in the 1840s, though it did have a more revolutionary wing to which Dostoevsky did not belong. As its name would suggest, it was organized by Mikhail Petrashevsky, a follower of the French Utopian Socialist, Charles Fourier.

man as Dostoevsky was always a visionary. Before he was sentenced, he had to spend eight months in solitary confinement in the Peter and Paul fortress in St Petersburg. During this time, he was given a show trial and was finally sentenced to death. With his co-conspirators, the young writer underwent a mock execution, but fortunately their sentence was commuted to imprisonment in Siberia at the very last minute before the order to fire at the hooded prisoners was delivered. Such an experience would be enough to unhinge the strongest of us. Indeed, one of his co-accused went permanently insane.<sup>75</sup> For Dostoevsky, that close encounter with death was a profound experience from which he learnt to value the sheer giftedness of his life and the wonder of existence. In other words, through this near brush with death he learnt to value life. In this sense, the existential encounter with mortality can have a therapeutic effect insofar as one becomes more appreciative of the sheer gift or grace life really is. Furthermore, this young impressionable writer served four years of imprisonment in what were unspeakable conditions in a labour camp or *katorga* outside a town called Omsk in Siberia where all prisoners were always shackled, both hands and feet, and were condemned to work in the extremes of cold and heat without any proper protection.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Dostoevsky had to pass a further five years of enforced military service after he had left prison, though he did earn a commission nearing the end of that period before he could return to St Petersburg in 1859.

---

<sup>75</sup> Frank (2010) reports the shocking effects of this mock execution thus: “One of them, Grigoryev, was as white as a sheet, all the blood having drained from his face; he had already shown signs of mental derangement in prison, and the mock execution ceremony finished him off entirely... and he remained a helpless mental invalid for the rest of his days” (p. 179).

<sup>76</sup> *Katorga* was a system of penal labour in the Russian Empire that continued even when the Soviet Union came into being. In this system prisoners were sent to remote penal colonies mainly in vast uninhabited areas such as those of Siberia and the Russian Far East where voluntary settlers and workers were never available in sufficient numbers to carry out work deemed necessary by the state. The prisoners had to perform forced labour under harsh conditions (severe punishments were given at whim) with no protection from the vagaries of the weather. Thubron (2000) describes Omsk city today and the remnants of the *katorga* in which Dostoevsky was incarcerated and notes that the governor’s house still remains and is now the Dostoevsky Museum (see pp. 50 — 55).

Russia is a vast territory and it is hard for us readers in the West to get our mind around the fact that the distance from Moscow to Omsk is 2,732 km and that of St Petersburg to Omsk is 3,325 km.<sup>77</sup> I mention this vastness of landscape to highlight a pertinent observation by Nabokov (1983) on Dostoevsky's sense of landscape: "You will notice that the natural background and all things relevant to the perception of the senses hardly exist. What landscape there is, is a landscape of ideas, a moral landscape" (p. 104). This dissertation is, in part, a survey of that amazing "moral landscape," redolent with many controversial and opposing ideas which is at once inspired by a spirituality refracted through the vastness of the physical landscape. I write about a spiritual foundation of Existential Psychotherapy, and indeed of life itself, and in so doing, with O'Donohue (2015) imply that the outer landscape in its vastness and mystery is mirrored in our own inner (spiritual) landscape (p. 6 and *passim*). I will return to this spiritual theme in chapters five and six.

While in prison, Dostoevsky experienced his first major episodes of epilepsy, a disease that would torment him for the rest of his life. It is also significant that while he failed to mention this malady to his first wife Maria Dmitriyevna Isaeva, he would succumb to a bad seizure on his wedding night in 1857.<sup>78</sup> That experience would repeat itself on the night of his second marriage some ten years later to Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, but this time he suffered two separate attacks.

Fyodor was a workaholic who founded and ran several magazines with his brother Mikhail, engaged in journalistic work while also authoring his many novels and stories.

---

<sup>77</sup> The travel writer, Thubron (2000) notes of Siberia that if it alone were detached from Russia "it would remain by far the largest country on earth" (p. 4). It is no wonder that the German Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt was to remark of Hitler's onslaught on Stalin that "the vastness of Russia devours us." (Hughes & Man, 2002, p. 127)

<sup>78</sup> Maria Dmitriyevna died of consumption in 1864.

Mikhail died young and Dostoevsky, with customary concern and compassion for those he loved, took on all his brother's debts and continued to support the latter's family into adulthood. Furthermore, he lost his first daughter with Anna, named Sonya, to pneumonia three months after her birth and this sorrow was added to by the loss of his son Alexey (Alyosha) at three years of age to epilepsy. Dostoevsky was riven with sorrow and guilt especially by the latter's death as he blamed himself for his son's dreadful end insofar as he believed that the little fellow had inherited the disease from him. To add further to his woes, he was for a period of his life cursed with the addiction of gambling and had lost many thousands of roubles at the gambling tables of European cities to which he had fled to escape his creditors in Russia. Therefore, these traumatic experiences, coupled with his earlier experiences as a young boy raised in the lodgings of a hospital for the poor, would have profoundly affected any human being, never mind a writer of the sensibility of Dostoevsky. It was from this crucible of suffering that the young author was to fashion a well-formed and determined Self, bruised, and battered, yes, but never fully crushed to paraphrase the words of St Paul (2 Cor 4:8). Moreover, his work, and indeed his personal status as a hero for the Russian people is still recalled today.<sup>79</sup>

There are other ways of saying what Strakhov puts rather poetically above about Dostoevsky's motivations as a writer and one of them would be to state that he was the first great novelist who sought to describe humanity from a deep psychological perspective. Morrison (2005) praises him for his "psychological penetration into the darkest recesses of the human heart together with his unsurpassed moments of illumination."<sup>80</sup> Another commentator, Walter Kaufman (2004) expresses this very

---

<sup>79</sup> See Jones (2009), pp. 1, 7 and 68 and Thubron (2000), pp. 51 and 54.

<sup>80</sup> See <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fyodor-Dostoyevsky>, accessed 22/01/2018.

point in another illuminating way, namely that this great nineteenth century Russian novelist highlighted “a new.... self-preoccupation,” a previously “unheard song of songs on individuality.... wretched and revolting, and yet for all its misery, the highest good” (p. 12). While René Wellek (1980) praises the Russian critic Bakhtin’s appreciation for the dramatic nature of Dostoevsky’s novels, the sense of conflict that arose therefrom and the author’s power of empathy with his multitude of characters over some forty years of writing, he states clearly that Bakhtin is “simply wrong if he pushes this view so far as to deny the authorial voice of Dostoevsky, his personal angle of vision” (p. 32). This latter Russian critic had argued that there were many distinct voices working in Dostoevsky’s oeuvre where “*a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices,*” with “*a plurality of consciousnesses.... combine*” (author’s own italics), (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). However, on balance, I must agree with Williams (2008) that it is important that we do not engage in a simple “reading-off from the text of ‘what Dostoevsky thought’” (p. 3) as if we can have a one-to-one correspondence between text and the author’s life. The Girardian prong of my double hermeneutic, of course, avoids such a gross misreading.

I could re-cast my argumentation thus far in this biographical account in terms of my present research by saying that Dostoevsky was engaged in storying the Self from as many psychological perspectives as he could while he sought to understand all the wide range of characters he would meet in the course of his eventful life. However, it is worth reflecting on the fact that such psychological insight and the parallel sympathy for the importance of individuality came at considerable personal cost.

To conclude these biographical remarks, I wish to stress again that my argument in these pages is that Dostoevsky storied himself through his texts not alone in an individual way but in a universal manner which is a project as relevant today as it was

in nineteenth century Russia. In tracing the novelist's story on the path to identity through the medium of his written work, I will employ the personal power of story, which is such a distinctive feature of Dostoevsky's life and work and indicate where it engages with any of Yalom's four ultimate concerns. Furthermore, I will highlight where Girard's theory of triangular desire helps elucidate what I am calling the therapeutics of the text by revealing the dynamic unity of author and authored, novelist and text in the Russian author's writing. These conflicts, as reflected in Dostoevsky's novels, therefore, portray and provide an experiential background to the human predicament as comprehensive as any novel, or indeed prose work, we may read in the twenty-first century. Again, to conclude this biographical section, Berdyaev provides us with an appropriate insight into the author's novelistic vision with regard to how his life is reflected in his work: "All the heroes of Dostoevsky" — are actually himself, the different sides of his particular spirit."<sup>81</sup>

### 3.3 The Human Condition: Triangular Desire and Core Conflicts

Shakespeare grasped the human condition very well indeed, when in sonnet 29 he summed up our abiding desirous state of being as: "Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, // Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,"// "Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope, // With what I most enjoy contented least;"// In so doing he essentially captures what René Girard means by triangular desire as a basic imitative feature of the Self. I will describe in the coming chapters the unconscious triangular desires of Dostoevsky's protagonists and I will indicate how they grapple with one or other of the four core conflicts as outlined in detail by Yalom.

---

<sup>81</sup> "The Revelation about Man in the Creativity of Dostoevsky", on-line article: Retrieved from: [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1918\\_294.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1918_294.html) accessed 05/01/2021.

The triangular desires we are all heir to, akin to the four core conflicts described in detail in the first chapter, endure in all our lives and leave us in a conflicted state at times of pressure and stress. In their complexity, and in our conflicted state, I argue, they carry the trauma and pain to which all human life is heir. In a recent article, Kearney (2016) stresses the ambiguous role of the Arts in dealing with such pain and trauma by noting that while the creative works of literature or drama may through catharsis bring about some healing they never offer a full or total cure to trauma: “It is in the telling of it (the story) that there is some healing, never full cure... This is narrative as catharsis, but not narrative catharsis understood as closure or completion. Rather it is narrative as impossible story, storytelling that forever fails to cure trauma but never fails to heal it” (p. 81). The Arts in all their forms, therefore, help to purge our wounds but the memories and the scars always remain.

There is a further paradox highlighted by Kearney in this same essay, namely that the traumas we may experience in our lives are at once unutterable or “unsayable,” as he puts it, while for their healing, they demand some form of expression. In sum, the illusions of romantic cure or saving miracle in a magical text are shattered in all good literature (pp. 87 — 90). Both “text” and “talk” may and often do help in healing our wounds, but never in altogether curing the inevitable suffering and pain associated with our existential condition in our finite world.

The literary effort of Dostoevsky, as I shall explore in this dissertation, never offers easy answers to life’s hard questions nor does it reduce the complexity of life in all its vicissitudes to superficial conclusions by offering neat stories with simple endings. In this respect Dostoevsky’s work, as one of the first modern existential writers, chimes well with Kearney’s notion of narrative, namely that literature dealing with human issues needs “open narratives that never end, rather than closed narratives

that presume to wish away wounds rather than working through scars. Trauma narratives are, by their very nature, truncated, gapped, fractured, and inconclusive. They may be great stories, but they can never offer terminal solutions. There are no total cures” (pp. 87 — 90). Mindful of this statement as a sobering guide, I now turn to two of Dostoevsky’s novels to trace what the title of this chapter terms the fragmented or conflicted Self. It will show where the Russian author engages with what Yalom calls the four ultimate concerns of life through his protagonists and how Girard helps us to further diagnose this engagement in therapeutic form. Again, these core conflicts along with their accompanying unconscious desires, in Williams’ (2008) words, are expressed in a text that “*consciously* writes out of the to and fro of dialogue, always alerting us to the dangers of staying with or believing uncritically what we have just heard” (author’s italics) (p. 3). In other words, we are engaging with an author and a text that remain fundamentally open.

### 3.4 The Fragmented Self in *The Double* (1846)

Dostoevsky wrote *The Double* in 1846 when he was only 24 years old and it was his second novel. For a young man he shows amazing insight into the psychological make-up of the human being as he portrays the mental breakdown or disintegration of the protagonist. It is a very modern story to the extent that modernity and post-modernity are periods that show much fragmentation culturally and, indeed, individually.<sup>82</sup> This section explores the concept of Self, strangely but appropriately, in terms of its disintegration or fragmentation as found in Dostoevsky's early short novel

---

<sup>82</sup> Taylor (2010), after Weber, speaks of the ensuing “disenchantment” that occurs with such fragmentation which heralds “the dissipation of our sense of the cosmos as a meaningful order,” which has helped to obscure, if not destroy, “the horizons in which people previously lived their spiritual lives” (p. 17).

*The Double*.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the hero of this novel presents himself to his doctor at the beginning of the novel in search of some help yet fails to follow his advice.

*The Double* is a novella that was first published on January 30, 1846, in a contemporary Russian journal called *Fatherland Notes*. It tells the story of the eventual mental breakdown of a minor government official which is recounted in a well-paced and gripping fashion and easily captures the reader's imagination from the very beginning. Jessie Coulson, the translator of the edition used here puts it succinctly:

The 'Gothic' subject of a man haunted or possessed by his exact double must have been conventional enough at the time. It might have cropped up in the work of Gogol as one of the tales of the still popular Hoffmann.... (Dostoyevsky, 1976, pp. 7 — 8).

The Gothic genre, however, lies outside the context and intention of the present study while the psychological level lies very much within its remit. The story is as follows: *The Double* revolves around a government clerk named Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin who is of an extremely nervous disposition, exceedingly hesitant and almost unable to make decisions until finally forced to do so by pure necessity at the moment of crisis. Such inability or reluctance to make decisions is one symptom of an individual's fear of the responsibilities that go along with freedom. In this sense, Mr Golyadkin is encountering Yalom's second core conflict concerning our liberty. This man is a total misfit who is obsessed with doing the right thing if only he knew in the first place what the socially acceptable thing to do was. While attempting to assert himself so ineffectually, he repeatedly encounters someone who is his exact double in

---

<sup>83</sup> We might remind ourselves at this juncture that often the psychotherapist, and especially one rooted in an existential approach, meets clients who find that their sense of Self is too diffuse, too scattered, often fractured and they are seeking healing of that split. Here the therapist will see his/her role as accompanying those persons on the path to healing by supporting them in their brokenness and by listening, elucidating, and helping the clients find possible avenues to healing the Self. This process often lasts many months, if not several years depending on the seriousness of the fracture.

appearance but who is more confident, aggressive, and extroverted — all characteristics that are the polar opposites to those of the nervous, highly strung, laughable, and hesitant “pushover” hero or, more correctly, anti-hero. In the novella, Dostoevsky names Golyadkin Senior as the original anti-hero, whom he sarcastically calls “our hero” again and again while Golyadkin Junior is his doppelganger or double but, in the mind of Golyadkin Senior, this second man is the real hero or protagonist he really wants to be. Furthermore, this second character always seems to provoke him because he outshines him in every way. In Girardian terms Mr Golyadkin Junior is the anti-hero’s internal mediator, or the model of the perfect person he wants to be. Another layer of meaning is added when we bear in mind the fact that the Russian name “Golyadkin” means the “naked one.” One senses in such a naming of the hero an attempt either to get at the “real” person under the outward appearances of the clothes that might indicate rank or station or public identity or even, the contrary intention of stripping the character down to the plight of a naked entity who has no identifying characteristics that would give him a fulsome selfhood.<sup>84</sup> Golyadkin’s existential crisis is presented to us in such an in-depth and insightful fashion that one is left in no doubt, after employing the double hermeneutic described in the last chapter, that Dostoevsky had plumbed these same depths of angst and similar conflicts himself.

---

<sup>84</sup> Here I am reminded of the evil actions of the Nazi concentration camp guards during the Second World War in stripping their prisoners naked and throwing them any old rags and in so doing stripping them of any signs of personhood. Mr Golyadkin, the naked one, will no doubt be stripped of his clothes and offered other clothing more suitable to a psychiatric hospital in Russia in the early to middle nineteenth century. There he will be stripped, as well, of all his roles in life. “Goly” in Russian means “naked” or “nude.” Irwin Weil, a scholar of Russian literature and the work of Dostoevsky emphasises the importance of this much overlooked fact in a recent lecture: See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayh-ehvFVfU> Accessed 20/10/2019.

The author informs us that Golyadkin is a titular councillor, who is ranked nine in the official table of ranks, set out by Russian law under Peter the Great in 1722.<sup>85</sup> As the immediately higher rank of eight led to hereditary nobility, there is, therefore, reason why he chose rank nine for his anti-hero because that position is symbolic of a low-level bureaucrat still struggling to succeed and he would have been under considerable pressure to move up a rung on the ladder in society. Early in the novella, Mr. Golyadkin has hired a carriage and has insisted that his servant Petrushka dress in livery as befits the servant of a nobler class of man. He has, after much deliberation decided to take the carriage first to go to his doctor's surgery. However, on his meandering journey there he meets his immediate superior Andrey Philippovich, and Mr Golyadkin is immediately gripped with a severe identity crisis. He is not so sure how he should act at all. As is now common parlance in cognitive behaviour therapy and in general psychotherapy circles not quite 200 years later, one could say that the "negative tapes"<sup>86</sup> that Mr Golyadkin plays over and over in his head exhibit a severe low self-image and a crisis in his sense of identity or perhaps we might simply say he is an obsessive type. It is worthwhile here to report in full the fleeting and unstable thoughts that shoot through his mind:

Mr Golyadkin, seeing that Andrey Philippovich had recognised him beyond doubt... thinks: 'Ought I to bow? Should I speak to him or not? Ought I to acknowledge our acquaintance?' our hero wondered in indescribable anguish. 'Or shall I pretend it's not me but someone else strikingly like me and look as if nothing's the matter?'" said Mr Golyadkin raising his hat to

---

<sup>85</sup> See Segrillo, A (2016): A First Complete Translation into English of Peter the Great's Original Table of Ranks. Retrieved from <http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/arttableofrankslea.pdf>, accessed 20/09/2018.

<sup>86</sup> These "tapes" are generally described as NATs or negative automatic thoughts in the literature, and as the name implies, they describe "thoughts that pop into our minds which are unhelpful or negative in content." (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 87). Because they are automatic, we do not have to deliberately call them to mind as they arise unbidden.

him and not taking his eyes off him.... ‘It’s quite alright; this is not me at all, Andrey Philippovich, it’s not me at all, not me and that’s all about it.’ (Dostoyevsky, 1976, p. 132)

That rather sad phrase that Mr Golyadkin repeats here like a chorus or mantra — “not me at all” — sums up the anti-hero whose sense of Self is totally dispersed and disintegrated into silly little whimsical thoughts and actions, or, in other words is fragmented. Also, it is worth pointing to a phrase, very appropriate to existentialism, in the above quotation that describes how “our hero” is feeling, viz., “indescribable anguish.”

We learn almost immediately that his doctor doubts his sanity and tells him that his behaviour is dangerously antisocial. Again, we might point out that here Mr Golyadkin is encountering the individual’s core conflict with existential isolation. The medic prescribes “cheerful company” as the remedy (p. 135) and indeed highly recommends that Mr Golyadkin get about more and to even take a drink.

One evening, when he gets home, he must fight his way up the “dark, damp and dirty stairway” (p. 172) that was cluttered with all the junk and detritus of his fellow tenants. Uncannily, he finds that his double is already there in his apartment before him and this frightens him to the core of his being (p. 173). The next night Golyadkin has a series of nightmares. They begin with his enjoying great popularity until his double appears in these disturbed dreams and usurps all the attention. These nightmares are really disturbing to “our hero’s” frame of mind. In one of those dreadful nightmares there were in fact multiple Golyadkins — enough to disturb even the most balanced of individuals. Again here, we have the idea — often met in much contemporary literature — of the existence of multiple selves. Indeed, the underlying theme of the nightmares dealt with the question as to which one of the Mr Golyadkins was in fact the real one

and “our hero” feels tormented in the extreme.<sup>87</sup> A sense of being tormented is one of the deep feelings associated with mental ill-health and it is often one of the symptoms of depression in its several manifestations and of schizophrenia, with its psychotic episodes where paranoid delusions abound — and indeed, very often we refer to a mentally troubled person as a “tormented soul.”

Many of the passages from *The Double* describing Mr Golyadkin’s breakdown could be compared with descriptions of depression given in modern books on the subject such as: Milligan, S. & Clare, A. (1994), Priest, R. (1996), Rowe, D. (1996) and Wolpert. L. (1999) or more recently Solomon, A. (2016) and Barry, H. (2017). Again, one could argue quite convincingly that depression would have been comorbid with the epilepsy from which Fyodor Dostoevsky suffered severely. Those who have experienced what is generally described as a “nervous breakdown” or any bouts of major mental ill-health will agree that Dostoevsky must have had some first-hand experience of depression because he writes so convincingly about mental illness. Hingley (1978) alludes to the fact that his second wife, shortly after their marriage, had to hold Fyodor’s head during a singularly bad fit and that she had to constantly comfort him “through the week of bad depression that followed in conformity with the normal pattern of his affliction” (p. 125). In one sense, then, Dostoevsky’s second novel may be superficially derivative as the nightmarish story of a man possessed by his exact double — even at one stage in the novel hallucinating about many other doubles.

---

<sup>87</sup> It is interesting here to note that some modern authors contend that there are multiple selves at work within us — see D. Lester (2015) where he argues for “a multiple-self theory of the mind” (p. 1 ff. and *passim*). A similar point is made by R. Carter (2008) where she argues similarly: “the evidence for human plurality (of self) is all around us and always has been” (p 4). It must be pointed out here that David Lester and Rita Carter remain in the minority with respect to this theory. Most scholars and therapists would see multiplicity as pointing to fracture of a unity which should be there in the Self which is innately holistic. They would argue that therapy sets out to re-establish that unity. Dr David Spiegel (2008) states that people diagnosed with “multiple personality disorder,” more correctly termed Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), do not have more than one personality, “but rather have less than one — a fragmentation of Self rather than a proliferation of selves” (p. 27).

However, the further question can be asked as to whether the double really is a double or whether he is simply another more disturbed aspect of his own nature? It is this uncertainty, highlighted by this question, which gives the ultimate horror to *The Double* as the “hero” or “anti-hero” is eventually carried off, accompanied by his doctor, to the local asylum. This reading of the novella presents us with one of the first classic studies of mental breakdown in novel form, of an individual struggling to keep himself from crumbling into sheer fragments with no clear unity of Self. Some commentators maintain (Frank, 2012) that Mr. Golyadkin reflects what the critic Belinsky, Dostoevsky’s initial mentor, believed, that the author was simply portraying “a case of paranoia and mental breakdown with no larger significance than that of a case history” (p. 102). Later in the same work Frank underlines the point that Dostoevsky was also making a deliberate point about “overt social pressure” (p. 301), but the exact diagnosis need not detain us here as, for the purpose of this dissertation, the more common and general terms “mental illness” and “mental breakdown” will suffice to describe this extra-literary phenomenon from the optic of the shared space of literature and psychotherapy. *The Double* portrays the failure of its protagonist in achieving a stable self-identity, or to put it more simply still, it manifests succinctly the disintegration of the hero’s Self. In Girardian terminology, outlined in detail in chapter two, we might argue that Mr Golyadkin Junior is the “internal mediator,” for Mr Golyadkin Senior of all his romantic desires for “originality” in upward mobility and promotion to the next grade in the Russian Civil Service. Indeed, an “internal mediator” for Girard is very much open to severe inner conflict, the kind we get in this novella. Here we have a good illustration of the French philosopher’s thesis that the author is the real protagonist of the work of fiction and the evidence given by Hingley, R. (1978) substantiates this contention where he argues that Dostoevsky during the period of writing this novella

experienced a duality akin to that of Mr Golyadkin by referring to himself as the “real Golyadkin” and goes on to argue that the author experienced this doubling of Self in real life: “Golyadkin Senior was the miserable creature Dostoevsky saw himself to be in bouts of depression, whereas Golyadkin Junior was the triumphant dispenser of insults which part of Dostoevsky was determined to become” (p. 51). In short, here we have evidence of the Russian author’s early grappling in his work with the fragmentation of Self. Again, I will argue in this dissertation that such fragmentation, and indeed the awareness of that condition, is a necessary precondition of its eventual healing and indeed that it provides the initial spark that ignites its author’s spiritual quest for healing or wholeness.

One of Dostoevsky’s severest Russian critics, Nabokov (1983) maintained that *The Double* is the author’s greatest work, even though clearly critics would strongly disagree as would Dostoevsky himself (p. 100). R.D. Laing (1990) in his classic study of schizophrenia speaks about the descent of the so-called “mad person” into a state of “chaotic non-entity,” the nearest equivalent to a living hell one should imagine, and of the medical profession’s duty to help prevent such a descent, and he continues:

In many schizophrenics, the self-body split remains the basic one. However, when the centre fails to hold, neither self-experience nor body-experience can retain identity, integrity, cohesiveness or vitality, and the individual becomes precipitated into a condition the end result of which we suggested could best be described as a state of ‘chaotic nonentity’ (p. 162).

Taylor (2010) clearly echoes these sentiments where he states that for us “moderns” that the pressure is potentially so immense and inescapable that “we may crack under it... the fear is of a terrifying emptiness, a kind of vertigo, or even a fracturing of our world and body-space” (p. 18). In short, we can assert that Mr Golyadkin, at the end of this novella, has descended into such a “chaotic nonentity”

where this described “terrifying emptiness” abounds. The only way out of such an abyss of emptiness or chasm of personal chaos would be through an awareness of one’s plight helped both by the psychopharmaceutical intervention of the medical profession coupled with the support of on-going psychotherapy.

### 3.5 The Fragmented Self in *The House of the Dead* (1861)

It is a widely accepted principle of existential psychotherapy that a state of wholeness or integration cannot be reached except by acknowledging one’s fragmentation and lack of integration in the first place. Once again in this novel, Dostoevsky faces the fragmentation of Self in one of his most autobiographical works which is based on his own experience of incarceration in a prison in Siberia. The plot of this novel presents the reader with a central hero, Aleksander Petrovich Goryanchikov, who after the initial narrator has introduced him, becomes the main storyteller. Goryanchikov has been sentenced to deportation to a katorga prison in the icy wastes of Siberia and has been sentenced to ten years of hard labour for murdering his wife. As a person of noble birth, his life in prison is particularly hard for him since practically all his fellow prisoners belong to the peasantry or what was known in nineteenth-century Russia as the serf class. This novel was written between 1860 and 1862, shortly after Dostoevsky’s return to Russia proper after his initial incarceration and subsequent enforced exile in Siberia. We are, therefore, presented very much with the fragmented Self of a noble man cast among his inferiors, a man who must struggle to retain the vestiges of his former nobility, and even the traces of human dignity, and this was exactly the position in which Dostoevsky had found himself when he was imprisoned at Omsk. The story presents us with the experiences of Goryanchikov not in any chronological fashion, but rather in a thematic form. This novel is Dostoevsky’s

most autobiographical work, along with *The Gambler*, and is described widely as being at least semi-autobiographical<sup>88</sup> since it follows so swiftly on the heels of his own imprisonment in such a *katorga* prison. Writing to the critic N.N. Strakhov in 1863 Dostoevsky stressed the fact that this novel described one of the two hellish enslavements he had to endure in his life, the other being his addiction to gambling.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the correspondence between the fictitious narrator and the real writer is far stronger than in his other novels.

The city of Omsk became a major centre for enforced exile in nineteenth century Russia. From 1850 to 1854 Dostoevsky served his sentence in an Omsk *katorga* prison and he was to relate his impressions of that city in an 1854 letter to his brother Mikhail:

Omsk is a hateful hole. There is hardly a tree here. In summer — heat and winds that bring sandstorms; in winter — snowstorms. I have scarcely seen anything of the country round. The place is dirty, almost exclusively inhabited by military, and dissolute to the last degree. I mean the common people. If I hadn't discovered some human beings here, I should have gone utterly to the dogs (quoted in Eliasberg, A. & Colburn Mayne, E., 1917, p. 59).

His Romanticism was now to be seasoned with a harsh realism, a realism that led him to declare that the novels he wrote were steeped in a “fantastic realism,”<sup>90</sup> that is, that while they might depict with gory detail what really happens in life, they also raised

---

<sup>88</sup> Briggs (2010) notes that, with *The Gambler*, this prison novel is “deeply autobiographical” and shows the writer at an “important turning point in his life” (p. xii). Dostoevsky’s novel about a prisoner’s life in Siberia continued a Russian tradition of prison camp literature that lasted into the twentieth century with Solzhenitsyn. (See Solzhenitsyn, A (2000) *One Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich*. Further, his fellow novelist Leo Tolstoy declared that *House of the Dead* was this author’s best work (See <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fyodor-Dostoyevsky>, accessed 22/04/2019)

<sup>89</sup> See Briggs (2010) p. xxi.

<sup>90</sup> Frank (2010) quotes a letter of Dostoevsky’s where he describes his realism as fantastic because he argued that it was “more real” and “deeper” than that of those who criticised him for his lack of realism. His critics’ realism, he argued, was shallower. His “more real” realism plumbed his moral-spiritual depths and that of his readers and suggested a mystical dimension to life (p. 575).

such incidents to a mysterious or, extraordinary, fantastic, or even mystical or supernatural level at one and the same time.

The narrator tells us that he has found the manuscripts of the central character Alexander Goryanchikov of *The House of the Dead* after he has died and that the book is a selection from those writings. There were some 250 inmates in the *katorga* prison that comprised “murderers by mischance and men who were murderers by trade, brigands and brigand chiefs. There were simple thieves, and tramps who were pickpockets or burglars.” (Dostoevsky, 2010, p. 11). There was a drunken and sadistic major in charge of the prison and he had to be avoided at all costs because of his volatile temper when he would lash out indiscriminately at any inmate. One of the most deeply tormenting experiences he shares with his readers is the fact that during those ten years he could never get a single moment alone because quite simply privacy did not exist there. Also, practically all prisoners refused to talk about their former lives or crimes unless they were very drunk when, for example, one inmate spoke of how he had murdered a small boy of five years (p. 12). He recounts that he has heard stories of the most gruesome crimes and of “the most unnatural actions” (p. 16) from the other prisoners over his ten years incarcerated in the *katorga*, including the story of a parricide, a theme Dostoevsky would return to in his last great novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). It is patently obvious that Dostoevsky authors this book with a sense of justice in mind as his narrator becomes upset at the injustice of similarly harsh sentences delivered to prisoners for murders of far different levels of seriousness and culpability, what he calls “the inequality of punishment for the same crime” (p. 51) and gives an example of murder in self-defence versus the unprovoked murder of a total innocent which received practically the same sentences of hard labour.

What inmate would not end up in a fragmented state of mind and body given the daily grind of enforced labour in all kinds of weather, having to share a common bed with fellow prisoners, suffer the indignity of complete lack of privacy and endure the restriction of having to wear fetters on hands and feet for the duration of their incarceration? These inmates, whom the narrator calls “lost creatures” (p. 7), had at times to endure excruciating punishments for misdemeanours at the whim of their captors. One such punishment, called “walking down Green Street”<sup>91</sup> (p. 13) by the inmates is described in detail and it is arguable that Dostoevsky may have been on the receiving end<sup>92</sup> once in his time in the *katorga*: “But the fearful procession begins; he [the one to be tortured] is led along; the drum begins to boom; the sticks begin flying... ‘Whack him! Flay him! Scorch him! Lay it on him! Harder! Harder! The rascal... and the soldiers hit as hard as they can, the poor wretch begins to scream...” (pp. 194 — 195). The prisoners would have unconsciously copied the desires of their captors whom they would have seen as idealising the dual reality of freedom and control, thereby becoming conflicted insofar as their captors become the internal mediators of their desires and they would have unconsciously derived pleasure from seeing their fellow inmates tortured and punished in this dreadful fashion.

Given these conditions what inmate would not consider the value of freedom, the second ultimate concern advanced by Yalom as one core conflict dealt with in existential psychotherapy. It is salutary and important to bear in mind at this juncture that the existential psychiatrist sees the core conflict of freedom as being linked with

---

<sup>91</sup> This torture was called “palki” meaning “sticks” where prisoners were forced to run the gauntlet between two lines of soldiers who were armed with sticks and who beat the condemned man as hard as they could. This was a favourite punishment under Czar Nicholas 1 who reigned from 1825 to 1855 during whose reign Dostoevsky was a prisoner in Siberia. See Dostoevsky (2010), p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> Frank (2010) does mention the fact that Major Krivtsov, the commandant of the *katorga*, had issued an order that Dostoevsky was to be punished by the lash for malingering but was saved by a visit to the prison of an army General who countermanded the order (p. 191)

dread or angst as the individual knows that he or she is ultimately responsible for their own being in the world, for their own choices and acts, and their consequences.<sup>93</sup> Dostoevsky, at the start of his creative life as a novelist, was a convinced romantic, alive to the inspiration of lofty ideals in literature and the arts and open to the influence of both the German and French Romantic movements and the powerful impact of Gothic tales.<sup>94</sup> However, that Romanticism was to be severely reined in by the bitter reality of the suffering he experienced and witnessed others enduring during his incarceration in the prison camp outside the city of Omsk in Siberia. My argument here, through the Girardian prong of my double hermeneutic, is that Dostoevsky is gradually disabusing his mind of negative mimetic desires by making them conscious through his writing. He thereby becomes a more authentic person and author who faces down the very lies his ego so much desires to tell.

Above all, the overriding message of *The House of the Dead* is that “more than anything else, it is the need for individual freedom that makes us human.”<sup>95</sup> In this graphic and reflective novel, which is singularly devoid of bitterness, Dostoevsky (2010) describes vividly the psychology at work in a prisoner’s mind as he contemplates

---

<sup>93</sup> This is essentially what Jean-Paul Sartre meant when he declared in an early lecture that as human beings, “We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.” (Jean-Paul Sartre 1946, “Existentialism is a Humanism” Lecture, 1946, available in full here: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>. Accessed 02/09/2018.) But the burning question that remains is whether humankind will be brave enough to take on that accountability. Can we dare to be truly ourselves in an authentic act of freedom? Can we dare story an authentic Self against the background of inevitable suffering and against the price that life requires of us: nothing less than taking full responsibility for our every choice and for our very being? This is a question that lies at the very heart of existential therapy.

<sup>94</sup> Frank (2010) writes insightfully about the influence of both these movements in Romanticism on the young Dostoevsky and points out that the German strand gave him a firm metaphysical base to his belief in the transcendent God while the French strand convinced him of the importance of the social implications of Christianity in compassion and love for others (pp. 51 — 60).

<sup>95</sup> Quoted at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fyodor-Dostoyevsky> accessed 29/04/2019.

his incarceration and lack of freedom and how that sense of freedom is basic to being human:

From the very first day of my life in prison, I began to dream of freedom. To calculate in a thousand different ways when my days in prison would be over became my favourite occupation. It was always in my mind, and I am sure it is the same with everyone who is deprived of freedom for a fixed period. I don't know whether the other convicts thought and calculated as I did, but the amazing audacity of their hopes impressed me from the beginning. The hopes of a prisoner deprived of freedom are utterly different from those of a man living a natural life. A free man hopes of course (for a change of luck, for instance, or the success of an undertaking), but he lives, he acts, he is caught up in the world of life. It is very different with the prisoner.... Every convict feels that he is, so to speak, not at home, but on a visit. He looks at twenty years as though they were two and is fully convinced that when he leaves prison at fifty-five, he will be as full of life and energy as he is now at thirty-five (p. 100).

The above quoted text could arguably be pointed to as a central one considering my argument in this dissertation that the creative works of Dostoevsky can provide ample examples of material that captures the existential dilemma of the modern human being. The concept of "home" is well known from everyday experience and plays a crucial role in all kinds of narratives about human life. We all deeply appreciate the comfort and security of being "at home" which is decidedly different to the idea of a "house" which is just a building. In fact, we make houses our homes by giving them our personal stamp, by imposing on them something of our own style, our own needs — of our very identity. Quite obviously, Goryanchikov is simply not "at home" in prison. In fact, he is estranged from his home in St Petersburg, and in consequence is estranged from his own self-identity. This experience is one referred to in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger as not being "at home." "To be a human being means to be on the

earth as a mortal. It means to dwell” (Heidegger 1971, p. 147). The safest place to dwell is “at home.” This adds a deep existential angst to the above sentence in the quoted passage: “Every convict feels that he is, so to speak, not at home, but on a visit.”

Furthermore, Dostoevsky (2010) is aware of the fact, and makes his readers sit up and reflect on it, that freedom is at base an existential conflict for all of us, not only for incarcerated individuals: “I may mention here... that our dreams and our long divorce from the reality made us think of freedom as somehow freer than real freedom, that is, than it actually is. The convicts had an exaggerated idea of real freedom” (p. 305). Too often, we in our youthful idealism can engage in such dreamy romantic notions, too, and not realise that real freedom is an interior state, a state of mind that can transcend almost any bondage or suffering.<sup>96</sup>

While Mr Golyadkin was carted away to an asylum, Mr Goryanchikov was found dead in his rented room, having spent some months in a very agitated state after being released at last from prison. In the introduction the narrator tells us Goryanchikov was a man of “irreproachably moral life... dreadfully unsociable and avoided everyone” (p. 4) and when the narrator once went to his lodgings, he chanced to surprise the loner so much that he was “utterly disconcerted, jumped up from the chair and gazed open-eyed at me.” Quite obviously he had been greatly affected by his incarceration. His landlady informs the narrator that in his final few months of life he scarcely did anything and was much agitated as he could “not open a book or take up a pen; but that he would walk up

---

<sup>96</sup> Viktor Frankl (2004) makes this important point in his seminal book, *Man's Search for Meaning* on survival and the strength of the human spirit to overcome any suffering we may encounter in life: “It is one of the basic tenets of logotherapy that man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in life. That is why man is even ready to suffer, on the condition, that his suffering has a meaning” (p. 117). Frankl is fond of quoting Nietzsche's statement that “He who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*” (see pp. 84, 88, 109). Even in the hellish suffering of Auschwitz concentration camp, Frankl lived his life believing that no matter what evil he encountered or experienced that his life had meaning: “I bear witness to the unexpected extent to which man is capable of defying and braving even the worst conditions conceivable” (p. 132). This, as well as luck, is surely one of the reasons he survived.

and down the room all night, brooding and would sometimes talk to himself” (pp. 6 — 7).

While much of this book springs from personal recollections, it is presented in a pseudo-fictional form. Briggs (2010) insightfully notes that we might expect Dostoevsky to have erupted in rage against the injustices, privations, and cruelties he experienced in prison but instead we find “a quasi-memoir that is remarkably controlled, detached and restrained.” He goes on to declare that the story “gains a good deal through its self-restraint” (pp. xviii — xix). Undoubtedly, buoyed up by his conversion experience during his mock execution that was such a close encounter with death, Dostoevsky had learnt to value the sheer giftedness of his life and the wonder of existence that would sustain him even in the hell hole at Omsk. In fact, he assured his brother Mikhail, before he left the Peter-and-Paul Fortress and set off for prison in Siberia that while his body may have been weak he had never before felt so spiritually strong: “Never before have I felt welling up in me such abundant and healthy reserves of spiritual life as I do now” (quoted in Frank, 2010, p.181). In short, while he would have to face much fragmentation and conflict, both physical and mental — indeed, he experienced his first epileptic fits in the katorga — he drew renewed strength from what can only be termed a deep spiritual conversion while blindfolded before the firing squad. Recalling a visit that he and the other prisoners had from some Decembrist wives who visited the prisoners before their departure for Siberia he spoke movingly in his diary of their gift of the New Testament. Of the sustaining power of that gift, he wrote: “It lay under my pillow for four years during penal servitude. I read it sometimes and read it to others. With it, I taught one convict to read”<sup>97</sup> (quoted *ibid.*,

---

<sup>97</sup> It is also salutary here to bear in mind that Dostoevsky describes how Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* kept his New Testament, a gift from his lover Sonya, under his pillow while incarcerated in his Siberian prison.

p. 187). In other words, here we have a pointer to what Dostoevsky would have believed to have been the spiritual foundation of his life which he would recount thoroughly in his later novels, especially *The Brothers Karamazov*. However, that personal integration could not have been achieved except through experiencing the crucible of suffering and fragmentation recounted in the two novels discussed above.

### 3.6 Conclusion: The Journey to Healing Begins

*The House of the Dead* is as we have seen not a thoroughly negative book, but rather one that can sometimes manifest the good side of life in the prison like the Christmas plays the convicts put on to entertain themselves. It also portrays the acts of certain decent souls who managed to survive in the very midst of all the filth and degradation that obtained in those prison conditions. One such person is the Daghestan Tatar, Aley whom he describes as a 22-year-old young man who “was able during his prison life to preserve such a gentle heart, to develop such strict honesty, such warm feelings and charming manners, and to escape growing coarse and depraved.” (Dostoevsky, 2010, p. 64) Dostoevsky’s own incarceration was a transformative experience that both provided harsh and moving occurrences that inspired and strengthened his survival instincts and matured his spiritual vision. It also provided much important material for his later novels particularly *Crime and Punishment*. The narrator discovers that even among the most debased criminals there can be strong and beautiful souls. His story is, finally, as I have explicated above, a profound meditation on freedom and a witness to the innate spiritual strength, courage and resilience that lies in all of us if we have the determination and perseverance to search for it. It also bears witness to Dostoevsky’s own strength of character, his native resilience and to his own spiritual transformation through his ability to persevere in extreme conditions of deprivation.

In conclusion, then, in this chapter I have described the fragmentation or fracture of the human being in two early works of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky. In so doing I have shown the tentative beginnings of Dostoevsky's "dialogue with himself." I have mapped out what I contend was his early grappling in his work with the fragmentation of Self. Such an experience of being shattered is essentially the result of an initial inability to cope with the core conflicts of the human condition outlined in chapter two. Not alone do the characters, (and also Dostoevsky by implication), engage with these core conflicts but also, they are enmeshed in the negative fragmentary side of what Girard calls mimetic desire. I have argued that every client comes to therapy in a state of fragmentation or in a conflicted state, that is, they present themselves to the therapist in a state of crisis, which is referred to as the "presenting problem". While there may be little hope of the healing of that fracture in selfhood described in *The Double* there are definite pointers to relief and assuagement in *The House of the Dead*. In fact, this second novel, while it pulls no punches with respect to the cruelties suffered by both the author and the inmates in prison, ends on a very hopeful note of their release at last: "Yes, with God's blessing! Freedom, new life, resurrection from the dead... What a glorious moment!" (p. 307). Furthermore, to my mind, Dostoevsky gives perhaps his best description of our native resilience had we but the courage to keep right on going when he states early in the novel: "What cannot man live through! Man is a creature that can get accustomed to anything, and I think that is the best definition of him" (p. 10). In short, I have shown by a close analysis of these two texts how necessary it is for the author or for any individual to face his fragmentation head on before discussing in detail the trajectory of his eventual healing and spiritual integration.

In my next chapter I am going to trace more fully what I have described above as pointers to the assuagement and eventual healing of the fractured Self, to a greater

revelation and integration of the storied Self of Dostoevsky and a growing sense of an awareness of the necessity for a spiritual foundation for that sense of personhood in the novels *Notes from Underground* (1864), and *Crime and Punishment* (1866).

# Chapter Four

## Storying the Self and the Therapeutic Presence of the Other

### 4.1 Introduction

In the last chapter I dealt with the acknowledgement of personal fragmentation and conflict and underscored the fact that such an awareness was the beginning of the journey to the integration or healing of the Self. In the novels I will deal with here, *Notes from Underground* (1864) and *Crime and Punishment* (1866), while there is still definite fragmentation and conflict, there is also the physical and spiritual presence of others who may offer intimate relations to the heroes of the works in question. The novels dealt with in the last chapter did not treat of such intimate presence and the growth and healing offered by such close relationships. In continuing my central argument by way of the Girardian prong of my double hermeneutic, outlined in chapter two, I contend that Dostoevsky is painstakingly continuing his “dialogue with himself” by describing the struggles and growth involved in the encounter with the healing presence of the Other. In short, then, I shall describe here in detail how Dostoevsky stories himself through much mental anguish with the help of the healing presence of two female characters (with Anna Snitkina as inspiration in the background) and how such heralds the beginning of his spiritual journey to self-acceptance, healing, and redemption.

### 4.2. The Possibility of Healing and Redemption

The two novels I intend to discuss in this chapter are *Notes from Underground* (1864) and *Crime and Punishment* (1866). In both these novels Dostoevsky introduces us to two interesting characters, both deeply alienated people — both from their own

selfhood and from others around them. The first is a novella that presents us with a nameless protagonist, called the Underground Man throughout, who is on the road to unity at some level, yet he remains a creature unable to make the final jump to facing up to the truth of his own self-worth and that of others. There is one glimmer of hope and healing offered to him in the person of Liza, who stands out, despite the small but significant role she plays at the end of this novella, as the only real and integrated person we encounter. She represents the healing presence of the other, albeit for a noticeably short time, if only our unnamed anti-hero had the courage to reach out and “open up” to her. Unfortunately, we know, since the stories recounted in the second part of the novel happened before the first section, that the so-called Underground Man did not exploit the glimmer of hope offered through a possible relationship with an authentic human being. The second is a long novel of great psychological depth that brings us into the mind of a murderer before, during and after committing his horrendous crime. It is further complicated by the fact that the author is so accomplished at presenting the perplexing nature of the character of the protagonist that the reader begins to empathise with him and like him. In this novel the possibility of healing turns into the probability of redemption achieved through the healing relationship, also with a woman, named Sonya who plays a far more significant role than does Liza in the novella. While from a Biblical/religious influence, Dostoevsky presents these two women as working prostitutes due to circumstances beyond their control, he does reveal them as being strong healing heroes possessed of a native integrity and authenticity. As the Russian author was a firm believer in the healing message of Jesus, he would not alone have admired their courage but would have had great compassion for these women and seen them as spiritual healers. Again, without

the intervention of strong women in his own life, like his second wife Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, he readily admitted that he would not have survived at all.<sup>98</sup>

#### 4.3 *Notes from Underground* (1864)

Written in the form of a diary, *Notes from Underground* presents us with a fascinating portrait of a miserable and alienated man filled with conflicting urges. Firstly, then, what does it mean to be such a subject, or such a conflicted individual? What does it mean to be a conscious being, at all? Lavine, (1984) argues that “existentialism says I am nothing else but my own conscious existence” (p. 330). In this regard, Dostoevsky introduced into both Russian and world literature this new sense of heightened inner awareness or this new preoccupation of the writer with a deepened sense of self-consciousness in his oeuvre, and most especially in his novella *Notes from Underground* (1864).<sup>99</sup> The nameless anti-hero of this novella is very much a man estranged or alienated, firstly, from himself, secondly from others and thirdly, from any source of meaning outside his own individual Self. Jessie Coulson describes this isolated or alienated character succinctly thus:

... a man turned in upon himself, a man of heightened awareness, whose sensitivities to slights drives him alternately to retreat into his corner, his underground, and to revenge himself for his humiliations by humiliating others. Dostoyevsky declared in his notebooks that he prided himself on

---

<sup>98</sup> Frank (2010) tells us: “... thanks to the sterling moral qualities and sturdy good sense of Anna Grigoryevna, the erratic and turbulent Dostoevsky would finally attain the relatively tranquil family existence he so much envied in others” (p. 509). From the outset, when she was first employed as his stenographer for *The Gambler*, she had managed to pacify a very agitated writer who had just suffered an epileptic fit a few days prior to their meeting and who was under considerable pressure from a ruthless publisher to finish the novel within a matter of some weeks. From the outset, there was a deep connection between them which resulted in their marriage within months.

<sup>99</sup> During the writing of *Notes* his first wife Maria Dmitrievna Isaeva died of TB — a fact that meant her corpse was on the table of their home for two days, as was then the funereal custom, for part of its composition.

having been the first to portray the “real man of the Russian majority” and lay bare his ugly and tragic aspect (Dostoyevsky 1976, p. 9).

The whole of the first part of this novella is in the form of a long monologue that is the philosophical manifesto of the man from the underground, which some critics argue is in the style of a parody.<sup>100</sup> Written in the form of a diary, it is a fascinating portrait of a miserable and alienated man filled with conflicting urges. The Underground Man is a former civil servant who embraces a nihilistic view of society, leading him to become irrational and very paranoid. In other words, he is conflicted in the sense of the dynamic interplay of Yalom’s four conflicts with existential isolation and meaninglessness to the fore.

The main issue for this creature from the underground world is that he has reached a point of “ennui” and “inactivity” that are central planks in later existentialist writings. Coupled with “angst” or anxiety, these two states of being would surely prevent anyone from doing anything worthwhile — hence this man’s inability to act or participate in any collective or community project. On the very first page, Dostoyevsky (1976), in the guise of the first-person narrator, leaves us in no doubt of the alienated and embittered condition of this “anti-hero” by launching straight into his anguished litany of complaints:

I am a sick man.... I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man. I think there is something wrong with my liver.... I am not having any treatment for it, and never have had, although I have a great respect for medicine and for doctors.... No, I refuse treatment out of spite. That is something you will probably not understand. I can’t of course explain who my spite is directed against in this matter (p. 15).

---

<sup>100</sup> See Harold Bloom (2005) where he argues: “Dostoyevsky, unlike Tolstoy, was a great parodist: it may even be said that satirical parody was the centre of Dostoevsky’s art. More even than powerful satire, absolute parody is a corrosive. Something in Dostoyevsky is always on the verge of parodying even his own religiosity, and his worship of authority” (p. 2).

Immediately, we are the confidante of this sick man who lures us irresistibly into his anguished mind. He goes on to stress that he has no intention of ever going to a dentist and would prefer to suffer the pain of his decaying teeth also out of spite. Yet that spite has a reason behind it, namely his freedom to choose or, in more philosophical terms, his liberty to exercise his fundamental right to free will. Even though this exercise of free will brings about actual suffering, which Freeborn (2003) labels “egoistic masochism,” it is a small price to pay for exercising one’s fundamental right as a human being (p. 51). Again, he is here experiencing the conflict of freedom versus responsibility as Yalom would judge it. This is pointedly an argument against Chernyshevsky’s<sup>101</sup> contention that all is determined and that there is no free will. The Underground Man is prepared to sacrifice his liver and his teeth, in short, his health and his very life in the service of this important basic principle of exercising his free will.

*Notes from Underground* is a powerful attack, then, on the utopian and socialist ideas of Dostoevsky's time as well as an examination of the artificiality and superficiality of society. The underground, in both the title of the book and in the description of the unnamed narrator, refers to this creature’s complete separation or estrangement from society. Here, in other words, there is powerfully sketched for us the first truly alienated man in world literature. As both Richard Peace (1992, p. 7) and Jessie Coulson (Dostoyevsky, 1976, p. 10) point out, the chief target of this novella was the Russian novelist Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s book *What is to be Done?* (1863) that postulates the eventual attainment by humankind of perfect virtue, success, and happiness by the pursuit of enlightened self-interest. Chernyshevsky saw his novel as

---

<sup>101</sup> Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky (1828 — 1889) was a Russian revolutionary democrat, materialist philosopher, critic, and socialist (seen by some as a utopian socialist). He was the leader of the revolutionary democratic movement of the 1860s and had an influence on Vladimir Lenin and Emma Goldman.

more than a mere story, but rather a “textbook of life” for the author’s young contemporaries. He was a revolutionary democrat, a materialist philosopher, a literary critic, a utopian socialist and an ardent atheist. Hence, it is also helpful to briefly list the contentions made by Chernyshevsky in that work. His major beliefs were that in a world that is ruled by deterministic principles, free will does not exist, that all art must serve utilitarian or socially useful purposes, that man is innately good (directly contrary to Christian beliefs and consequently those of Dostoevsky) that spirituality does not exist as the world and all its contents, including human beings, are material entities, and that when human beings followed the laws of reason and engaged in reasonable behaviour no evil could possibly exist. He was a follower of what was called “rational egoism,” that is, the principle that an action is rational if and only if it maximized one’s self-interest. In fact, he believed that it was impossible for someone to act against their best interests when they fully understood the consequences of their actions, and all that was necessary for a social utopia to emerge was the consistent application of rational principles by those in charge of society. One simply had to teach everyone the benefits of the Enlightenment’s clarion call to “Sapere aude” or “Dare to know!”<sup>102</sup> What Dostoevsky is railing against in this novella is a very narrow definition of terms like “knowledge,” “reason,” and “truth” where such terms denote only what can be observed by the senses and what can be measured by the rules of mathematics and logic only, with no appreciation of deeper motivations, good or bad.

At one stage in this novella, in a pointed sarcastic argument against the materialism advocated by Chernyshevsky and his associates, the Underground Man declares of his anger, that “in consequence of the damned laws of consciousness [it] is

---

<sup>102</sup> See Frank (2010), pp. 250 — 253, 419 — 425, 488 and *passim*, Grossman (1974), pp. 252 — 3 and *passim*, and Freeborn (2003) pp 47 — 55, for background on Chernyshevsky. “Sapere aude!” was a phrase used by Immanuel Kant to sum up in two words the heart of Enlightenment philosophy.

subject to chemical decomposition” (Dostoyevsky, 1976, p. 27). He is implying, in short, that we are not just chemicals that think — we are people with feelings, and often those feelings are irrational, like anger. Like all his associates and liberal thinkers at the time of the Enlightenment and immediately after, Chernyshevsky would have believed in the myth of infinite linear progress and was imbued with a naive optimism as regards the positive future of humankind. In all of this, Dostoevsky could see the superficial and naive optimism of the rationalism that was at the very heart of the Enlightenment, and his novella was his well-wrought reply to that naivety. For the Underground Man, consciousness, not progress or rationality, was what life is all about: “Suffering — after all, that is the sole cause of consciousness. Although I declared to begin with that in my opinion consciousness is man’s supreme misfortune. I know that man loves it and would not change it for any gratification. Consciousness is infinitely greater than, for example, two and two make four...” (Dostoyevsky, 1976 p. 41). It is, of course, impossible to say whether Dostoevsky really believed all that he had his anti-hero say in this short and complex book, but he certainly believed in his character’s right to freedom of choice even if that embraced the necessity for suffering. <sup>103</sup> One way or another, the Underground Man is enduring an existential crisis which takes him way beyond any account of existence that is purely mechanical or rational. He realises all too well that human life is far more complex than either the precise calculations or the shallow prognostications of Social Utopians like Chernyshevsky and his colleagues will

---

<sup>103</sup> I certainly cannot be sure at all if Dostoevsky subscribed to the belief that suffering caused consciousness. This thought may be one he puts into the Underground Man’s head to point up his total eccentricity and complete alienation. We also must leave room for the author’s imagination in describing a character’s thoughts and motivation. Hence, we cannot equate specific thoughts or feelings directly with the author, though we can trace his struggle for self-identity within them in line with Girard’s theory of mimesis which I have explicated in chapter two. Frank (2010) quotes a Russian critic Skaftymov who makes the interesting point: “The Underground Man is not only the accuser but one of the accused” (p. 415) a contention which leaves us with an extraordinarily complex and conflicted protagonist indeed. This fact shows Dostoevsky’s great skill in presenting complex characters and ideas.

allow. This is how the critic Gary Adelman (2001) summarises succinctly the above points:

*Notes from Underground* (1864) demolishes Chernyshevsky with mockery, both by direct satire and by parody, and shows the moral anarchy that will result from a materialistic and deterministic philosophy. I am what you get in Chernyshevsky's scheme, says the Underground Man, my dreadful subterranean activity is what you get — that is, my whole being in revolt against your golden path (p. 39).

The Underground Man opposes such a rationalist view, then, because he believes that it underestimates the human desire for free will, and the exercise of that free will is essentially what this novella is about. He argues that we humans value the ability to exert our own will even if that runs contrary to our best interests. We want happiness, but we have a special talent for making ourselves miserable: “Man is sometimes, extraordinarily, passionately in love with suffering. That is a fact ... I find it somehow unseemly to love only well-being. Whether it is a good or a bad thing, smashing things is also sometimes very pleasant” (Dostoyevsky, 1976, p. 41). Such a brave, or even foolish, choice gives rise, in short, to the notion of ill-being as a project, and this is certainly in the thought of Dostoevsky through the words and actions of his anti-hero. Indeed, he argues that we value suffering even more than our powers to reason. The Underground Man's masochistic tendencies illustrate this theory. Rather than submit to the hollow “law of reason” that dictates that only doctors and dentists can cure liver disease and toothaches respectively, this alienated man from the underground world prefers to suffer his ailments alone and in silence, even though this decision only brings him inevitably more and more pain. That pain, he believes, is worth suffering in itself, because it is an exercise of his free will against all constraints, physical or otherwise. This medical example is obviously absurd and most likely parody, but it emphasizes the

Underground Man's point about the desire of humanity to exercise its powers of free will. He is also underscoring the existential point that at base human life means suffering for everybody as we are all heirs to the finitude and pain that life inherently brings in balance, of course, with its joys. No amount of reasoning will dissipate all suffering as the Utopians naively imagined. Having suffered as much as he did both through his incarceration in a *katorga* prison and other deprivations recounted in the biographical section in the last chapter of this dissertation, Dostoevsky needed no confirmation of this principle — for him life implied that suffering and pain simply could not be avoided.

Furthermore, it has been universally acknowledged that one of the strong points of John Henry Cardinal Newman's method in theology and arguments against the rationalists for the justification of faith in the late nineteenth century was his broadening of the then current narrow understanding of reason.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, it is my argument here that one of the strong points of Dostoevsky's overall philosophy, and indeed of his overarching vision in his oeuvre in general, as well as the locus of his polemic against the westernizing influence of the intelligentsia here in *Notes* is its author's realisation of their far too narrow understanding of humanity in general and of reason in particular. Human beings are not just "rational animals" and they cannot live their lives by reason alone. Indeed, human beings are highly irrational, as well as rational — they run the whole gamut of experience from good to evil as is illustrated vividly in the many different psychologies of this author's vast cast of characters from his many novels.

---

<sup>104</sup> Quinlan (1994) argues that in both his *Oxford University Sermons* and *The Grammar of Assent* Newman's "most significant contribution to the philosophy of religion at the time of writing was his refusal to accept the received understanding of reason." For this Oxford scholar and cleric, reason could never be reduced to mere syllogistic reasoning. Reasoning as a phenomenon required more than mere logic. In making decisions, he contended that "the whole man moved" (p. 2). I would argue that Dostoevsky would see reason in the broader sense in which Newman sees it — for the Russian, two plus two did not always equal four in human motivation and decision making, and this he repeats several times in *Notes*.

Dostoevsky's search for selfhood is one which knows that the egoistic and narrowly rational search for Self in the unnamed anti-hero, called the Underground Man, is simply not enough. The author realises that more depth is needed, and, therefore, his anti-hero must admit that Liza, the self-transforming prostitute, is the true heroine of the story. She realises that love and compassion are needed in life to complement reason, especially reason understood as a very narrow logic that reduces the mystery of the human being to a mere arithmetic calculation where you cannot fight the proven result or bang your head off the "wall" where "twice two is four" (Dostoyevsky, F. 1976, p 23). In this sense, then, Liza could be the truer hero in the Girardian sense insofar as in and through her Dostoevsky is seeking to burst the bubble of the "romantic lie" that the Underground Man believes himself to be more intelligent and perceptive than others he encounters in this novella. He believes that he is more important and dignified than the army officer (an internal mediator for his unconscious desire to be a person of status) and his so-called friends, especially than Zverkov (another internal mediator of whom he is completely envious). He also mistakenly believes he is more important than Liza, a mere prostitute, but he is at most only half-way to the shattering of that illusion. However, Liza, like Dostoevsky himself, has long had her "romantic bubble" burst, as is evident in her air of dignity throughout this whole encounter with the Underground Man, in her rejection of the five rouble note, which was a sorry and futile attempt to put a price on her love, which by implication is priceless. Moreover, in Girardian terms, the author is also storying his own authenticity here through this significant interaction which places real love on the priceless level of values above and beyond a lower type of love that can be reduced to a commodity for sale.<sup>105</sup> While the Underground Man has singularly failed to confront fully the negative

---

<sup>105</sup> Dostoevsky did have an extra-marital affair during his first marriage with an attractive 23-year-old

pull of the internal mediation and rivalry (most apparent in his attitude to the army officer and to Zverkov, and sustained in all his other relationships),<sup>106</sup> Liza has managed to face them down with greater authenticity.

In sum, then, for my purposes here, *Notes from Underground* presents us with the struggles of the Underground Man, as he makes his way through the crucible of self-knowledge and self-doubt in an effort to salvage some sense of moral compass, even if it is a futile effort to find meaning in a life he finds unbearably disgusting, shallow, and full of self-hatred and the hatred of others. I have also shown that he has acknowledged that much is missing and lacking from his little “insect” life under the oppression of rampant westernizing materialism that denies the existence of, on the one hand, real personality, or true selfhood and, on the other, a life-enhancing spirituality. The Underground Man is a highly parodied example of social utopian westernised nineteenth-century Russian society, and as such bears no similarity to the newly converted Dostoevsky, who in the words of Girard (1976) is describing “all the lies of

---

Apollinaria Suslova, and Frank (2010) mentions that it is possible that the writer had “relations with other women of which we know nothing; he was not averse to such casual encounters when the occasion made them feasible” (pp. 384 — 385). So, the account of the liaison with Liza and the Underground Man’s confused moral reaction to his mistreatment of the prostitute may have a provenance in personal experience, and perhaps as a believer he lived to regret such casual encounters.

<sup>106</sup> The narrative part of the novel recounts the Underground Man’s encounter and subsequent obsession with an army officer, who he thought had insulted him. Dostoevsky writes it as pure comedy. This officer becomes his “internal mediator” as he unconsciously desires this man’s status and elegance. The second vignette recounts his disastrous experience at a dinner party (at which he eventually realises he is far from welcome) with some old colleagues from school. Further, he manages to insult all present, including the guest of honour. Girard (1976) sees the Underground Man here in this scene as a pathetic parody of a westernised man who is aping his role model, namely Zverkov, whom he at once scorns and whose success he desires to emulate: “We see him driven by his obsession, hurrying in pursuit of the absurd Zverkov” a drivenness that Girard calls “metaphysical desire” where the character is so besotted by the mediator that he wants to be him (pp. 264 — 267). Finally, the third vignette of this section portrays the Underground Man’s complicated experiences with a prostitute. He wakes up, after having slept with this young woman of the night, he hears a clock wheezing, and he takes in the details of the dirty, narrow room where he has been sleeping. He remembers the events of the previous day as if they had happened a long time ago, and slowly he begins to feel anguished. Next to him, the prostitute opens her eyes and looks at him with indifferent curiosity. The Underground Man realizes that he has never spoken to her, and he suddenly feels disgusted with the idea of sex without any kind of love. In short, the mechanical de-personalised action that he has engaged in the night before illustrates almost complete self-alienation. However, his morning-after awareness shows the dim possibility of future personal growth which under the proper circumstances could blossom.

which he is in the process of ridding himself' in this novella (p. 208). The contextualised quotation itself is worth reproducing in full here as it provides an excellent summary of the important link between the author and the authored:

In the writing of *Notes from the Underground* Dostoyevsky rises for the first time to the level of novelistic revelation. He escapes egotistic indignation and justification; he foregoes the literary fruits of the underground, renounces the "beautiful and sublime" of *White Nights* and ceases to wallow in the misery of *Poor Folk* ... And he describes all the lies of which he is in the process of ridding himself. The man's health and the novelist's genius are indistinguishable.

Furthermore, with Girard, we can but agree that Dostoevsky is thereby increasing his well-being and authenticity, such well-being and authenticity he will recount in his later and greater novels, which I will discuss shortly, where he will describe all the lies of which he has rid himself.

Finally, Dostoevsky also has graphically presented before us, in Liza's dignity, a hint, and a strong one at that, that while all may be lost for the Underground Man, that all is not lost for Liza or for others who have an openness to a life of redeeming love and an ability to admit their vulnerability before others. When the pair eventually say their final goodbye, he squeezes something into Liza's hand. That something, we later find out, is a five rouble note which the Underground Man finds crumpled and lying on his table shortly after her departure. Dostoevsky is underlining here the fact that Liza's pure love was never to be bought with sordid money. Nor is life lost for any of us who attain an awareness of the necessity of confronting authentically the core conflicts that life, of necessity, faces us with. Identity or selfhood for Dostoevsky, then, is the discovery of a firm faith in the redemption of love through encountering those very conflicts in the multiplicity of his well-drawn characters, but it will be in his last two

great novels *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* that he will explore more fully the flowering of selfhood and the burgeoning of a spirituality that can cope with all the trials and tribulations life throws in the path of every human being.

#### 4.4 *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

*Crime and Punishment* followed in quick succession on the heels of *Notes from Underground* — within two years, in fact. In both books we witness the struggles of the protagonist with storying himself, with achieving some authentic encounter with what Rogers calls the “real self,” Laing the “true self” and Girard the “truer Self.” We have seen in *Notes* that the nameless hero or anti-hero even (indeed, he is by turns both) hid himself away from society in his “underground” hide-out while in *Crime and Punishment* we meet the protagonist Raskolnikov who locks himself up in his “coffin” of a room.<sup>107</sup> I contend that the idea of the “double,” that is, the sense that human beings struggle with at least two versions of themselves carries through all that Dostoevsky writes. This idea is sustained in Raskolnikov’s character — there is a hard side and a soft side to him, especially when we contrast his pre-murder personality with his post-murder Self — indeed, as we shall see later, the very meaning of his name means “split.”

However, Raskolnikov acts with a sense of agency which the Underground Man does not. In short, he is somewhat further on the road to self-knowledge than his counterpart in the novella, though he is a disciple of rationalism or a nihilism which the Underground Man openly despised. In Russia of the 1860s atheism and materialism were both popular among the westernised and westernising liberals, a group which

---

<sup>107</sup> “What an awful room you have, Roddy! Just like a coffin!” is the statement his mother makes to Raskolnikov when she visits him in his apartment. (Dostoyevsky, 1977, p. 248)

Dostoevsky decried and generally called “nihilists” in his journalistic endeavours as well as in his more creative works. Morality, for these nihilists, was conceived in purely rational terms, and consequently a concept like conscience, which appeals to values beyond pure reason, is ruled out.<sup>108</sup>

Hingley (1978) points out that Dostoevsky had toyed with the idea of authoring this novel in the first person as he had *The Notes* but abandoned the idea because he wanted his study of the motives of a murderer to be as objective as he could possibly make them through the vehicle of a novel (see p. 110). Dostoevsky explores Raskolnikov’s initial motives as being at base philanthropic: What is the value of the life of an unmarried ugly old pawnbroker, a parasitical hag, when weighed on the scales of his own biased idea of justice when her murder would save his family from poverty, rescue his sister Dunya from an unwanted marriage to the middle-aged Luzhin and enable himself to return to university? While the Underground Man rejected the idea that human beings could be mere cyphers or “organ stops,” Raskolnikov at this early stage in his moral development is advancing a nihilist theory where human beings are mere monadic units as distinct from any dualist notion that they could be beings that have a soul as well as a body however complex their interaction. As Peace (1992) succinctly puts it: “Raskolnikov...is capable of regarding the mass of humanity as mere material” and disregarding the human nature of the old pawnbroker (p. 20). Here there is also a sense of the profound arrogance of the intellect in Raskolnikov where his nihilism leads him to devalue other human beings as mere “nothings.” However, despite this initial rationalisation on the part of the protagonist, we are gradually brought into the murkier world of his more hideous and sinister motivation, namely his deep desire to be a “superman” or what he terms a “Napoleon” : “... one day I asked

---

<sup>108</sup> See Hingley (1978), pp. 122 — 123. Peace (1992) credits the novelist Turgenev with popularising the term “nihilism” (p. 26).

myself the question: what if Napoleon, for instance had been in my place, and if he had not a Toulon or an Egypt or the crossing of Mont Blanc to start his career with... but instead there had simply been some ridiculous old woman ... to be murdered. Well, would he have made up his mind to do it if there was no other way?" (Dostoyevsky 1977, p. 428)

In Girardian terms, Raskolnikov is imitating, either consciously or unconsciously the desires of the nineteenth century nihilists, mediated by the likes of Mikhail Bakunin (1814 — 1876), a revolutionary anarchist and nihilist, and Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828 — 1889), a materialist philosopher who was the first to incorporate nihilism into the socialist agenda. More specifically, Raskolnikov clearly names Napoleon as the object of his metaphysical desire insofar as he believed himself at a certain time in his life to be like Napoleon, indeed, to be actually another Napoleon. Moreover, Dostoevsky is dealing with a man who thought he could become a superman (and Nietzsche, always a fan of the Russian's novels, was inspired by this thought, not terrified by its horrific possibilities like Dostoevsky) or a Napoleon who has the right to do anything he wants, break any laws he wants — and thereby the will to power is born.

There is a certain *hubris* if not a downright narcissistic and megalomaniac streak in such a proclamation. Such narcissistic beliefs are based on reason (and a very narrow concept of it at that) as the only arbiter of truth. Dobrolyubov<sup>109</sup> and Chernyshevsky, against whose ideas Dostoevsky rails in *Notes* and *Crime and Punishment* had based their theories on the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804 — 1872) who deliberately substituted a religion of humanity for Christianity itself. For all these "Nihilists" man had become the sole measure and arbiter of all values as there simply was no higher

---

<sup>109</sup> Nikolay Dobrolyubov was a disciple of Chernyshevsky and wrote for the publisher Nikolay Nekrasov in the latter's journal called *The Contemporary*. He died at the early age of 25 in 1861 from tuberculosis.

court of appeal. Neither were there any such things as an immortal soul or an afterlife. In their conception of reality everything lay within the control of humankind and within the province of reason narrowly defined. <sup>110</sup>

In other words, this murkier world of twisted motivations might mean that he could prove himself a superman by committing a murder, or even that by committing the horrific act he might find out if he were such a creature in the first place. Immediately, then, we are faced with a protagonist who is divided within himself and against himself, a world where desires clash, like the conflicted Self that is investigated in St Augustine's *Confessions*, or in Girard's theory of triangular desire. In line with this, the commentators Peace (1992, p. 34) and Taylor (1994, p. 139) both point out that Dostoevsky has chosen the protagonist's name deliberately as Raskolnikov means "split in two." <sup>111</sup> The importance, then, of this work is its complexity of motivation, the balancing of opposites within the psyche, the struggle of good and evil within the one character, the effects of crime on the personality, the importance of due punishment for a crime and the possibility of redemption. These are all big and complex issues that offer up no easy resolution. In parallel, one could say that life itself in its existential reality offers up no easy solutions for any human being and especially for anyone who seeks to be as authentic and as true to Self as possible. Peace (1992) rightly points out that Dostoevsky is decrying a then current idea that "one can conceive of crime rationally, justify it rationally, and execute it rationally" (p. 34) and that it is this that the author is attacking in his novel. Indeed, this clearly thought-out murder does not go as planned as the old woman's sister, who is a poor simpleton, walks in and Raskolnikov

---

<sup>110</sup> See footnote 104 above for elucidation of a broader versus a narrow understanding of the concept of reason.

<sup>111</sup> Peace (ibid.) refers to the name's origin in the Russian verb "raskolot" — to split. However, Hingley (1978) suggests that the word "raskolnik" may mean "old believer," though this, on the surface, appears less likely and the former explanation more correct (p. 109).

must slay her, too. Unlike its clear precise planning and its apparently logical justification, the crime is far from rationally portrayed — in fact, it is described in minute and horrific detail in all its messiness and visceral and animalistic nature. Here we have portrayed a harrowing crime which cannot be contained within its own “logical” or “reasoned out” confines alone as it takes in an unintended murder of a complete innocent, too. In other words, the murkier world of instincts and of the primitive brain kicks in ever so easily and can unseat reason from its seemingly unshakeable throne of rectitude. This correlates with the shadowy world of Freud’s *Id*.

<sup>112</sup> Once again, Dostoevsky is here returning to his old criticism of what we would today call the Left-Wing Liberals or as the Russian commentators of the 1860s called them the “Oppositionists” or the author himself the “Nihilists”<sup>113</sup> who would have based their whole understanding of the human being on a very narrow understanding of reason as I have discussed in some detail in my commentary on *Notes from Underground* above. Dostoevsky is arguing in his novels that humanity is always “more” than we in our *hubris* think, and so he attempts to story himself in exploration of what this “more” may mean in terms of, at least, our knowing what he or she is “more than.” Such exploration, as all good novels portray in their plethora of characters, will lead down many blind alleyways as well as indicating any possible road to authenticity or salvation. For Dostoevsky that openness to the “more than” was essentially a basic religious or foundational spiritual urge in humankind. His whole oeuvre is shot through with such a perspective even if it is only hinted at in these earlier novels. <sup>114</sup> Williams

---

<sup>112</sup> Freud described the id as "chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations" dominated by impulses of aggression as well as sex. See Storr, A (1989), p. 61. Berdyaev (2009) describes an interest in such matters by Dostoevsky as his predilection to explore the “underground psychology” of humanity (p. 27).

<sup>113</sup> See Hingley (1978) p. 122. Dostoevsky always capitalised these terms.

<sup>114</sup> Here we are allowing for a theory of counselling and psychotherapy that is wide enough to allow its many forms to be practised either from a humanist perspective or from a more spiritual one that can be open to a religious dimension.

(2008) confirms our contention here by noting that Dostoevsky's dialogical style is such that his characters "can always say more," (p. 11) that there is, in fact, a great freedom in the language which expresses the various voices of his many characters. We the readers are always convinced that there is much more to be said about whatever subject is being discussed, and certainly much more can be said about the meaning of human existence. And the lesson we learn from Dostoevsky here is that this amazing "more" can only be accessed through our continuing dialogue with an Other. When we have no Other to engage with we stop talking and consequently stop growing as individuals.

When reading *Crime and Punishment* one is immediately overwhelmed by its pace, its urgency, and its intensity. While this is a novel of ideas like most of Dostoevsky's novels, it is also one of frenetic action and crude instincts like the way both murders are executed, the way the protagonist encounters other characters in wild debate in public houses and in his own "coffin" of a room. Likewise, Raskolnikov's mind is constantly racing and is choc-a-bloc with confusing and contradictory ideas always in conflict with one another. This freneticism in the writing mirrors well the state of the writer at the time of its composition. Peace (1992) notes this exact point: "Raskolnikov ... [is] a many-sided human being... and Dostoevsky has entered into the innermost depths of his hero's soul..." in such a fashion that "the author's state of mind at the time may not have been greatly dissimilar from that of his hero"<sup>115</sup> (p. 22). Again, here we have a contention that strongly reflects the Girardian idea that the author

---

<sup>115</sup> At the time of authoring this novel, Dostoevsky's fortunes were miserable to say the least. In the first place, he was exhausted from trying in vain to save his self-published journal called the *Epokha* and he was struggling financially to support his family and other hangers-on against the background of the constant threat of imprisonment for debt. Coupled with that, he had signed away the copyright for his existing works to an unscrupulous publisher named Stellovsky in return for money to defray his debts. Furthermore, under the same contract, he had to produce another novel by 1 November 1866 and that book was *The Gambler*. Otherwise, Stellovsky could publish his work without payment for many years to come. (See Hingley, 1978, pp. 106 — 107)

is actually the hero of the novel and his creative work the “dialogue of the novelist with himself” (Girard, 1997, p. 102).

At this juncture, I would like to return to Raskolnikov’s abiding sense of guilt that overwhelms him to the point of psychological and somatic illness.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, the hero is on the verge of divulging his crime at least on three occasions soon after his commission of these dreadful murders. Firstly, he draws attention to himself by fainting at the police station and later, in a pub, he almost confesses to the crime and then tells the incredulous police officer, who is in the company, that he was only teasing. Finally, he stupidly returns to the scene of the crime. That is why all along we are enabled to feel the weight of his remorse. Like the protagonist, Dorian Gray of the only novel written by Oscar Wilde,<sup>117</sup> we increasingly feel that Rodyon Raskolnikov wishes to scream his crime aloud to the world and run along the roof tops so that he might expiate his great sin. It is no wonder, then, that for most of part two of *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov suffers from a feverish illness as if he is in a permanent delirium that we all feel sure is psychosomatic, that is, a consequence of his great and terrible crime. He hardly knows whether he is asleep or awake. Fortunately, he has a loyal student friend called Razumikhin to look after him. People keep coming and going and everyone is talking about the murder and speculating about who might have done it, and the ill student must listen to all this in a tormented state. In sum, he is driven to distraction. In all of this, we may say with Berdyaev, that Dostoevsky is at his “anthropological” and psychological best. It is here, also, that we may say that he is at his existential best, too,

---

<sup>116</sup> Dostoevsky as a gambler and sufferer from epilepsy and comorbid depression would have been aware of the physical repercussions of psychological disturbances. While he would not have used the term “psychosomatic,” he would have well understood the state it describes.

<sup>117</sup> The book is entitled *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and it is a Gothic and philosophical novel by Oscar Wilde, first published complete in the July 1890 issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*.

insofar as the author has fully captured our sympathy and empathy for his central character by sheer dint of his insight into humanity's weaknesses.

The two most seminal chapters for my purposes here — the storying of the Self and the presence of the therapeutic Other — are Chapter 4, part four (Dostoyevsky, 1977, pp. 330 — 346) and Chapter 5, part four (pp. 419 — 436) as they herald two fateful encounters between Raskolnikov and his lover, Sonya.<sup>118</sup> She is a prostitute, or sex-worker, by sheer necessity, not by choice as her father Semyon Marmeladov is an unreformed alcoholic, her mother ailing with consumption and her brothers and sisters on the bread line. She is meek and easily embarrassed, but she maintains a strong religious faith and supports her family by her sacrifice. She is the only person with whom Raskolnikov shares a meaningful relationship and in whom he can confide. My argument here is that his lover acts as a facilitator or counsellor or therapist for her beloved Raskolnikov. These are the chapters where the hero faces his real Self (he is ridding himself painfully slowly of his various masks, namely his nihilistic, his over-rationalistic and Napoleonic ideas of Self) through the compassion, understanding and love of his prostitute lover or therapist. He is enabled by her love to grow to a truthful realisation of the horror of his crime, and only in so admitting can he face the truth of his real Self.<sup>119</sup> These are the most intense and anguished chapters of the novel wherein we see Raskolnikov at his most tormented. In his desolate state he throws himself down at Sonya's feet, kisses them and weeps like a little boy. Sonya recoils a

---

<sup>118</sup> It cannot have been by chance that Dostoevsky named this heroine Sonya as the name itself comes from the root "Sophia" meaning "wisdom." Also, it was the name of his first-born, a little daughter who had died at the age of three months in 1868. The Russian author always chose the names for his characters with great care.

<sup>119</sup> The famous American psychotherapist and counsellor Carl Rogers would assert that it is in facing and accepting one's real Self in all its strengths and weaknesses that is the goal of healthy self-actualisation. The gap between the Ideal Self (meaning the false Self we have a habit of showing to others) and the Real Self, Rogers defined as neurosis. Recognising that gap, he saw as the gateway to healing and it was the human relationship between therapist and client that helped in the task of closing that gap.

little as she believes it is she who is the greater sinner, unaware at this stage that she is in the presence of a murderer, and one who is later to confess his heinous crime to her.

It is significant to point out that Raskolnikov in his anguish is also wrestling with the question of belief in God <sup>120</sup> as he understands that Sonya's sense of herself is inextricably bound up with her steadfast belief in Christianity. Again, in the Girardian sense she is illustrating external mediation in her imitation of Jesus Christ or at least of Mary Magdalene. His questions about the deity are also anguished: "But, what if there is no God?" (p. 336) and "So, you pray to God, Sonya?" (p. 339) Indeed, her whole sense of identity may be summarised in her reply: "What should I be without God?" Then we are invited into Raskolnikov's mind as he thinks "She's mad all right!" Then, in his frenzy he notices a copy of the New Testament<sup>121</sup> on a chest of drawers nearby, and, in a twist so typical of Dostoevsky, Sonya informs her lover that it was her good friend Lisaveta who had given it to her as a present. Up till now Raskolnikov did not know that Sonya was a friend of one of the murdered women. At this point, Dostoevsky tells us that his hero's head "was beginning to swim" at this amazing revelation. Once again, here we have a most potent link with his heinous <sup>122</sup> crime as it points to the New Testament as the key to his redemption through the extraordinary and

---

<sup>120</sup> I will be dealing with the inextricability of spirituality and psychology for Dostoevsky in later chapters. For this Russian writer, his philosophical anthropology is essentially theological.

<sup>121</sup> Note that during his time of incarceration in the *katonga* that Dostoevsky read the New Testament over and over again, and his personal copy of it is highly annotated and can be seen today in the Russian State Library, Moscow. Three Decembrist wives who met the prisoners on their way to Omsk prison gave the prisoners a copy each of the New Testament. (See Frank, 2010 p. 187.)

<sup>122</sup> After Dostoevsky was released from prison, his idealism and romanticism were now seasoned with a harsh realism, a realism that led him to declare that the novels he wrote were now steeped in a "fantastic realism," that is, that while they might depict with gory detail what really happens in life, they also raised such incidents to a mysterious or mystical, extraordinary, or supernatural, or even fantastic level at one and the same time. In other words, beneath a harsh reality there could be a mystical or profound dimension. Carl Jung would call such extraordinary connections "synchronicity" and the amazing links we have in this chapter with Lisaveta's Bible and her personal cross would be good examples of that. (I will discuss the concept of mysticism in more detail in later chapters.)

fantastic connection with the murdered sister of the old pawnbroker.<sup>123</sup> At this point the anguished and tormented murderer implores his lover to read from the New Testament: “Come on, read! I want you to!” he insisted. “You used to read to Lisaveta, didn’t you?” (p. 341).

Then, in an extraordinary paragraph, Raskolnikov marvels at Sonya’s deep sense of the preciousness of her faith in God and through Him in herself. It is in fact a hymn to the uniqueness of individuals when they realise that they are absolutely loved unconditionally by another or the *Other*, whom believers call God:

He realised too well how hard it must be for Sonya to betray and expose her inmost feelings. He realised that those feelings were indeed her present, and perhaps her old secret, a secret she had probably cherished since she was a child, that sustained her while she still lived at home with her family, her unhappy father, and her stepmother, gone mad with grief, among the starving children...then he read it in her eyes, and he realised it from her state of rapturous agitation... She suppressed the spasm in her throat... and went on to read the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John. (p. 341)

This illustrates nicely Yalom’s belief in the self-disclosure of the therapist, insofar as I am arguing that she plays that role here for Raskolnikov. Her revelation of her private and precious relationship with God allows Raskolnikov to “open up”<sup>124</sup> in complete confidence that he will be listened to. Furthermore, it is a truism to state that we need others and further that it is through relating to and knowing others in dialogue that we come to know ourselves, and this is a form of good imitation. Raskolnikov realises that on the journey to self-actualization, that we depend very much on others,

---

<sup>123</sup> Sonya invites Raskolnikov to exchange crosses with her, a traditional Orthodox expression of friendship or fellowship, and Sonya had already exchanged hers with Lisaveta whom he has murdered. These crosses were worn around the neck. Obviously, Raskolnikov is now wearing Lisaveta’s cross.

<sup>124</sup> I have already mentioned the importance of this process of gaining the client’s trust through the self-disclosure of vulnerability on the part of the therapist because it creates a welcoming and accepting atmosphere where the patient can “open up” to the healing power of the therapeutic encounter.

especially on significant others.<sup>125</sup> This is summed up succinctly in his simple words to Sonya: “I need you. And that’s why I’ve come to you.” A little further on in the same chapter he avers to this patient listener: “You are all I have left” (p. 427). In life, there is simply no going it alone — as Yalom puts it “we are all in the one boat!” Again, fantastically, it is Sonya’s friendship with Lisaveta that allows Raskolnikov an avenue to his confession of murder. Choosing her to be his confessor or therapist he informs her that he will tell her in their next meeting who killed her friend... “I’ll tell it to you, and to you alone! I’ve chosen you...” (p. 345).

We read that prior to his second significant encounter with Sonya that he was “glad of the chance to get away from his own feelings which were becoming so unbearable to him” (p. 419). The weight of his guilt now requires him to confess... “He had to tell her who had killed Lisaveta” (p. 419). To be healed we need to confess our guilt to another. In the second intense encounter, the purpose of which is the confession of his heinous crime, Raskolnikov wonders why he has chosen Sonya to be his confessor and to undeservingly bear some of his burden. Furthermore, from his anguished conversation she realises before he admits it, that it is he himself who is the murderer. As she guesses correctly, we read her tormented reaction: “Oh God! A terrible wail broke from her bosom.” This realisation allows Raskolnikov to openly confess his guilt and examine his motives more deeply. Dostoevsky is such an accomplished writer that he has managed to gain our sympathy for his hero-murderer to such an extent that we fail to question Sonya’s amazing lack of revulsion, indeed her lack of fear of the obviously agitated criminal in front of her. Again, this amazing

---

<sup>125</sup> Our need for others is a fundamental principle in both sociology and psychology. It is through encountering others that we are socialised, and it is a major avenue through which we grow in our own sense of identity. One of the central principles of Adlerian therapy is what the founder calls “Gemeinschaftsgefühl” which is often mistranslated as “social interest” but is rendered more correctly as “social feeling,” a concept that underscores the importance of the person’s need to belong. This therapy sees that need as central to our identity or sense of Self.

strength of character and deep human empathy belongs to this so-called fallen woman. While initially shocked, “she gave a start, uttered a cry and, not knowing herself why, threw herself on her knees before him” and asked him: “Oh what have you done to yourself?... she flung herself on his neck and held him tightly in her arms” (p. 425). Sonya can see, with great spiritual and psychological insight, that the murderer has harmed himself greatly in his crime, a theme that Raskolnikov will echo in his declaration that it was himself he had grievously harmed, not the old woman. <sup>126</sup>

As this second encounter progresses Raskolnikov is learning what is morally right and wrong at the hands of his more authentic and less educated lover. At one stage he tries to defend his actions by saying that the old “hag” was a mere “louse,” but Sonya corrects him firmly and he replies: “I know, I know it wasn’t a louse... I am just talking a lot of rot, Sonya. I’ve been talking a lot of rot a long time... There are quite, quite other motives here...” (p. 430). In other words, Raskolnikov, the fragmented man, is beginning to realise his real Self, the horror of his crime, the value of the lives of others, the awful consequences of rationality gone mad and of the nihilism as advocated by the so-called westernising intellects of modern Russia (the “rot”). <sup>127</sup>

He discusses his delusions of power with his compassionate confessor, or attentive counsellor, as that is essentially what Sonya is for him now. In an amazingly

---

<sup>126</sup> While it is ethically unacceptable that the horrific deaths of the two women should be treated rather cavalierly and that their status as human beings be secondary, even instrumental, to Raskolnikov’s state of mind, we must remember that this is a novel, not an ethical text *per se*, and that the author is examining the psychology of the mind of a murderer and the existential cost of such a crime on his personality and on that of his close associates and, indeed, he is also dealing with the subject of appropriate punishment and of eventual redemption.

<sup>127</sup> This is all in conformity with the research into the psychology of the mind of the criminal as found in the modern science of criminology. Professor Wilson (2019), a leading criminologist, speaks of the “reframing” of the human being as an “it” or “target” so that a premeditated murder by a hitman can be carried out (pp. 210 — 212). Murderers, like Raskolnikov, who are truly remorseful have to again reframe their victim from an ‘it’ into a ‘Thou’ (to use Martin Buber’s felicitous term) or person with all his/her dignity and integrity as a human being. Raskolnikov is undergoing a true reframing of Alyona Ivanovna from an ‘it’ into a “Thou,” and is thereby growing in integration and integrity.

deep insight into why someone might commit a crime as horrific as murder, Dostoevsky outlines clearly the alluring deceptions of power where Raskolnikov admits that “power is given only to him who dares to stop and take it... one must have the courage to dare” (p. 431). When people are given power, they can be swept away by the ego with its potential to deceive, delude and ultimately destroy others and one’s Self in its wake. And that is precisely what has happened to Raskolnikov. I have mentioned the courage to dare in respect to existential psychology elsewhere in the present work, not in the deluded and horrific sense Raskolnikov uses it here, but in the sense of the courage to dare to be, to dare to be one’s true or real Self,<sup>128</sup> a courage that has evaded the so-called hero/anti-hero for all his life but which has been for the most part achieved in the stance of humility, forgiveness and faith in God as portrayed in the attitudes and life of Sonya. For Dostoevsky self-identity is inextricably linked with one’s relationship with the very source of one’s life, of all life — namely, the Creator God.

To appreciate the significance of this heart-rending encounter we must realise that it is essentially the exploration of the healing power of relationships wrought through literary space. It is here also that we reach the very hub of the human encounter as happens in a counselling or therapeutic situation, only in this case it is an imaginative process anchored in real life — a therapeutics of the text. It is a truism, now a central tenet of all therapy, that it is the relationship between therapist and client that is the source of the healing that takes place. It is also interesting that Dostoevsky sees Sonya’s reaction as beyond comprehension to herself as it is to us — indeed, as all true

---

<sup>128</sup> It is in this regard the orator Robert Ingersoll (Jan 16, 1883) (<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/lincoln-character-power/> , accessed 18/11/2019) said of Lincoln that he was a truly great leader since “nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power” and in his use of power Lincoln was thoroughly merciful and utilised it for the common good. That is another way of saying that the only difference between a hero and the villain is that the villain chooses to use that power in a way that is selfish and hurts, or even kills, other people while the real hero will use it for the betterment of others. Raskolnikov is here admitting that, like Napoleon when conquering others, he had abused his power — by murdering the two women in his case.

heroic action should be. Instead of recoiling in horror she embraces the guilty one and has compassion on him for destroying himself through his heinous crime. In short, Raskolnikov is being saved through the intercession of his lover — and is gradually coming to knowledge of his real Self as a despicable criminal. Dostoevsky was often himself overcome by guilt throughout his life such as his regret for the way he had not appreciated his father as a young man and especially for how his incessant gambling had affected his wife Anna and family in the early years of their marriage and, in many ways, much of Anna's love for him is reflected in Sonya's wholesome acceptance of the weaknesses of her lover.

#### 4.5 Conclusion: The Therapeutic Presence of the Other

In this chapter I have described in detail the possibility of healing in *Notes from Underground* and the probability of redemption in *Crime and Punishment*. I have shown that Dostoevsky is painstakingly continuing his “dialogue with himself” in these two novels by describing the struggles and growth involved in the encounter with the healing presence of the Other. Were it not for the healing presence of his wife and emotional supporter, Anna Snitkina, Dostoevsky admitted he would scarcely have survived at all.<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, I have discussed fully the relevance of the presence of the Other to both the psychotherapeutic process and the therapeutics of the text. This latter has been discussed for the purposes of underscoring its relevance for Dostoevsky's storied Self. I have also explicated how each protagonist in the treated novels stories himself through his on-going suffering and how he handles that and have argued that in the person of Raskolnikov we encounter an individual who has managed to journey further and more deeply in his personal integration than has the unnamed

---

<sup>129</sup> See footnote 98.

protagonist of the shorter novel. In other words, when both stories are connected, the latter can be seen as a development of the former. Through the double hermeneutic we have argued that such a development mirrored that of the writer himself. Furthermore, on the one hand, I have outlined in the first novel that the prospect of healing through an encounter with the other in *Liza* was an opportunity that the Underground Man failed to grasp. On the other hand, I have analysed in detail the encounter between Raskolnikov and the healing presence of the other in his lover Sonya. Unlike the unnamed man, Raskolnikov chooses to accept the opportunity of healing and redemption offered to him, and his encounters with Sonya, described in detail above, mirror a traditional therapy session where she acts as a counsellor or therapist who listens patiently to the client Raskolnikov who finds himself impaled on the horns of a dilemma. In other words, in both novels Dostoevsky has sustained the advancing dialogue with himself through reaching out for the healing intervention of the other where Lisa represented the self-alienating experience the author himself had with prostitutes<sup>130</sup> and Sonya that of his healing encounter with his soon to be wife Anna Snitkina.<sup>131</sup> In short, these two novels expiate Dostoevsky's own early preoccupation with westernising ideas that diminish humanity and reveal his gradual healing through the powerful presence of others in his life, especially that of his wife Anna and his young family.

---

<sup>130</sup> Frank (2010) mentions that it is possible that the writer had "relations with other women of which we know nothing; he was not averse to such casual encounters when the occasion made them feasible" (pp. 384 — 385).

<sup>131</sup> Again, I would draw the reader's attention to the fact that Dostoevsky himself and many of his friends underlined the fact that his second wife was responsible for any semblance of order and tranquillity in the author's life. In all domestic troubles, and certainly in times of crisis she would be his saviour again and again.

In a reference to Hegel's notion of "the freedom of the void",<sup>132</sup> Williams (2008) mentions that the defining characteristic of such a reckless notion of freedom is that it has no sustaining Other to direct, lead or heal it, and so the void and destruction lie at its very heart (p. 11). In short, without the sustaining and healing power of good relations with the Other, society is doomed to conflict and destruction. Indeed, when we become isolated human beings who have no Other with whom to engage we stop speaking and stop developing as human beings.

In conclusion, then, I will briefly summarise Raskolnikov's and Sonya's encounters from a therapeutic point of view. Firstly, Raskolnikov, unlike the Underground Man comes willingly to therapy, wishes to unburden himself of guilt and indeed implores my imagined counsellor to help him in his healing. This is one of the most basic requirements of a good therapeutic encounter, that is, that the clients or patients have come freely of their own accord to therapy. Furthermore, it requires no great analysis to see that Sonya displays what Carl Rogers calls the three core conditions of counselling namely (i) congruence or in other words she is true to herself, that is, there is a concordance between her inner and outer worlds — she is not pretending to be anything other than she is in reality, (ii) unconditional positive regard, that is, she is completely non-judgemental of her "client"/lover almost unbelievably so as he had just admitted to her that he has murdered her best friend and (iii) accurate empathy where she can put herself imaginatively into the perplexed state of Raskolnikov so much so that she understands the way he has tormented and tortured

---

<sup>132</sup> See Jeffrey Church (2010), footnote 23, p. 132 for a clear definition of Hegel's concept of "freedom of the void."

himself existentially and spiritually.<sup>133</sup> In sum, she displays almost a Christlike compassion for her “client”/lover.

Finally, I must mention the healing power of forgiveness and the realisation of the redemption that is promised for those who are terribly sorry for their awful crimes. To be fully authentic we must be honest with ourselves by facing up to the shadow Self within us, by accepting our gross failings, and especially our wrongdoings. For Dostoevsky, the authentic Self is inextricably bound up with the forgiveness of God we encounter in Christ. In essence, his philosophical anthropology is at base a theological one. The message here is: one knows oneself best when one knows oneself unconditionally loved by God. This is what Sonya means when she declares to Raskolnikov: “Accept suffering and be redeemed by it,” and she later hands him a cross stating: “We’ll suffer together, so let us also bear our cross together” (Dostoyevsky, 1977, pp. 434 — 436). She will follow him loyally through his trial and sentencing and right on to his imprisonment in the *katorga* system in Siberia. We feel sure that with such a sympathetic other and such a support in life as Sonya, that Raskolnikov is well on the road to rehabilitation and redemption. Dostoevsky gives us strong hints that this will be so throughout the novel, e.g., when Raskolnikov asks Sonya to read Chapter 11 of John’s Gospel to him from Lisaveta’s New Testament, we know if we are familiar with the Gospels that this story is the one of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Like Lazarus, then, Raskolnikov if he persists in his conversion to the truth, will experience the new life of the resurrection. Dostoevsky would have deeply believed that he also would share in such a renovation of life and the probability of redemption.

---

<sup>133</sup> See Rogers, C.R. (2003) especially sections I and III for a detailed account of the person-centred approach and a comprehensive description of the core conditions of counselling and psychotherapy.

However, we are left with the question whether there can be a profoundly good person at all in this world where so much evil abounds. At the same time, we always remain hopeful in Dostoevsky's darker works that the light of hope can be sparked by the possibility of healing and the probability of redemption as witnessed in the beliefs and lifestyle of his more positive characters. With both these observations in mind, I now turn to the discussion of three further novels, *The Gambler* (1866), *Demons* (1871 — 1872) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) to discuss how the author stories himself against the existential evil of addiction to gambling in the first case; against the presence of moral, political, and terrorist evil at large in the world in general in the second; and against the evil of the sheer injustice of innocent suffering and the atheistic proclamation of the death of God in the third. <sup>134</sup>

---

<sup>134</sup> Purcell (2016) adds this insightful note about Dostoevsky's great last novel: "The Russian Tsar was seen as father of his people and a Dmitri Karakosov had attempted to assassinate Tsar Alexander II in 1866. So, peering between the lines, a Russian reader would have understood a wider, political theme beyond the obvious one of the disintegration of the family — the assassination of the Tsar. And beyond that lay Dostoevsky's principal theme — contemporary nineteenth-century society's attempt to murder God" (p. 20).

# Chapter Five

## The Spiritual Quest 1 — Encountering The Mystery of Evil

### 5.1 Introduction

My argument thus far has been that Dostoevsky, through the existential process of triangular desire, courageously faced up to the fragmentation of Self and dealt with that primarily in the novels *The Double* and *The House of the Dead*. From there, I argued that when he had clearly realised the healing power of a loving relationship he storied its tormenting and destructive refusal in *Notes from Underground* and its painful but redemptive acceptance in *Crime and Punishment*. In this chapter, I intend to deal with his painful encounter with his own inner demons or torments as they reveal themselves in the three novels *The Gambler* (1867), *Demons* (1872) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). To engage with these inner demons the discernment and employment of a strong spirituality was necessary for Dostoevsky. Therefore, I will briefly describe at the outset what I mean by spirituality or, expressed more dynamically, the spiritual quest.

### 5.2 The Spiritual Quest

When an individual sees life as a spiritual quest he intuitively, and later reflectively, encounters what I argue is a “spiritual dimension” to life. I maintain that such a dimension is the depth dimension of all experience where through an engagement with a method of interiority like that suggested by St Augustine of Hippo who maintained that we encounter the presence of God within our very being through what he and later

writers called the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.<sup>135</sup> In other words, for my purposes here I am defining spirituality as the deep sense of connection with three distinct though inextricably related realities (i) the Self, (ii) the Other as in a significant other or friend or therapist (iii) the *Other*, a word I am deliberately italicising here for distinction purposes, to denote a deep reality whom some of us call God.<sup>136</sup> In reaching out to the Other in either of the last two cases the individual experiences the Other as reaching back to him or her. For any theist who believes in a personal God, the loving presence of the Creator is experienced as a great comfort and support reaching out to him or her both in good times and on occasions of great suffering and torment.<sup>137</sup> In short, then,

---

<sup>135</sup> Traditionally the Fathers of the early church based their notion of the indwelling of the divine or transcendent in the heart or soul of the believer on the text from John's Gospel: "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." (John 14:23). St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that their bodies are "temples of the Holy Spirit." (1 Cor 6: 19) Augustine and many of the other early Fathers began to write about the indwelling of the Godhead in the human being mostly in a Trinitarian context as doctrine and dogma developed. Strange (1981) underlines Newman's contention that "what was achieved for man in Christ was constituted by Christ's presence dwelling in him," establishing thereby his divinization, a concept explicated and heralded by many of the Fathers of the early church (p. 155).

<sup>136</sup> The concept of the Other is just as important as that of the Self. One can say that they are mutually dependent realities. It is a central principle in social identity theory and in psychology that self-concept is composed of two key elements: personal identity and social identity. One simply cannot exist without the Other. However, several modern philosophers have written much on the sheer "Otherness" of the Other and criticise an approach that projects the sole perspective of the Self onto that individual, or, in other words, views the other through the lens of one's own Self alone. One such philosopher who loudly proclaims the "Otherness" of the Other is Emmanuel Levinas (1906 — 1995). His starting point is ethical insofar as the individual Self is called upon to respect the utter uniqueness of the person or "face" one encounters. As a philosopher and a Jew, Levinas, according to Levy (2018) offers a unique presentation of the reality of the Other whom he judges to be shot through, as it were, with "traces of infinity," a philosophical anthropology that is based on the biblical notion of the other person being a veritable "revelation" to us of a being who is totally other to the Self (pp. 291 — 293). Levy continues by pointing out that Levinas sees the Otherness of God as an "absence" or a "trace" or a yearning for God, and in this way underscores the total transcendence and ineffability of the Divine as Other (pp. 293 — 294). Levinas capitalises the noun "Other" in both the human and the divine cases to emphasise their total Otherness. The radical Otherness of both the individual human being and/or of the Divinity I may encounter as underscored by Levinas is an insight that is profitable, though it blunts the role of positive psychology somewhat. However, while Levinas' interpretation of the Otherness of the Divine is a Judaic anthropology and theology that emphasises the transcendence of the Godhead while the schema I am proposing is Christian or Christocentric anthropology where God can be encountered in the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the soul of the believer.

<sup>137</sup> Ehrenreich (2015), an avowedly atheistic but open-minded scientist, who believes she has had several mystical experiences finishes her book on mysticism and science with the statement that she has "the impression, growing out of experiences chronicled here, that a palpable Other or Others may be seeking us out" (p. 237).

spirituality is experienced as a dynamic, two-way process, and it is my contention that Dostoevsky embraced a spiritual vision incorporating these three levels.

I am stressing, then, in this chapter that when one is engaged in storying the Self, one can do so on several levels. Different approaches to psychotherapy will state the goal or end of therapy in various terms, some of which will be more open than others to deeper meanings.<sup>138</sup> I am dealing expressly here with Existential Psychotherapy, the goal of which may be expressed as the creation of meaning,<sup>139</sup> since we are meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures. As we have seen, Yalom argues that we do that essentially through storying the Self. Selfhood, I contend is experienced — and further argue that Dostoevsky’s dialogue with Self fully embraces this contention — as a sense of who one is deep down as a human being, as a unique and irreplaceable gift which I am arguing in this dissertation has essentially a spiritual dimension. Yalom would not acknowledge a spiritual level to psychotherapy in the sense that the term “spiritual” is defined as implying the existence of a transcendent reality called God who is experienced here in our human existence. The third dimension of spirituality in my scheme of things, then, is not generally acknowledged in modern psychotherapy. By definition, no sense of selfhood can be established without a deep connection with the first two dimensions listed, namely Self and Other. Dostoevsky as a committed Russian Orthodox believer would maintain, as I will show in this and the next chapter, that no

---

<sup>138</sup> For instance, the Psychodynamic School will emphasise the making of the unconscious conscious which will lead to a greater integration of both the conscious and the unconscious but it need not acknowledge anything deeper. Carl Jung sees the goal of therapy as that of individuation, namely that the client or patient becomes an indivisible unity or wholeness that is the true Self, a word he always capitalised. Furthermore, his theory leaves the door open to a spiritual dimension to therapy. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy operates within a directive and didactic structure that is designed to get the clients to practise new behaviour outside the therapy sessions and does not seek to go any deeper than exploring the inextricability of thinking, feeling, and behaving. The Humanistic School, whose leading light was Carl Ransom Rogers, highlights what is called “self-actualisation” that also leaves room for the exploration of the spiritual dimension of psychotherapy.

<sup>139</sup> Meaning is only one major goal, among several others, of Existential Psychotherapy. Other associated goals would be the growth in self-awareness, the recognition and elucidation of their problems, and the clarification of choices with the encouragement to make them as authentically as possible.

sense of personhood or selfhood can be fully developed or expressed without acknowledging our relationship to a divine principle in life — a position I strongly hold and which I will show is central to my argument for the recovery of a spiritual dimension of Existential Therapy. This is essentially what I meant in my opening sentence in this paragraph that we can story the Self on different levels, some more meaningful than others.

In the last chapter, I spoke of the healing power of the other, namely of the therapist/significant other/listener (talk) or of one character with another and by implication with the author/reader (text). In this chapter I will describe the *Other* in the context of God, or in other words in the presence of the Divine healing power that can potentially be experienced in the healing power of therapy. Here, then, I will deal with how Dostoevsky's spiritual vision, which, while not explicitly expressed in the first two novels in question, nevertheless enabled him ever so gradually to deal with the demons he had to encounter in his own life. In other words, I will be engaging here with the existential struggles and torments of the mystery of evil in its many manifestations as Dostoevsky encountered them in his own life and as he attempted to deal with them in his work. His struggles, then, are worked through slowly and painfully in these creative works and that laborious process is an anguished prerequisite for the final flowering and expression of his deep spirituality which I will recount more fully in the next chapter. In line with traditional mystical theology,<sup>140</sup> I will call the encounters with evil in the

---

<sup>140</sup> Mystical theology is the branch of theology that attempts to explain mystical practices like meditation and contemplation and the various mental states experienced during such practices. Traditionally, a history of mystical theology begins with the Greek Patristic Fathers of the early centuries and traces its development through the centuries from Denys the Areopagite, through St Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross and so on up to more modern mystics like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Teilhard de Chardin. In general, this branch of theology emphasises the fact that the mystical life is about sharing in the mystery of Christ. I describe mysticism more fully in chapter six.

novels discussed in this chapter Dostoevsky's "dark night of the senses"<sup>141</sup> where the *Other* or God has seemingly abandoned his faithful disciple and is apparently absent, and there can be found no consolation through the medium of any of the senses. Paradoxically, however, God is present in a mysteriously dark and painful way, a way that is central to the deep complex and Christian understanding of suffering.

### 5.3 Encountering the Mystery of Evil

A major torment for Dostoevsky was both his personal experience of suffering in his own life and his witnessing of the cruelty of human beings to one another and to animals. Then there was the innocent suffering of little children, his own included, either from illness or at the hands of others. In short, from early in his life he would be preoccupied, among many other concerns, with the mystery of evil in the world and with all the problems that mystery presented for humankind. Furthermore, it is salutary to recall that the major criticism of the Humanistic School of Psychotherapy made by Martin Buber and Rollo May was that it failed singularly to take into account the problem of evil in the world, and indeed in the lives of human beings, even in the "here and now" of both the client's and the therapist's life. The strength of Existential Psychotherapy is that it deals with it in a forthright manner as all human experiences, good, bad, and in-between, come under the term "existential." Dostoevsky deals with evil in practically all his novels in a straightforward way. Murdoch (1997) stresses that "good literature is uniquely able to clarify evil" and points to Dostoevsky and Dante as

---

<sup>141</sup> The words "night" and "dark" obviously contrast with those of "day" and "light," all highly symbolic words in a religious or spiritual context. For the mystic, John of the Cross (1542 — 1591), while the pathway through all types of physical and mental suffering may have constituted a great part of the "dark night," he differentiated between what he called the "dark night of the senses" where he experienced the weakening of all attractions to worldly things and the "dark night of the spirit" where he encountered a separation from all consolation. In this second state he would encounter periods of desolation. However, for mystics such as St John of the Cross the "dark night" became paradoxically and mysteriously the privileged if painful place to encounter God. See Bungum, D. (2016), pp. 187 — 204 and Ataria, Y (2016), pp. 331 — 356.

good examples of such writers who present “misery and evil justly” (p. 458). If he is not dealing with evil as a moral problem (murder, rape, robbery and so on), Dostoevsky is dealing with it from the point of view of the suffering caused to individuals by the evil acts of others or by chance occurrences. It is no surprise then that one of the first books of the Bible that fascinated him as a young boy was the *Book of Job*. This is an Old Testament book which presents a profound meditation on the anguished question as to why good people suffer and that, more often than not, evil people seem to prosper. Indeed, Dostoevsky referred to the influence of this biblical book on him in a letter to his second wife Anna in his later life as he re-read it: “... this book is one of the first in my life which made an impression on me; I was then still almost a child” (quoted in Frank, 2010, p. 30). He further stated to her that he always wept when he read it. This thorny problem of innocent suffering has been the basis of a positive argument for atheism for centuries. That argument states that if God exists, then he is omnipotent and perfectly good, and such a being would surely be both able and willing to eliminate evil. Since evil exists in the world, therefore, a good and omnipotent God does not exist. Or as the Scottish philosopher David Hume remarked: "Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"<sup>142</sup>

This thorny problem just quoted, both in its intellectual and existential dimensions, has dogged the consciences of believers in their faith journey for years. As a staunch believer, then, the question of evil and its consequent suffering posed a deep existential problem for Dostoevsky. Indeed, he went on to engage with the mystery of innocent suffering in the world in many of his novels and he even attempted to justify

---

<sup>142</sup> Patrick Sherry in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/problem-of-evil>. Accessed 18/11/19.

the ways of God to man through the stories of the many characters he presents his readers with in his novels — stories which were very much part of his own lived experience.<sup>143</sup> In *The Gambler*, *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, the question of evil is dealt with as a deeply existential problem we encounter through either our own suffering, that of those close to us and lastly that of innocent children if we are at all empathetic human beings. Again, from the perspective of this dissertation Dostoevsky was engaging in both a tormenting existential struggle and a keen and passionate dialogue with himself as he sought some possible resolution to his quandary. In a significant sense, also, I contend that Dostoevsky storied himself in the context of his faith journey by tackling head on the mystery of evil in the world and in his own lived experience, and I describe that self-dialogue by discussing the three novels named above. The struggle with the question of evil and the innocent suffering that often comes in its wake is especially important, then, in the context of the central argument of my dissertation, namely that in tackling it and facing it head on one encounters points of illumination on the road to recovering a spiritual foundation to Existential Psychotherapy.

#### 5.4 *The Gambler* and the demonic power of addiction

One of the best examples of an existential conflict, which in Dostoevsky's case was essentially a spiritual one, that tormented him was his struggle with the demon of gambling. Writing to the critic N.N. Strakhov in 1863 Dostoevsky stressed the fact that this novel described one of the two “hellish enslavements” he had to endure in his life, the other being his incarceration in the katorga prison at Omsk:

---

<sup>143</sup> Classically, the argument(s) advanced by theologians and philosophers to justify the ways of God are termed theodicies.

If the *Dead House* attracted the public's attention as a portrayal of convicts whom no one had portrayed graphically before, then *The Gambler* will without fail attract attention as a first-hand and most detailed portrayal of roulette... This is a description of its own kind of hell, of its own kind of prison 'bathhouse'; I want to make a picture and will strive to do so (quoted in Briggs 2010, p. xxi).

Here Dostoevsky is describing the addiction of gambling in a most forthright and existential way, as a hell "of its own kind" on a par with the hell of physical imprisonment, except in this case one is imprisoned within the hell of psychological addiction. Above, then, we have Dostoevsky's own account of how this book is one of his more autobiographical novels which captures the hellish enslavement that gambling is for the addict.

But first a little biographical information will be helpful here to understand the frenetic pace and existential angst that pervades this short work. Dostoevsky had returned from his second trip to western Europe (August — October 1863) which, ostensibly had been a trip for medical reasons (to explore cures for his epilepsy) but, in reality, was a gambling trip as well as a turbulent period of liaison with his extra-marital lover Polina Suslova (1839 — 1918). At home, he had left his ailing wife who was suffering from consumption, his stepson Pasha, and much debt. Being the romantic addict, he was convinced that he would win his fortune on the roulette wheels at Wiesbaden and Baden-Baden and would be able to return home to defray his debts, support his ailing wife and publish his literary journal <sup>144</sup> with his brother Mikhail. He did win a lot of money on occasions but gambled it away as quickly on the spin of the little white ball of the roulette wheel. His relationship with his lover Polina Suslova

---

<sup>144</sup> Dostoevsky and his beloved brother Mikhail edited and published two journals: (i) *Vremya* or "Time" which began publication in January 1861 and was officially suppressed in April 1863, and (ii) *Epokha* or "The Epoch" which made its debut in March 1864 and collapsed under its debts in June 1865. See Hingley (1978), pp. 89 — 105 for an account of the life of both these journals.

was just as frenetic and turbulent as she constantly blew hot and cold with her would-be innamorato whom she teased relentlessly. Shortly after his return to St Petersburg his wife Maria and his brother Mikhail died (early 1864), and Dostoevsky became the lone guardian of his stepson Pasha and the sole supporter of his brother's family. One can only imagine the tormented and turbulent state of his mind and emotions at this juncture in his life. It is precisely during this period while he was about a third of his way through *Crime and Punishment* and was under considerable pressure from the ruthless publisher Fyodor Stellovsky to provide him with a novel by the end of October 1866 that he wrote *The Gambler* in twenty-six days.<sup>145</sup> He did so with the help of the twenty-year-old stenographer Anna Snitkina who would become his second wife within months of their first meeting.

All this haste, frenzy and turbulence are reflected in the short novel *The Gambler*. We can see here that the central character, Alexei Ivanovich, a tutor working for a Russian family living in a suite at a German hotel blindly desires to be a winner at the roulette wheel like his employer General Sagorjanski. His “metaphysical desire” for the General contains all the oscillating feelings of attraction and repulsion of love and hate that characterizes what Girard (1976) calls “internal mediation” (p. 9). He does not realise that his so-called hero and employer is in fact indebted to the Marquis de Grioux since the latter had made up a shortfall in public funds that the General had to cover before he could retire from his government post without being incriminated.

This is a household on the brink of collapse, but that is not apparent at the beginning of the novel as all the characters seem to be well-to-do upper-class Russians living in an exclusive hotel in a fictitious German city called Roulettenburg: “The

---

<sup>145</sup> Dostoevsky was in such desperate financial straits that he agreed to a hazardous contract with the publisher, F. T. Stellovsky that if he did not deliver a short novel by 1 November 1866, the latter would acquire the right to publish Dostoevsky's works for a further nine years, until 1 November 1875, without any compensation payable to the writer.

General is looked upon by everyone here as an extraordinarily rich Russian grandee. Even before dinner he commissioned me, among other things, to change two notes for a thousand francs each... Now we shall be looked upon as millionaires for a whole week, at least” (Dostoevsky, 2010, p. 311). Obviously, the adverbial phrase on which this sentence concludes is a humorous hint that all is not right with the General’s household. Also, I note that the General’s stepdaughter’s first name Polina is a diminutive form of that of Dostoevsky’s mistress’ first name Apollinariya. This is the woman who, as Briggs (2010) puts it, “had been conducting a tempestuous on-off affair all too recently” (p. xxii) with Dostoevsky. The protagonist Alexei Ivanovich is besotted with Polina who spitefully uses and indifferently manipulates the smitten narrator. For example, she has him run gambling errands for her, gets him to insult a noble German couple just for fun and to cynically demonstrate her power over him. To employ an insight from Yalom we could argue that eventually Alexei gets his romantic bubble burst as he learns through bitter experience that his love is unrequited and that he has been merely used as a messenger boy to bet at the tables for Polina. While Alexei is besotted with the wild and unreliable Polina, the General is equally infatuated with Mademoiselle Blanche. We know from Dostoevsky’s own diaries and letters that Alexei’s relationship was practically a mirror of his relationship with his mistress. As the character grows, the author grows some little insofar as he is gradually disabused of his romantic notions and lies. If he has learnt a little about the cruel nature of highly romanticised love, he has still not accepted the foolishness of his obsession with gambling given that the final words of the novel sustain that very obsession: “I was going out of the Casino, I looked, there was still one gulden in my waistcoat... I went back. I staked that gulden... and there really is something peculiar in the feeling ... when you stake your last gulden... I went out of the Casino with a hundred and seventy guildens in my pocket... What if I

had not dared to risk it?” (Dostoevsky, 2010, pp. 453 — 454). In short, then, in this highly autobiographical novel, Dostoevsky has had his romantic illusions shattered and has dealt with that disillusionment through the experience of the protagonist Alexei. However, he realised all too well, as this quotation illustrates, that the addiction to gambling is extremely hard to uproot and that merely writing about it is simply not enough to repel this obsessive demon.

Moreover, this demon manifests itself most powerfully in the form of an obsession with winning some of the “heaps of gold which are said to lie on the gambling tables” (p. 320). Such an obsession also involved swallowing lies to the Self, that one knows how to beat the table, that one has a fool-proof system of playing and winning. In a letter to a friend in August 1863, Dostoevsky bragged that the secret to winning was “ceaseless self-control at all stages of the game and not getting excited” (quoted in Mulhall, 2016, p. 122). His second wife Anna was to remark that such a method might have worked for anyone else bar her husband who was “nervous, easily carried away, and prone in everything to rush to extremes” (quoted in Briggs, 2010, p. xxiv). Lying to the Self is one of the greatest self-delusions and is essentially the road to self-fragmentation rather than self-evolution, and here Dostoevsky is doing so according to his wife’s evidence. While the writer would come to believe this statement in later life when he had ceased his gambling, here in this short novel he captures well the essence of the obsession that possesses the gambler standing before the gambling table:

I confess my heart was beating, and I was not cool. I knew for certain... that I should not leave Roulettenburg unchanged, that some radical and fundamental change would take place in my destiny; so, it must be and so it would be... Since I was myself possessed by an intense desire of winning, I felt as I went into the hall all this covetousness, and all this covetous filth if

you like, in a sense congenial and convenient... And indeed, why deceive oneself? Gambling is the most foolish and imprudent pursuit! What was particularly ugly at first sight, in all the rabble around the roulette table, was the respect they paid to that pursuit, the solemnity and even reverence with which they all crowded round the tables (pp. 320 — 322).

In this passage we have described the excitement of the obsession by his heart beating wildly; his conviction that he would experience a great change in his destiny or, in other words that he could command forces beyond his control; that he would definitely win even though his reason was telling him that this was a foolish pursuit; and finally the thralldom of the magic of gambling on a par to a religious devotion noted in the solemnity and reverence the gamblers showed towards the roulette table. Dostoevsky goes on in the same chapter to describe the pretence of the gamblers when they are playing roulette, that is, say when a gentleman goes up to the table and places a large enough bet and wins or loses, he must walk away pretending he is unaffected by the whole process. He gives an example of such pretence when he describes his General as walking away from the table with a smile to “keep up his dignity” even though he had just lost twelve hundred francs (see Dostoevsky 2010b, p. 322).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1983), with Dostoevsky in mind, describes the experience of the gambler who stands in front of the gaming table as having an awareness of “nothingness” where he is caught in an experience of not-being. He feels all his previously strongly affirmed resolutions not to gamble as melted away, experiences a complete discontinuity with his old Self and out of his experience of “nothingness” he then gives into his compulsion to gamble: “it is nothingness that separates him from himself ... his former understanding of the situation is no more than a memory... he must recreate himself *ex nihilo* and freely... rediscover the fear of financial ruin and of disappointing his family” (p. 70). Unless he can re-make himself or create himself

anew in the “now” of his “nothingness,” the point of Sartre’s existentialism, he will simply capitulate to his old urge to gamble. In this sense, I contend, following the French philosopher’s argumentation, that gambling reduces the Self to the brink of disintegration or, to state it in other terms, it catapults the fragmented Self in an anguished state into the abyss of “nothingness.” The problem with this particular form of existentialism is that it is totally self-reliant, a philosophy which sees the Self as a project to be engaged in by the individual alone, totally “pour-soi,” with no help or sustenance from outside its own orbit to give it anchorage. With such a narrow humanist philosophy the centre of Self simply cannot hold.

Such a narrow, solely self-reliant approach omits the healing power of an Other, or the *Other*, and indeed as many twelve step programmes have shown, one of the principles thereof is the admission that the individual is quite powerless on his or her own to save themselves from the addiction in question. In fact, such programmes enable the addicts concerned to put their trust in a spiritual power outside their own Self, rather like a lifebuoy to pull them safe from drowning. In terms of the tripartite description which I advanced for spirituality at the beginning of this chapter, this admission of a dependence on a higher power as we find it in the *credo* of the Alcoholics Anonymous Movement is the third dimension of spirituality – namely, the transcendent *Other* or God reaching out to the individual to pull him or her safe from the abyss of destruction in alcohol. The task of the counsellor or psychotherapist, then, is to help the client or patient to reconnect with their sense of being that exists beyond such nothingness by helping them to confront their problematic behaviour. Furthermore, the counsellor will encourage them to enter a twelve-step programme, to find a mentor or sponsor or significant Other who will help in times of crisis, or if the

individual is open to grace in a more profound spiritual context, to reach out for a spiritual lifebuoy that will pull them clear of total disintegration and so on.<sup>146</sup>

Gambling is also about risk-taking, indeed about the courage to face one's possible self-destruction by losing all that one possesses, and, in this sense, it shares something with risking one's life and courting one's death in an oblique way — thereby encountering Yalom's first ultimate concern. Mulhall (2016) contends that Alexei's foolish declaration that he would throw himself off the neighbourhood mountain for the love of Polina, parallels the rashness of his risking all his money at the gambling table. Mulhall maintains that “the fantasy that most deeply structures their relationship — that of casting oneself into the abyss at another's command... For Alexei, this is the meaning of his love, and so is the meaning of his life as such; the underlying significance of existence declares itself under the sign of gambling as a modality of vertigo” (pp. 121 — 122). This relevant quotation effectively sets into relief the existential crisis of the gambler who is almost on a cliff edge overlooking the abyss. Such a description neatly sums up in the totally disorienting and anguished experience of vertigo what might approximate to what we could term a “Dostoyevskian apocalypse.”<sup>147</sup> This is a world where the centre cannot hold, where chaos reigns, and the abyss and eventual death constantly beckon. Girard would see the possibility of such extinction in death as the culmination of metaphysical desire where the gambler desires the metaphysical object of the one last big win. The gambler instinctively feels that with one last throw of the die or one last spin of the wheel of chance that he can

---

<sup>146</sup> I have argued in chapter 4 that Anna was the significant and healing other for Dostoevsky, the one who saved him in his time of crisis with the publisher Stellovsky, and it will be my argument in this chapter that it was her faithful love and care that helped him on the road to his recovery from gambling.

<sup>147</sup> Girard (1976) devotes a whole chapter to what he calls the “Dostoyevskian apocalypse,” an “ontological sickness” (p. 279) which he declares may be summed up in Raskolnikov's nightmare in *Crime and Punishment* which is essentially “a vision of terror” and a “glimpse of the abyss in which Dostoyevsky's universe is always on the point of being engulfed” (pp. 281 — 282).

regain control, that he can resist the pull of the abyss, that he can order chaos, arrogate to himself the power of God, and make one last big win and come through triumphant over fate.

All the major characters in this novel are living a lie — Alexei the protagonist, the General and his daughter Polina, as well as the General's aunt, called affectionately “la baboulinka” or the grandmother — are deceiving themselves with the illusion that they are in control of their destiny, that they can determine their own fate through gambling and carve out a dreamlike future through the lucky spin of the roulette wheel. They are all avoiding reality as they refuse to face up to the responsibilities that true freedom demands of them and end up running away from those duties to take refuge in the illusion of a “quick fix” at the gambling table. They cannot admit their problems and weaknesses which would allow them to find legitimate ways of earning some money, perhaps even a suitable occupation that would permit them to become authentic human beings true to Self with no need to be constantly pretending to be other than they really are.

Girard's (1976) words in relation to *Notes from Underground*, are particularly apposite here as well, that Dostoevsky is continuing to describe “all the lies of which he is in the process of ridding himself” (p. 208) in this frenetically and hastily written book. First of all, *The Gambler* would never have been written without the invaluable help and steadying influence of his loyal stenographer and soon-to-be wife Anna Snitkina. Mulhall (2016) advances an insightful nuance that Dostoevsky's dictation of this story to his stenographer and future wife is at once writing as gambling as he had to complete his novel to meet a short deadline and also “the medium for another kind of gamble... that of falling in love” (p. 134). In this case he won both wagers. Under Anna's judicious guidance and calming influence Dostoevsky would begin eventually

to “get his act together” — very slowly at first as he was to continue to gamble much in their first few years of marriage and to accrue further debts as was his wont. She displayed great patience with his sullen moods and compulsive gambling, having at times to pawn her jewellery. Anna claimed that Fyodor quit gambling after the birth of their second daughter Lyubov in 1869 but this is not true as, according to Frank (2010, pp. 614 — 616), it was only shortly before their return to Russia after a four-year absence that he finally abandoned gambling, having experienced several haunting dreams, some strange coincidences, and the dreadful fear that Anna might die if he persisted in the addiction. Without her continued sustenance and support in constantly calming his fits of anxiety and confusion, it is probable that he would never have been able to rid himself of “all the lies” in his life and we might have been deprived of his later and greater novels and have missed encountering the traces of the authentic and integrated person he would become. Anna was the angel that would save him at last from the destructive demon of gambling. Furthermore, this also complements the healing power of the Other explicated at length in the last chapter.<sup>148</sup> She provides the calm presence of the Other which alongside his writing helped him “work through” his obsessions and overcome his demons.<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> In a letter during his four years exile in Europe, Dostoevsky remarked: “Anna Grigoryevna has turned out stronger and more profound than I had realized or anticipated. In many ways she has been a real guardian angel” (quoted in Hingley 1978, p. 127).

<sup>149</sup> Freud, S. (1917) compares the phenomenon of mourning after the loss and death of a close loved one to the phenomenon of melancholia or depression from which Dostoevsky suffered much. He explains that they both share a similar outward effect on the subject. Furthermore, the loss in melancholia or depression is an unconscious one as opposed to mourning which is obviously a conscious and a more apparent process. There is an acknowledgement of Freud’s contention here in the very title of the well-researched book on depression by Lewis Wolpert (1999), namely, *Malignant Sadness: The Anatomy of Depression*. Dostoevsky would have suffered greatly from melancholia with respect to his gambling along with dreadful guilt, feeling that he was responsible for the suffering endured by his wife and family. Anna was effectively the healer who helped him work through his melancholia as well as his obsessions, especially that of his gambling.

### 5.5. Demons and the Destruction of Relationships <sup>150</sup>

Effectively, it is the restorative power of the Other that heals us in any relationship. The central principle of all therapy parallels this contention, namely that it is the relationship between the psychotherapist and the patient that enables the latter to grow in integrated selfhood. If anything, our demons, or in other words our delusions or our lies to Self all prevent us from growing in wholeness or integration. *Demons*, I contend, presents us with destructive relationships and the collapse of any real or authentic Self in all of the characters. Corrigan (2017) would concur with this reading of the book as he expressly sees Dostoevsky's innovative demonology as "a study of collapsed selfhood" (p. 9). If the selfhood of each of the characters is in such a state, then so are their relationships.

Furthermore, in this novel, Dostoevsky was facing head-on in allegorical form what he would have seen as legions of demons that attacked the national identity and the moral fibre of the country as well as his own identity as a patriotic and loyal man of the Russian soil, a man with a firm belief in the presence of God in his own life. Hence, there were many demons which he saw as attacking that firm belief: materialism, atheism, positivism, rational egoism, terrorism, immorality, and indeed rampant amorality. *Demons* is regarded as Dostoevsky's most tragic and most violent work which he set out deliberately to write as allegory. Hence, we can say that characters and events are used to deliver a broader message about real-world issues and occurrences. Dostoevsky believed in Russian culture and folk beliefs going back to ancient times and that his identity and that of all true Russians was inextricably linked with the people and the land of Russia. To this extent he can be called a Slavophile. <sup>151</sup> While his early

---

<sup>150</sup> Sometimes also called *The Possessed* or *The Devils* depending on the translator and publisher involved.

<sup>151</sup> Fukuyama (2019), having pointed out that according to Hegel that the struggle for recognition is the driving force of history, emphasises that "the modern sense of identity evolves quickly into identity

mentor, Belinsky had long thrown off the belief in “a divinisation of the people,” Dostoevsky had maintained it all his life (see Frank, 2010, p. 123 and following). For him, his identity as a human being was always intricately connected to his identity as a Russian and as a believer in the God of the Russian Orthodox Church and the divine right of kings as exemplified in the close relationship of the Tsar to the people and land of Russia. Magarshack (Dostoyevsky, 1983) summarises the author’s belief system most aptly by stating that he believed in “his own peculiar political and religious recipe of a State based on a docile peasant population and run by an autocratic Tsar, who was no longer supported by a landed aristocracy (which Dostoyevsky hated), but who relied entirely on the Russian Orthodox Church” (pp. ix — x). However, it is all too easy to pin labels on people like “liberal” or “conservative” or “nihilist” or “reactionary” and neither the world of Dostoevsky nor his mind was as black and white as is often painted: for, as we read in Hingley (1978), having cited a radical comment the author made to A.S. Suvorin before his death, “Inside the Christian loyalist Dostoyevsky, there was, evidently, a submerged Nihilist as well as a submerged atheist feebly and sporadically struggling to be let out” (pp. 186 — 187).

Once again, I find that the insight of Girard (1976) in relation to *Notes from Underground* is also applicable here in this novel insofar as the novelist is continuing to describe “all the lies of which he is in the process of ridding himself” (p. 208). In his twenties, Dostoevsky was attracted to some (not all) of the “lies” (a word for which we can read “demons” here): he was greatly attracted to liberalism, rationalism and even atheism for a while, but he had quickly disabused his mind of those when he was

---

politics, in which individuals demand public recognition of their worth” (p. 10). In the light of this statement, we can clearly claim that Dostoevsky was involved in identity politics and the struggle for recognition of a people or a nation. Slavophilism was an intellectual movement in the 19th century that wanted the Russian Empire to be developed upon its own traditional values. For this reason, then, Slavophiles were opposed to the influences of Western Europe in Russia.

incarcerated in Peter and Paul Prison and sent to Siberia. He would rail for the rest of his life against what he saw as these warped ideas and “—isms” from liberalism to socialism to atheism. Hence, all the characters in this tragic and violent novel represent one or other of these particular beliefs. Again, I want to underscore the fact here that we cannot understand Dostoevsky, the man, or the work, without understanding his journey and encounter with faith which he painfully worked out through engaging with these blatant opposites to his own religious conviction. In short, these encounters with these warped “—isms” strengthened his faith which he maintained he earned through “the crucible of doubt.”<sup>152</sup>

*Demons* relates the tale of the social disintegration of a mid-nineteenth-century fictional Russian town, called Shpigulin, as it descends into chaos and becomes the point of an attempted revolution. We are presented with many examples of the social disintegration and the rise of evil in the town. For example, a manager of a factory has shamelessly cheated the workers as regards their due payments and, furthermore, their working conditions are dreadful. Moreover, subversive leaflets have appeared, urging the overthrow of the existing order. There is an arsonist on the loose as well as marauders and robbers who are wholly amoral wandering about at night. The narrator tells us that this revolt is orchestrated by master conspirator Peter Verkhovensky. Dostoevsky is arguing that “demonic” forces have taken possession of the town under the influence of Peter, his father Stepan and the irredeemably evil character Nikolai Stavrogin. The demons that have possessed this evil triumvirate are the evil westernising ideas that I have mentioned above. Let us also bear in mind that Anna described her husband’s state of mind around this time as being: “nervous, easily

---

<sup>152</sup> Dostoevsky declared that his critics could not conceive of how strongly he had denied God at one stage in his life before he came to believe very strongly in Him: “Thus, it is not like a child that I believe in Christ and confess Him. My Hosanna has come forth from the crucible of doubt” (quoted in Freemantle, A. 1984, p. x).

carried away, and prone in everything to rush to extremes.” (quoted in Briggs, 2010, p. xxiv). Added to that, we have to factor in the ever more regular occurrence of epileptic fits with their resultant weeks of comorbid depression. Again, as Frank (2010) points out, Dostoevsky was always superstitious and he believed that his dreams were the source of messages or warnings to him about his own health, that of his wife and family and especially about the future of his motherland, Russia (see pp. 613 — 614). Let us recall here that at the conclusion of *Crime and Punishment*, when he is imprisoned in Siberia, that Raskolnikov dreams that the world is condemned to a destructive plague from Asia, and that everyone is to be destroyed except a small remnant of the population. This disease attacks men by way of their sanity, making them highly paranoid of others: though mad, each believes that he alone has the truth and is, thereby, estranged from his fellows. These deluded and lost souls end up killing one another. *Demons* is, we could argue, a longer and more sustained re-telling of Raskolnikov’s final nightmare. In a similar manner, W.B. Yeats’ oft-quoted lines from “The Second Coming”: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...” capture well the fate of Shpigulin.

Dostoevsky had begun this novel while he was still living in Western Europe, in the city of Dresden to be precise, and he was extremely worried about the future of his motherland, which he saw as threatened on all sides by the evil westernising ideas that were currently assailing Russia from decadent nineteenth century Europe. These ideas can be summarised in a list of destructive and warped ideas or “demons” as he saw it: liberalism, socialism, nihilism, materialism, rationalism, utilitarianism, positivism, and anarchism with their one underlying, uniting, and igniting force, namely atheism. These demonic ideas embraced the alluring illusion of absolute freedom which, as Eagleton

points out, is “bound to be terroristic.”<sup>153</sup> In the late 1860s Russia was experiencing an unusual level of political unrest mainly caused by student groups influenced by the revolutionary ideas just mentioned. In 1869, Dostoevsky conceived the idea of what he called a “pamphlet novel” (see Hingley, 1978, pp. 149 — 150) directed against the radicals who expressed these revolutionary ideas. At this time in Dresden, he was reading three Russian papers a day (see Frank, 2010, p. 610) to keep up with the news in his homeland and he read with consternation about one revolutionary group organised by Sergey Nechayev (a disciple of the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin) who had himself murdered one of their own number Ivan Ivanov at the Petrovskaya Agricultural Academy in Moscow. Dostoevsky also heard a detailed account of the story of this political murder from Anna’s brother, who was a student at the same academy. The description of Shatov’s murder follows closely that of Ivanov given by the Russian newspapers the author was reading at that time (see Frank, pp. 601 — 615). Shatov is a believer and a recent convert to Russia’s Christian heritage, a character with beliefs not too unlike those of Dostoevsky himself. <sup>154</sup> Girard (1976) contends that in this newly converted character Dostoyevsky is “meditating on his own ideological evolution, on his own inability to free himself of negative ways of thinking. And it is in this very meditation that Dostoevsky transcends the slavophile ideology” (p. 190). This Shatov, who is soon to be murdered by Peter Verkhovensky, has declared on the recent birth of his son: “‘The mystery of the coming of a new human being is a great and incomprehensible mystery...’ Shatov kept crying like a little boy... in a wild, entranced,

---

<sup>153</sup> Quoted in Williams, 2008, p. 11.

<sup>154</sup> Dostoevsky was a Slavophile, that is, he believed that the Russian Empire of his time should be developed upon values and institutions derived from its early history, and not from the corrupting influences of Western Europe. He was also a follower of the *Pochvennichestvo* movement, a word that roughly translates as "return to the native soil." This was a late 19th-century Russian movement tied in closely with Slavophilism.

and inspired way... and he spoke to her... of the existence of God, of how good everyone was... In their excitement they took out the child again to have a look at it” (Dostoyevsky, 1983, pp. 588 — 590). The Russian author’s own daughter, Lyubov Fyodorovna had just been born in September 1869, shortly before the writing of the novel so the description of the home birth is very realistic indeed, and Shatov’s experiences reflect those of the doting father Dostoevsky was. Shatov’s is the only Christian voice amidst a veritable chorus of unbelieving voices in this tragic and intense novel, a sign that Dostoevsky never consoles himself with an easy or black and white faith. Rather, what he presents to the reader is the on-going central drama of his suffering Self as he encounters real life problems often of a tormenting and disturbing depth. In short, he is illustrating here the “crucible of doubt” from which his “Hosanna” was wrung.<sup>155</sup>

Two central characters, Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky and his son Peter connect two important periods in Dostoevsky’s life, namely the 1840s Russian intelligentsia with all its westernising influences in the person of the father and the nihilistic revolutionaries of the 1860s in the person of the son. While the author had once been captivated by the writings and beliefs of the 1840s, especially those of Alexander Herzen and Vissarion Belinsky his former mentor, he was now vehemently opposed to their ideas which he believed had caused the dreadful upset and demonic possession and breakdown of modern society as exemplified in the social disintegration of Shpigulin. It was his conversion to Christian principles after his mock execution, an experience that led him to look on life as the gift of God, coupled with his suffering endured while imprisoned in Siberia that caused this shift in beliefs. Like all principled converts who have built up their beliefs through suffering he took to heralding them

---

<sup>155</sup> Quoted in Freemantle, A. 1984, p. x

intensely and stridently. With respect to this novel, in a letter sent to his friend Maykov from Dresden, Dostoevsky realised all too well how his convictions might appear to the world: "... Let the nihilists and the Westerners scream that I am a reactionary! To hell with them. I shall say everything to the last word" (quoted in Magarshack, 1983, p. viii). While Dostoevsky has authored this book in terms of an allegory and with a definite message in mind, nevertheless as a true author, he gives his characters free rein and is never didactic or moralistic. In other words, I believe that he lets his characters develop and evolve dialogically or in conversation with one another; he respects the otherness of the Other without assimilating it into the Same.<sup>156</sup> As a truly creative writer he realises that there is always a tension between the control he wishes to exert over his characters and the freedom which they have in designing themselves that is truer to their character. Williams (2008) argues that freedom is itself a quintessential aspect of Dostoevsky's dialogical style and that as a result his characters exercise a liberty "to go on answering each other even when this wholly upsets and disappoints any hopes we may have for resolutions and therefore good endings" (p. 12). In fact, this approach leaves the reader with a freedom to reply and go on mulling over the open-ended problem or question presented. This is why scholars have argued rightly that Dostoevsky often paints the characters who express contrary viewpoints to his own beliefs far more convincingly and effectively than his own. In this regard, Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) insight into Dostoevsky's style is apposite here, namely that his literary style is polyphonic, with the cast of individual characters being a multiplicity of

---

<sup>156</sup> Kearney (2003) summarises the traditional treatment of the Other in western culture as follows: "My wager is that if the enigma of the Other has been largely ignored by the mainstream metaphysical tradition — going back to Parmenides and Plato who defined the Other in relation to the Same — it resurfaces again and again throughout our western cultural history in the guise of strangers, gods and monsters who will not go away and continue to command our attention. Preoccupied with the Rule of Reason, most western philosophers since Parmenides have banished the puzzlements provoked by "strangeness" to the realm of Unreason, namely the cultural unconscious of myth, art, and religion. And in the process of this estrangement, the Other passed from the horizon of reflective understanding into the invisible, unspeakable, unthinkable dark" (p. 7).

“voice-ideas,” (pp. 4 — 5 and *passim*) restlessly asserting and defining themselves in relation to each other. These “voice ideas,” which are captured in his cast of characters, I contend, are all voices in Dostoevsky’s own mind, often his own internal demons, more rarely internal angels, whom he is orchestrating as it were, or in more psychological terms, are all subpersonalities which he is attempting to integrate into his own personality. Again, I am arguing here that we have a contention that strongly reflects the Girardian idea that the author is actually the hero of the novel and his creative work the “dialogue of the novelist with himself” (Girard, 1997, p. 102). Furthermore, to employ my double hermeneutic we may say that Dostoevsky the author is engaging with his conflicted Self, consequent on dealing with the four ultimate concerns of death, freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness. While all of the evils from liberalism to anarchism to atheism, which embrace these four ultimate concerns, are dealt with in this novel, they all represent aspects of Dostoevsky’s conflicted Self which he is in the process of integrating as best he can. If the price of that integration meant that he might be considered a reactionary, well so be it!

#### 5.6. *The Brothers Karamazov* and the Suffering of Innocent Children as a challenge to Faith

Dostoevsky began writing *The Brothers Karamazov*, his last and greatest novel, in June 1878 and had just finished it in October 1880, barely three months before his death. In this well-written and many times revised book, the author explores the mystery of evil as it plays itself out through the lives and interactions of the three brothers Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov and their half-brother Smerdyakov. The eldest brother Dmitri is conflicted between the “ideal of the Madonna” (Love/Truth) and the “ideal of Sodom” (Lust/Evil). (see Dostoyevsky 1978a, pp 123 —124). Dmitri’s conflicted sense of Self reflects several aspects of the mystery of evil in Dostoevsky’s tormented

life (his womanising and his gambling) which he strove to work through in his writings as he storied himself towards wholeness. However, another and greater agony he was to suffer was the death of his two small children: firstly, his daughter Sonya who died from pneumonia at the age of three months and then, his son Alyosha who died some years later from epilepsy at the young age of three. Therefore, the suffering of little children was a painful mystery that cut him to the core. As a committed believer, he has to tackle this issue head on in his writings. The critic Hingley (1978) puts it judiciously and succinctly when he points out that the basic theme which Dostoevsky sustained in all his novels is “humanity under threat” (p. 123). These threats of course come from others, especially through the moral evil perpetrated by them, and from the very circumstances and the chance occurrences of life in general. Such is the nature of human existence that we need the assistance of others to help us develop skills to deal with the anxiety caused by such concerns and worries, and sometimes indeed professional help is needed. Storying the Self not only in talk (therapy — when it involves stories that individuals can relate to personally) but also in text (literature — when it is at bottom autobiographical) helps us to face our “demons” (Dostoevsky, Williams)<sup>157</sup> or the “lies” that the Self tells itself (Girard) or the “delusions of love” that the Self falls prey to (Yalom), all of which can haunt us throughout our lives and often form the basis of an on-going struggle to live authentically.

One such “lie” to Self is that of our *hubris* in thinking that we have all the answers, that our reason is the one sure way to solve the mystery of existence (rationalism), and in this case in point the unravelling of the thorny problem of suffering

---

<sup>157</sup> Rowan Williams’s (2008) critical assessment of Dostoevsky parallels Girard’s and Yalom’s concern respectively with unmasking “romantic lies” or bursting “romantic bubbles,” but he states his metaphor in theological terms, namely insofar as he sees the author as attempting to face with harsh truths the “demons” that certain characters embrace.

in the world. Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov (at times he is called by the family diminutives Vanya or Vanka)<sup>158</sup> is guilty of swallowing whole this intellectual lie to Self. He states the argument of innocent suffering against the existence of God trenchantly and effectively. He is the 24-year-old middle son and the first-born from Fyodor's second marriage to Sofia Ivanovna. He is a university graduate who has been influenced by all the new westernising ideas that have blown in from decadent Europe and which Dostoevsky in his journalistic work decried and even despised: atheism, materialism, and nihilism amongst all those I have listed already. Employing the Girardian prong of my double hermeneutic, we can see here that this central character, Ivan, blindly desires to be as clever as the westernising writers and intellectuals like Herzen or Belinsky or his university professors who act as internal mediators. However, he is an extremely sensitive soul and is in no way arrogant or full of delusions of grandeur and power like Raskolnikov. He is haunted by the prevalence of evil in the world and is disturbed to the core by the apparently senseless suffering in the world — especially that of innocent children. He is also disturbed by the fact that he cannot square such suffering with the existence of a good God. Magarshack (Dostoyevsky, 1978) makes a truly relevant point that the paradox associated with this Russian writer is that he puts the case against what he himself stands for much stronger than the case for his own convictions: “Father Zossima’s pious platitudes are never as convincing as Ivan’s ‘blasphemies’” (p. xxiii). While at a superficial, or purely cerebral level the old starets’<sup>159</sup> words may seem to the uninitiated to be “pious platitudes,” at another more

---

<sup>158</sup> Ivan is very seldom called by his family or pet name Vanka — unlike Alexey who is called Alyosha 90% of the time — as he is a cold character who finds it hard to connect with others in a friendly way. The only person in the novel to call him Vanka is his father Fyodor.

<sup>159</sup> A starets is an elder of a Russian Orthodox monastery who functions as a venerated adviser and teacher to his community and to visitors who come on pilgrimage or retreat. These spiritual fathers are charismatic leaders whose wisdom is said to stem from God and is obtained from long ascetic experience. In June 1878 Dostoevsky visited the enlightened starets, Amvrosij and stayed for two days at the monastery. The starets remarked of the author: “There is a man who’s repenting.” (see

spiritual level, they have been wrung from much life experience and reflection thereon. However, this does not dismiss Magarshack's relevant point. In other words, the creativity of the novelist who allows his characters to have a real authentic life of their own on the page wins out against the so-called reactionary journalist which Dostoevsky was in his public life. Dostoevsky's personal suffering in the deaths of his little children is all reflected in Ivan's anguished reflections of the suffering of an innocent child that takes place in a debate with Alyosha, the happy, open, spiritual, and spirited monk, the sounding board of equanimity for all three brothers Dmitri, Ivan and Smerdyakov. In Ivan's anguished protestation, Dostoevsky is examining in fine detail how the existence of a good God could possibly be squared with the existence of evil in the world:

I wanted to discuss the suffering of humanity in general, but perhaps we'd better confine ourselves to the sufferings of children.... This poor five-year-old girl was subjected to every possible torture by those educated parents. They beat her, birched her, kicked her, without themselves knowing why, till her body was covered with bruises; at last, they reached the point of refinement: they shut her up all night, in the cold and frost, in the privy.... they smeared her face with excrement.... Do you realise what it means when a little creature like that, who is quite unable to understand what is happening to her.... weeps searing, unresentful and gentle tears to "dear kind God" to protect her? (Dostoyevsky, F. 1978a, pp. 277 — 283).

Could a more impassioned argument be given for the assertion of the meaninglessness of life? Taylor (1994) declares that we can all find Ivan's reaction understandable and proceeds to point out that "the finer one's sensibility the more that sensibility is really aroused with horror by this evil" (p. 139). We could even be forced

---

<https://pemptousia.com/2016/04/dostoevskys-meeting-with-starets-amvrosij-optinskij/> accessed 25/11/2019)/ Amvrosij is presented in a life-like manner in the character Fr Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which Dostoevsky was just beginning to write at the time of the visit.

by such sensitivity and sensibility to understand acts of violence in retaliation for similar injustice as such is the argument advanced in Raskolnikov's frenzied mind when he murders Alyona because she is an exploitative moneylender.<sup>160</sup>

In short, Dostoevsky presents us with the crushing weight of Ivan's intellectual argument for an atheistic stance towards life, and yet we as readers know that he also presents us with the Christian visionary answer to the confounding mystery of suffering, most essentially through the healing presence and words of the old monk Zossima and to a far lesser extent through those of his protégé Alyosha. Dostoevsky as we shall see in the next chapter presents us with a far wider approach to the mystery of suffering than any mere academic text. Some philosophers and theologians have, since the time of Dostoevsky, distinguished between the concept of problem that seems to demand an answer and that of mystery, which leaves space for a more existential approach to the phenomenon. Firstly, a problem, they argue, is one that confronts us on a cerebral level like that of a mathematical problem, while a mystery is one that involves us at the very core of our being. One such philosopher is the twentieth century French Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel. According to Marcel, we are part of, and thus cannot be objective about, our own existence.<sup>161</sup> Existence transcends objective enquiry and is thus a mystery. Scientific questions may be objectively answerable and may, therefore, be considered as problems for which there may be solutions. Sometimes evil may be a cerebral problem on one level — say, that of a philosophy lesson; at other times it may

---

<sup>160</sup> Taylor (1994) points out that the meaning of Raskolnikov's name is "schism" or split — the separation implied here being that of the character from any common ethical or moral position (p. 139).

<sup>161</sup> "A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity." Marcel (1949), p. 117.

be a mystery, one from which we ourselves cannot stand apart as we may be so involved in it at a personal level, that is, because we ourselves are in pain or suffering.

There is little doubt whatsoever that Dostoevsky suffered much in his own life. When he describes its reality, either through story or philosophical debate, it feels as if he has confronted the question of evil as both a problem and as a mystery. I am arguing, then, that Dostoevsky intuitively understood the difference between a cerebral or intellectual problem and that of a mystery which might confront a human being on a more existential level. Furthermore, he was ahead of his time in appreciating what the philosopher Ivan Illich lamented as the modern depersonalised approach to pain where it has “ceased to be conceived as a “natural” or “metaphysical” evil.... Pain thus turns into a demand for more drugs...”<sup>162</sup> In sum, then, Dostoevsky was aware that suffering is a two-edged sword, one that can be a force for great good or great evil. The counselling psychologist Hardiman (2001) acknowledges this salutary lesson by adverting to the wonderful art that sprung from Van Gogh’s severe mental suffering while acknowledging that “the shadow side of human nature also corrupts many who are its victims” (p. 6).

Linked with the atheistic argument for the non-existence of God, based on the existence of innocent suffering in the world and the consequent meaninglessness of our very existence in that context, is the question of suicide as the only answer to such meaninglessness. Suicides are found in many of Dostoevsky's novels, and yet we know, given Ivan’s love of life when he declares that he would drink the “cup of life... to its dregs” (Dostoevsky, 1978a, p. 268) that he would never succumb to such a nihilistic temptation. Indeed, history shows that the 1860s — 1880s marked a near-epidemic

---

<sup>162</sup> Quoted in Woods, R. J. (2008). Human health (wherein, by implication, suffering is confronted), Illich argues is maintained through “self-awareness, self-discipline and inner resources by which each person regulates his own rhythm and actions...” (p. 98).

period of suicides in Russia, and many contemporary Russian authors wrote about its occurrence. Disbelief in God and immortality and the influence of contemporary philosophies such as positivism and materialism are important factors in the development of those characters' suicidal tendencies. It is their only solution to the lack of meaning that obtains in their lives. Dostoevsky felt that a belief in God and immortality was necessary for human existence and that meaninglessness, and worse still, chaos and immorality and amorality would hold sway in its absence. In short, the Russian novelist believed, just as Ivan says in the parable of "the Grand Inquisitor" that if God does not exist then everything is permitted in such a meaningless world. If there is no God then there are no rules to live by, no moral law we must follow. We can simply do whatever we want. All meaning will simply collapse where the centre of meaning simply cannot hold. We can argue that a corollary of such immorality would be a dissolution of authentic human identity. Kjetsaa (1989), in this regard makes an important point that this was precisely what Dostoevsky meant when he declared solemnly that when we take morality seriously as we should that "all are guilty before all and for all" because essentially we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers (p. 348). In a world without a moral vision rooted in a Christian belief structure Dostoevsky paints vividly the depth of the existential conflict of meaninglessness (versus the innate desire for meaning and significance) that persecutes and torments Ivan. Indeed, it is a core conflict that is unavoidable in any seriously examined life whether that human being is a believer in a divine principle or not. However, Dostoevsky would see it as a more acute crisis for Ivan, and consequently we witness the growing disintegration of his mind as he plummets into a nervous breakdown and an ensuing black nightmare.

In folk stories worldwide, there occurs the motif or pattern of telling some event three times, and the third such occurrence marks an important turn, twist, or

transformation in the story or in the character. In this regard, with respect to Ivan's growing sense of responsibility and guilt over his father's murder he is driven to visit his half-brother Smerdyakov three times. The third encounter marks the fact that now Ivan has admitted to himself that it is really he who is responsible for his father's murder since it was he who has convinced Smerdyakov through his philosophical discussions on nihilism and atheism that in a world without God everything is permitted. This is the teaching that made it possible for Smerdyakov to kill old Fyodor Karamazov. For this reason, he says, Ivan is as much to blame for the murder as he is.

Back in his room, Ivan's sleep is disturbed by a horrible nightmare in which a frighteningly dressed middle-aged man who claims to be the devil begins to taunt him. The devil teases Ivan about his doubt and insecurity and the young man becomes very agitated as he shouts at the unwanted visitor: "You're a lie, you're my illness, you're a phantom. I only don't know how to destroy you... You are my hallucination. You're the embodiment of myself, but only one side of me..." (Dostoyevsky 1977, p. 749) and the Devil replies: "*Satan sum et nihil humanum a me alienum* — I am Satan and nothing human is foreign to me" (p. 751). Though Ivan is harshly critical of the devil, the apparition eventually drives him into a mental breakdown about which at the beginning of the chapter the narrator has already informed us: — quite recently a doctor diagnosed "a nervous breakdown," and had warned Ivan that hallucinations would be quite likely in his condition (p. 746).

This nervous collapse reveals the terrifying emptiness at the heart of his philosophy. Nothing other than sheer fragmentation of selfhood lies in store for those who subscribe to nihilism and atheism. <sup>163</sup> His three encounters with Smerdyakov

---

<sup>163</sup> Charles Taylor (2003) in *The Ethics of Authenticity* sees fragmentation as the inevitable consequence of "the weakening of the bonds of sympathy" between people in modern society. He argues that such

gradually force him to accept the role he has played in enabling his half-brother to murder Fyodor Pavlovich. In more religious terminology, we can say that Ivan is forced for the first time in his life to accept the universal burden of sin, and it is the agony of this burden that leads to his mental breakdown. He is also forced down from the isolation of his intellectual ivory tower into the realisation that human beings not alone need each other, but actually influence one another for good or for evil. His breakdown results from the conflict between the psychology of his doubting mind and the idea of moral responsibility that dwells within all humankind.

Again, Girard's (1976) assertion that Dostoevsky is in the process of ridding himself of "all the lies" (p. 208) he sees around him in contemporary Russian society, some of which he had accepted as a young man, is applicable to Ivan's breakdown, too. Swallowing intellectual lies whole like Ivan has done inevitably leads to his fragmentation. Such fragmentation can only be healed by authentic relationships with others, and it is no coincidence that the devil disappears the minute his brother Alyosha comes in and listens to his demented and agitated brother as any good counsellor or psychotherapist would. Ivan's relationships with his brothers were rather superficial in the beginning, but towards the end of the novel, they become more complicated and somewhat less cold. However, he respects the way his youngest brother Alyosha has such patience to listen to his passionate pleading about his nihilistic beliefs. Deep down he envies Alyosha's peace of mind and seeming imperturbability, which Dostoevsky would see as consequent upon his profound faith. Ivan is eventually restored to a place of some little wellbeing, falls in love with Katerina Ivanovna, who was Dmitri's betrothed, and she just begins to requite his love towards the end of the novel. It will

---

fragmentation ensues when "people come to see themselves more and more atomistically... less bound to their fellow citizens in common projects" (pp. 112 — 113). Ivan has such an atomistic world view. He no longer feels he can have "a common purpose" with his fellow human beings, and so falls into fragmentation.

only be when he has dealt fully with his own demons will Ivan be restored to complete health. It is doubtful whether he will ever be so restored, especially if he continues to embrace his nihilistic philosophy.

### 5.7. Conclusion: Taming Demons and Giving the Lie to Untruth

In this chapter, I have examined three of Dostoevsky's novels *The Gambler* (1867), *Demons* (1871 — 1872) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) and have analysed where they have dealt with the mystery of evil from the point of view of acknowledging and dealing with one's own "demons," facing up to the "lies" one has been telling oneself all along and disabusing the mind of its delusions. The theme of this chapter has been Dostoevsky's encounter with his demons as he engages in his dialogue with Self or, in other words, his attempt to clear the obstructions on the road to the integration of Self. I am arguing that it is through encountering, accepting, and dealing with his "demons" head-on, that in acknowledging the lies he had been telling himself in order to face the truth within or, in other words, that it is through unmasking and dismissing the delusions he had formerly embraced, that he truly grows as an individual. I have also traced where the Russian author engaged with the many conflicts of human life through his protagonists and where necessary pointed out where they partake unconsciously with what Girard calls triangular desire. Again, I have shown how these core conflicts, or any conflicted state deriving from them result in fragmentation of the person. I have also indicated where the facing up to that conflicted state by the protagonists, allows them — if they have the courage and strength to make conscious and accept as inauthentic their unconscious desires — to become more congruent and more

autonomous human beings. Through the double hermeneutic I have shown that the author is involved in a process of self-development as he engages with all his “demons.”

In short, Dostoevsky is storying himself to greater authenticity and integration through his literary works which courageously face every problem life throws at him. In other words, he has tamed those demons and given the lie to untruth in his life thus far. By implication and extension, the engaged and committed reader could with effort share in this task of self-development while at the same time enjoying the pleasures of reading good literature.

Furthermore, I have shown how the stories recounted in Dostoevsky’s novels never offer second-rate answers to life’s hard questions nor do they reduce the complexity of life in all its vicissitudes to easy conclusions by offering neat stories with simple endings. In this regard, the good literature we encounter in the Russian author’s work parallels all good psychotherapy which itself never offers superficial answers to life’s complex issues but rather listens to the clients’ stories of pain and concern and gives them comfort, support and help on their onward journey to authentic selfhood. I have recounted in detail Dostoevsky’s encounter with the mystery of evil in the world, both intellectually and spiritually, and I would describe such an encounter above as his “dark night of the senses” where the *Other* or God has seemingly abandoned his faithful disciple and is apparently absent. Again, paradoxically, Dostoevsky deeply believed that the Divine is present in a mysteriously dark and painful way, in that existential suffering caused by the mystery of evil in our lives. For him, any meaningful life or authentic selfhood must, of necessity, involve a spiritual element, and it is to the tracing of that central belief in *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov* that I now turn my attention in the next chapter.

## Chapter Six

### The Spiritual Quest 2: Suffering and Death: Intimations of an Answer

#### 6.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, I dealt in detail with Dostoevsky's painful encounter with his own inner demons and torments as they revealed themselves in three of his novels. This, I argued, marked a significant stage in his spiritual quest. That phase I likened to St John of the Cross's notion of the "dark night of the senses" where the mystic paradoxically and mysteriously experiences God's presence in his apparent absence. In other words, all the possible consolations associated with the senses have completely disappeared. Here, I intend to explore Dostoevsky's deep encounter with the divine at the very heart of his suffering. I contend that he is here experiencing the third dimension of spirituality as I outlined it in chapter five, namely, the reaching out of the *Other* or God to the person in the very midst of his or her torment and travail. In sum, then, the spiritual experience is in fact a two-way encounter where the individual reaches out to God while God is simultaneously experienced as reaching out to him or her. In traditional theological terms, faith is seen as a response to the self-revelation of God, and the consequence of this is that spirituality is experienced as a loving response to the felt communication of the presence of God in the believer's life, a God who has loved the individual, an action that sparked the faith or spiritual response in the first place.<sup>164</sup> This brief excursus on spirituality is supported by the thought of Emmanuel Levinas who, having experienced the trauma of losing his family to the Holocaust, was extremely uncomfortable with any self-centred view of the world, any perspective that

---

<sup>164</sup> In Catholic theology, through what is called an "analysis of faith," the authority of the God who reveals is seen as the "decisive factor" for believing in the first place. (O' Collins, G. & Farrugia, E.G, 1991, p. 10). Therefore, faith may be described as the response of the believer to the self-revelation or self-disclosure of God. In a Christian context, spirituality refers, consequently, to how we systematically respond in faith to God's self-disclosure through various forms of ritual, sacraments, and prayer.

sought to control or define in any way the unique Otherness of the Other through the lenses of the isolated and consequently prejudiced Self. He had seen that such a self-oriented perspective could lead not only to exploitation but to the domination and in extreme circumstances the extermination of others. The Other is so totally other that I am relying on him or her to reveal themselves to me, and my response should be one of listening in humility to that self-revelation.<sup>165</sup> It is not alone the awareness of this sustaining Otherness but also an openness to it that lies at the very foundation of experience for Levinas. This openness in its broadest sense allows for an openness to a spiritual dimension to experience which, in turn, supports my argument for the recovery and efficacy of a spiritual foundation of Existential Psychotherapy.

In chapters one and two, I gave a comprehensive account of Yalom's existential therapeutics which is based on a psychoanalytical approach rooted in talk — what the psychoanalytic tradition calls the “talking cure.” The structure Yalom provides for understanding the central drama of this approach is fourfold, namely helping the patient confront in a supportive context the four “ultimate concerns” of death, freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness. In the unfolding of that therapeutic

---

<sup>165</sup> In Levinas's conception of the relationship between the Self and the Other I can never say that I have a conceptual or knowledge-based perception of that Other, formed solely through the lens of Self, which would be tantamount to an invasion of that Otherness. Rather, in Levinas's scheme of things, I have instead a knowledge learnt primarily through listening to their unique self-revelation. This way of looking at the dynamic relationship between Self and Other is highly Biblical and is based on the experience by the Jewish people of a self-revealing God in their history as a people. In short, Levinas's insights support my contention as to the uniqueness of the Otherness of every individual, and in the distinct utter and ineffable Otherness of the sustaining Creator of the universe, whom theists call God. Levinas as a Jewish theist would obviously not accept the intimate and immanent encounter with the Godhead in the Self as described in a mainline Christian approach as outlined by St Augustine, who based his experience of the encounter with the Divine as a journey into the interior of the Self where he could encounter an “indwelling” of the divine. What is at stake here is what is termed essentially the growing awareness and gradual explication by the early Christian Church of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. With regards to the development of this doctrine O'Collins & Farrugia (1991) make seminal points that are relevant here about Augustine's “psychological” model of the Trinity where he interpreted “the generation of the Son (or Word) on the analogy of human self-knowledge, whereas true self-love illuminates the origin of the Holy Spirit, the “personified” mutual love of Father and Son” (p. 250). On this analogy the closely related doctrine of the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the soul of the baptised Christian lends support to the argument for a profound spiritual base to all experience and for a spiritual foundation of Existential Psychotherapy.

encounter, story is an important device which Yalom employs to help the individual deal effectively with that confrontation. This process, as any psychotherapist will argue, provides a catharsis of healing for the otherwise suffering client. However, my argument is that Dostoevsky's existential therapeutics goes far further and deeper than this; that it is essentially a spiritual therapeutics which is deeply rooted in his novels. I will examine especially how Dostoevsky's existential therapeutics take us deeper into the mystery of human suffering than Yalom's storied Self permits within the limits of his particular existential therapeutics. In taking us deeper into that mystery, Dostoevsky allows for an encounter with the presence of the healing *Otherness* of God.

Dostoevsky engages in general with the whole gamut of human experiences through presenting the reader with a great cast of characters in his many novels and short stories. These characters come from all walks of life from the richest to the poorest circumstances, display multifarious motives from the most sublime and ethically pure to the most abject and morally corrupt; some suffer from either physical or mental disability while others are addicted to either alcohol or gambling. In short, then, for Dostoevsky, nothing human, and consequently nothing spiritual, lies outside his purview. In this spiritually comprehensive view, I will argue that the author's oeuvre is universally representative of the existential reality of living and that his struggle to story himself is, as a result, a spiritual one that is essentially a two-way encounter between the author and his Creator God. In the words of Berdyaev, Dostoevsky is presenting human beings to the reader in their "boundlessness."<sup>166</sup>

Here I will speak of the healing power of the *Other* or the transcendent in therapy and will deal with the novels *The Idiot* (1868 — 1869) and *The Brothers Karamazov*

---

<sup>166</sup> Retrieved from: [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1918\\_294.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1918_294.html) accessed 20/09/2018.

(1878 — 1880) in succession. In *The Idiot* I will trace the author's encounter with the spiritual dimension of life in what we call mystical experience <sup>167</sup> while in *The Brothers Karamazov* I will describe the religious transformation of the author through meeting the living God in the very midst of suffering. However, an acceptance of a relationship to a divine principle is no simple way out of life's difficulties because belief in Christian principles comes at a price, which is the cost of a discipleship that requires believers to face the stark geometry of the cross in their own lives. Dostoevsky was well aware of that cost as we shall see in our treatment of both these novels. However, the juxtaposition of therapist as Other and God as *Other* will allow us to see the limitations of therapy when it does not acknowledge the Self who is searching for God or God who is searching for us.

## 6.2. *The Idiot* — Encountering God through Mystical Experience

The American author Henry James once referred to nineteenth century novels, especially the Russian ones, as being “loose and baggy monsters.” <sup>168</sup> What he meant by that generalisation was that they lacked compact structure and form, and were, in short, scattered. We certainly get a “loose and baggy monster” in *The Idiot* as its very provenance indicates. Dostoevsky struggled with authoring this novel for several years, even at one stage destroying an extensive draft in its entirety and had changed his central character from being an evil devil-incarnate person to one who was going to be wholly pure and good like Christ. All the characters in this novel tell stories and relate

---

<sup>167</sup> Mystical experience in the Christian tradition refers to the union the mystic experiences with the Godhead or the transcendent. I define mysticism more fully below under section 6.2. and see also footnote 173.

<sup>168</sup> See Swindon, P. (1973) where he tells us that the remark appears in James's preface to his novel *The Tragic Muse*: "But what do such large loose baggy monsters with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean?" (p. 102)

anecdotes from their past, and this adds to the “looseness” of the novel and its seeming digression from its central theme. However, when we bear in mind Bakhtin’s theory of the “polyphonic” dimension in all of Dostoevsky’s work we realise that the co-existence of multiple voices suggests a greater harmony beyond the apparent digressions and that, as Williams (2008) suggests, all of this author’s novels contain “a constant and unfinished interplay of perspectives” (p. 3).

Following the Girardian principle outlined in chapter two, I am arguing that the author’s personal torments and struggles at the time of writing are deeply reflected in this novel.<sup>169</sup> According to Hingley (1978) Dostoevsky was often “irascible, highly-strung, living on his nerves and with a very low flashpoint” during this period (p. 129). Furthermore, he was constantly taking offence, often when none was intended, and was almost banned from a casino in Baden-Baden. In a letter to his friend Maykov,<sup>170</sup> Dostoevsky acknowledged these flaws of character, declaring that he had “a base and excessively impetuous nature. Everywhere and in all things, I go to the limit. All my life I have overstepped the mark” (quoted *ibid.*, p. 130). In short, he was a very conflicted and complex man, who struggled to make sense of his life and we witness that struggle in his novels where he sought as Girard puts it to “dialogue with himself.” In that struggle, he constantly returned to the spiritual sustenance he had gained through reading his *New Testament* which had sustained him from the time of his imprisonment until his very last breath.<sup>171</sup> The argument for belief in God was central to his dialogue

---

<sup>169</sup> Girard (1997) calls this emphasis in Dostoevsky’s work the “dialogue of the novelist with himself” (p. 102).

<sup>170</sup> Apollon Nikolayevich Maykov (1821 —1897) was a Russian poet, best known for his lyric verse showcasing images of Russian villages, nature, and national history.

<sup>171</sup> Dostoevsky’s well-worn and heavily annotated copy of the *New Testament* can be seen in the Dostoevsky Museum in St Petersburg. In her memoir, his wife Anna wrote, “often when he was deep in thought, he would open the New Testament . . . only in that book did he find support; whenever he resorted to it, he was filled with new energy and strength.” See Frank (2012), p. 925.

with Self because Dostoevsky could not conceive of a philosophical anthropology without belief in a personal creator even if that involved a struggle with the living God. Indeed, a recent visit with another great Russian author, Ivan Turgenev, ended up in a blazing row on that score: he had taken umbrage at the latter's continual exile in Europe, his seeming indifference to all things Russian, his European ideas and most essentially his declaring himself to be an atheist. In an interesting letter, again to Maykov, he stated that Turgenev "has insulted me... by his beliefs" (quoted *ibid.*, p.132). All of this background is very essential to understanding *The Idiot* because its central character is based on the coupling of the author himself and the person of Christ — that is, there is a certain mimesis going on between the author and its central character here. In this, I contend that Myshkin, to whom he also attributes epilepsy and social awkwardness from which he suffered himself, is more probably a character with some of the author's qualities who attempts to act like a Christ or a Don Quixote. However, he does not give Myshkin his irascible or impetuous nature but rather the seeming imperturbability and equanimity of a saint. It would appear that such an attempt to live as a Christ-like figure is fated to failure as Myshkin ends up a broken man and has to return to his sanatorium. While Dostoevsky may well have planned to present his readers with an exceptionally good man, his knowledge of his craft demanded that such an apparently naïve and good character could only end up as a tragic failure. This in itself, the struggle to be scrupulously or naively good, formed part of Dostoevsky's own search — an age-old moral struggle first alluded to by St Paul.<sup>172</sup>

The plot of the novel deals with a murder consequent upon the passionate love of two rivals, Prince Myshkin and Rogozhin for the *femme fatale* Anastassya Filippovna

---

<sup>172</sup> In Romans 7: 19 we read: "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing." While Myshkin does what is good all the time, he inevitably and naively does not attempt to stop others doing evil things when he has an opportunity to do so.

Barashkov. This denouement comes about against the background of the Christian ideal of forgiveness portrayed by the innocent and gullible central character Prince Myshkin who seeks to do good to, and by, everyone. Dostoevsky purposely drew this character like that of a compassionate Christ or an innocent Don Quixote and knew well that he would be castigated for such a pure, almost unbelievably saccharine, delineation of virtue. As Cardinal (2010) points out, the author was well aware that goodness is not a great literary theme as good stories derive much of their strength from the depiction of evil and the efforts to counter it (p. vii). Myshkin is no figure of fun, except perhaps when he accidentally smashes the expensive Chinese vase at General Epanchin's social gathering. The central problem with Myshkin's characterisation is that he simply does not develop as a character and his very changelessness prevents him from listening sympathetically to others, and therefore, in relating to and understanding them. Williams (2008) puts it succinctly by stating that he is a character "without a hinterland" (p. 50), that is, he has no vibrant family background as he literally is without firm roots, emerges at the beginning from a sanatorium and retreats there at the end of the novel in a worse state than he was when he first arrived. Significantly, from the point of view of Existential Psychotherapy, then, Myshkin is far too immutably the same to possess the characteristics of a counsellor.

However, what is of importance here is the mystical dimension that lies at a deep level in this novel. Therefore, a definition of mysticism must be advanced at this juncture. For the ancient Greeks, the word "mystic" referred to one to whom a secret knowledge of the divine mysteries had been given. Welch in Komonchak, Collins & Lane (1987) defines the Christian concept of mysticism "as referring to an experience of God... [it is] a process... a way of life which is built upon one's direct experience of God and which proceeds in an organic manner as one is led ever more deeply into the

reality of life and into a loving union with the Mystery revealed at its core” (p. 694). Over the centuries the word “mystic” came to refer to anyone who enjoyed contact and communion with the very source of all life, God Himself. This tradition persisted through the centuries in all the Abrahamic faiths.<sup>173</sup> Happold (1970) offers the following general and succinct description: “Mysticism, in its pure form is the science of the Ultimate, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else.” (p.12) In short, then, these several descriptions offer us a way to understand the mystical sense that Dostoevsky is exploring in the life of Myshkin and by mimetic implication in his own life. Also, in this respect, therefore, I contend that Dostoevsky’s Existential Psychotherapy is essentially a spiritual one that is far more ultimate than what Yalom offers us by way of his ultimate concerns.

Furthermore, this mystical level is inextricably bound up with the issues of suffering and death which are existential issues or “ultimate concerns” if we use Yalom’s language. For instance, the author models aspects of the prince on Jesus Christ, after the depiction of Jesus in Russian icons, as having hollow cheeks, blond hair, and a thin pointed beard. Indeed, icon painting and prayerfully observing icons can be seen as mystical acts of communing with the divine. Also, the prince ignores insults from others and does not engage in judging them even when they extort money from him. Being Christ-like, he silently ignores such personal contempt, writing it down to their lack of understanding. Furthermore, he even resists condemning Ragozhin for murdering the woman of their desires. This latter character is the polar

---

<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, mysticism is also found in the Eastern religions, e.g., in Hinduism we find much mention of the saintly Sri Ramakrishna who lived in India between 1836 and 1886. Examples from the other great world religions can be found in Rafique, Powell & Hudelson (2000). Another definition of mysticism given by a twentieth century philosopher is also *ad rem* here. Conradi, in the introduction to Murdoch (1997), states that mysticism, as Murdoch understood it, is to be equated with “an other-centred picture of moral choice,” motivated by “a sense of mystery” that is ultimately attracted to the “Platonic Good” (pp. xxii – xxiii). The late Irish Jesuit and mystic William Johnston (2006) states that mysticism is a way to get in touch with his “true self” (pp. 26 and 96).

opposite to Myshkin as he is dark haired and almost demonic in nature. Again, the dramatist in Dostoevsky skilfully uses the interplay of the images of light and dark to portray the conflict between good and evil. Ragozhin is a confirmed atheist who comes from a family besotted by religion — his father was a staunch Old Believer <sup>174</sup> while his mother constantly read accounts of the lives of the saints. He instinctively likes and trusts the Prince since their first meeting but develops a hatred for him out of jealousy of his love for Anastassya. Rogozhin represents passionate and instinctive love in contrast to Myshkin's Christian love that is based on compassion. From his first meeting with Myshkin in the train, the reader is introduced to the beginnings of the war between good and evil in the conflict between the two.

In the character of Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky admitted that he set about depicting "the positively good and beautiful man." In the same letter he reported that initially he had been afraid "to make a novel out of it because it is an exceedingly difficult idea," and that "at last, I took a chance, as at roulette..." (quoted in Frank, 2010, p. 562). It is quite easy to see that this man models himself on Jesus Christ through what Girard would call "external mediation" which in his case is conscious and authentically motivated. Because this character is "too good to be true," other characters in the novel see him as naïve and as an "idiot."

The theological and mystical concept of "the Fool for Christ," or "Holy Fool" in the Russian Orthodox tradition is similar to a biblical prophet who is able to reveal the deep truths of life, but unlike the biblical counterpart strives "with imaginary insanity to

---

<sup>174</sup> The Old Believers or Old Ritualists are Eastern Orthodox Christians who maintain the liturgical and ritual practices of the Eastern Orthodox Church as they were before the reforms of Patriarch Nikon of Moscow between 1652 and 1666.

reveal the insanity of the world.”<sup>175</sup> No doubt Dostoevsky had that in mind, too, as Myshkin is an individual who outwardly behaves in an eccentric, naively open and gullible manner, taking everyone at face value contrary to the commonly accepted standards of his society while he inwardly pursues a religious ideal of behaviour and practice nourished by mystical experience where he encounters a unity with God. Peace (1992) acknowledges this mystical dimension of the novel, the masterful presentation of which is “the triumph of aesthetics” (p. 59). By this he means that Myshkin’s philosophy, which can be encapsulated in his declaration that “beauty will save the world” and that “humility is a terrible force,” is essentially an aesthetic one. Furthermore, Dostoevsky set out in this novel with this aesthetic in mind to present us with “the beauty of the example of the positively good man” (ibid., p. 62).

Furthermore, we find this sublime aesthetic in Dostoevsky’s own life. For instance, his experience of his mock execution led him to appreciate the beauty of life in a mystical sense. Employing my double hermeneutic, namely the storying of the Self as described by Yalom and Girard’s theory as two related forms of existential therapeutics, I argue that Dostoevsky’s love of (desire for) life as witnessed in his devotion to Christ as external mediator leads the author to a mystical appreciation of the beauty and fragility of all life. The following brief lines from Myshkin’s account of a prisoner’s encounter with a mock execution reveal a mystical intent that links directly with Dostoevsky’s experience:

He had only five more minutes to live. He told me that those five minutes seemed to him an infinite time, a vast wealth; he felt that he had so many

---

<sup>175</sup> Quoted at [https://www.rbth.com/literature/2013/06/06/russian\\_umberto\\_eco\\_demystifies\\_the\\_holy\\_fool\\_26401.html](https://www.rbth.com/literature/2013/06/06/russian_umberto_eco_demystifies_the_holy_fool_26401.html), the official site of *Russia Beyond* owned by the Rossiya Segodnya, a Russian government state news agency, offering news, comment, opinion and analysis on culture, politics, business, science and public life in Russia. Accessed 11/12/2019. The Russian term for “holy fool” is “yurodivy.” See also Syrkin, A.Y. (1982) pp. 150 — 171.

lives left in those five minutes... Not far off there was a church and the gilt roof was glittering in the sunshine... he could not tear himself away from the light. It seemed to him that those rays were his new nature and that in three minutes he would melt into them... (Dostoevsky, 2010, pp. 53 — 54)

Here, the mystical experience allows the subject to encounter a timelessness where he meets infinity in a short five-minute interval as well as being enlightened by the light of truth reflected from the gilded roof of the nearby church. Again, he also experiences a sense of unity in this mystical encounter, so much so that he felt he would become part of the whole experience by “melting” into it in such a way that he believed this was his new nature. All of these qualities are the hallmarks of a genuine mystical experience.

Moreover, Dostoevsky describes somewhat later in the book the experience of an epileptic fit, the “aura” of which is a sublime experience, somewhat akin to a mystical or religious experience: “The sense of life, the consciousness of self, were multiplied ten times at these moments which passed like a flash of lightening. His mind and his heart were flooded with extraordinary light; all his uneasiness, all his doubts, all his anxieties were relieved at once...” (Dostoevsky, 2010, pp. 201 — 202).<sup>176</sup> Once again, the mystical experience depicted here through the literary device of Myskin’s epilepsy connects directly with Dostoevsky’s own illness. The analytical psychologist and interdisciplinary critic in literature and religious studies, David Tacey (2013), rehearsing a theme long emphasised by Jung, maintains that “the gods return in our time...as fierce psychological forces in our psyche,” especially during our illnesses, and goes on to further emphasise that modern life suffers from an “unparalleled

---

<sup>176</sup> Dostoevsky does question in this passage whether the experience of the so-called aura before an epileptic seizure proper is only attributable to his illness by getting Myshkin to muse: “What if it is only disease?” (ibid. p. 204). There is also an interesting link here with Ivan’s musing as to whether his meeting with the Devil is real or is a mere delusion of his mind. (Dostoevsky 2007, “Ivan’s Nightmare,” pp. 713 — 731) Both these references show us Dostoevsky’s questioning and open mind.

impoverishment” of religious symbolism and experience (pp. 31 — 32). This theme of men becoming gods or idols is a theme also central to Girard’s (1997) analysis of modernity that human beings have replaced the true God with false ones or idols where they “renounce the divine mediator only to fall back on the human mediator” ... and “in tomorrow’s world *men will be gods for each other*” (author’s italics), (pp. 60 — 61).<sup>177</sup> I am arguing, then, that the healing for Myshkin and for Dostoevsky lies in the richness and authenticity of their religious symbolism and experience that allows them to plumb the depths of their sufferings. In other words, their authenticity is bought at a high cost, at the price of the anguish of both physical and mental pain.

Furthermore, much of the potent symbolism found in *The Idiot* grows in part out of the fertile soil of the Russian spiritual heritage that embraces both the “Fool for Christ” tradition and that of the importance of iconography. Both of these themes are prominent motifs in this novel. For instance, the process of the creation of icons is in itself a prayerful activity and Myshkin, as we have seen, is given the fair and sublime features of the Christ figure often depicted in those images. The mystical significance of iconography is called into play by implication of its contrast with the importance of Dostoevsky’s reference to the famous painting of Hans Holbein’s *Dead Christ*.<sup>178</sup> Frank (2010) calls this image “the key religious symbol of the book” (p. 583). We find a copy of that famous painting in the picture gallery as Rogozhin is conducting Myshkin

---

<sup>177</sup> Chapter two of Girard (1997) offers a rich exploration of this theme under the title “Men Become Gods in the Eyes of Each Other” (pp. 53 — 82).

<sup>178</sup> Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) is in the Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland. When one visits it, it is hard to believe that it is only a painting. The art critic Jonathon Jones describes the experience of looking at it thus: “It is a dead body that lies at eye level in a recess in the museum wall. Of course, you can see perfectly well that the recess is a three-dimensional illusion created by a painter. And yet even as you admire Holbein's skill in painting it, you respond to the corpse not as a painted figure at all — but as a dead body. You behold nature's way with the human creature, right here, right now.” In short, we are in the presence of death. Quoted at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2009/jun/17/holbein-dead-christ-jonathan-jones> accessed 13/12/2019.

around his large and strange family home. This painting is such a realistic depiction of death that Dostoevsky through his character Myshkin feels he is in the presence of the dead Jesus. It is so realistic that it frightens all its viewers, and indeed it is a painting that leads the dying Ippolit to believe that there is no God or other life, and that this world is all there really is.<sup>179</sup> Holbein's depiction is starkly realistic while the Russian tradition of iconography would depict all their saints and most especially Jesus Christ, even the crucified Jesus of Good Friday with unearthly, ethereal and unnaturalistic features which deliberately point to the powerful presence of the supernatural or transcendent shining like a light through the images depicted. The contrast with Holbein's realistic portrayal of Jesus in the *Dead Christ* suggests that the latter implies finality and finitude while the former implies continuity and infinitude.<sup>180</sup> Only Myshkin can see it in a mystical way as the Good Friday-Holy Saturday experience that precedes the resurrection.

A.S. Byatt (2004), in her critique of this novel, argues that it is essentially about the human encounter with death. In her review of the Penguin Classics version, she avers, contrary to accepted critical opinion, that it deserves to be rated among Dostoevsky's major novels because of his masterly exposition of the death conflict that lies at its very heart. This contemporary novelist and critic states her contention thus:

This book is a masterpiece — flawed, occasionally tedious or overwrought like many masterpieces.... [because] the true subject of *The Idiot* is the imminence and immanence of death... as Myshkin makes us confront the horror of the certainty of being about to die, of knowing that it is exactly

---

<sup>179</sup> In all the major novels, characters like Raskolnikov, Ippolit, Kirillov, Ivan Karamazov are all tainted by the ideology of nihilism, yet Dostoevsky portrays them with sympathy and understanding.

<sup>180</sup> In August 1867, the Dostoevskys visited Basel on their way to Geneva. They took the opportunity while there to visit the museum where they viewed Holbein's famous painting and Anna writes in her diary: "Feodor was completely carried away by it, and in his desire to look at it closer got onto a chair..." (Quoted in Frank, 2010, p. 549.)

appointed and inevitable, while the body and mind are in ordinary good health.<sup>181</sup>

Byatt and Yalom being agnostic and atheistic commentators respectively would doubtless contend that Myshkin is unhinged by the trauma of his experience and rendered completely mad. I am arguing here that there is perhaps another interpretation which is only hinted at, namely that the “Holy Fool” is transformed beyond any human recognition into a supernatural state that cannot be fully recognised in this human world. This is a paradox that Dostoevsky realised he could not resolve in this novel because the inevitability of Myshkin’s naïve love and concern for others can only result in his dismissal as an idiot and in his own tragic fall and indeed that of others as well.

Dostoevsky lived with illness and death all his life as we have seen already from my biographical sketch of his life. Because of this, he wished to stress death’s inevitability, even in the very midst of life. With regard to the autobiographical nature of this novel, Dostoevsky has Myshkin recount the author’s own acquaintance with facing imminent death during his experience of mock execution as a young man. The following words of that account are worth reproducing here as we can intuit from the text the reaching out of the *Other* or transcendent to the condemned: “What if I were not to die! What if I could go back to life — what eternity!... I would turn every minute into an age... I would count every minute as it passed, I would not waste one!” (Dostoevsky, 2010, p. 55) Here, we have distilled the author’s deep spiritual and mystical take on the prospect of death, namely that contemplating it allows us to appreciate all the valuable things in life, the gift of our very being, the consequent insight into the beauty and fragility of that life, the interconnection of all things, the unity of being and the presence of the living and transcendent God through his

---

<sup>181</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jun/26/highereducation.classics> accessed 27/02/2018.

immanence in nature and living presence in our own hearts. This is essentially what I mean by stating that there is a spiritual dimension to life and by implication to Existential Psychotherapy.

In short, Dostoevsky wished his readers to engage with the reality of death, and while offering no final solution for the unbeliever, he felt deeply that acknowledging the anguish of being alive must surely end in our being better human beings. It is in and through our sufferings, and in facing head-on our mortality, fragility, vulnerability, and finitude that are part of this deeply felt anguish that we become stronger human beings. We become stronger in the sense that we have a new appreciation for all the little things in life which we once took for granted. We place more value on our time, and consequently spend it on pursuits that build up our sense of selfhood and also on surrounding ourselves with others who are dear to us instead of depleting our energies on less valuable pursuits. This, Dostoevsky certainly did as he dedicated himself to wrestling with the big questions in life through his creative work and in supporting and being supported by his extended family. In this sense, we can apply Nietzsche's oft-quoted wisdom to Dostoevsky that what does not kill us will in fact make us more resilient human beings. I contend that Dostoevsky sought to portray that fact in this novel. While, at the end of the novel, Myshkin is racked by grief on an emotional level as he is left without his beloved, yet on a mystical level he is able to enter a state where he can even be compassionate towards her murderer. This experience, of course, will appear as sheer idiocy to unbelievers and again Dostoevsky, who was steeped in the *New Testament*, would be familiar with the text from St Paul: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor 1: 18)

Rogozhin's invitation of Myshkin back to his eerie house, along with the scene of the dreadful crime where the victim Anastassya Filippovna is laid out on a desk in the study covered with a sheet, are details redolent of gothic tales. No wonder, then, that the narrator describes Myshkin's experience of this frightening scene as follows: "Moreover his heart was throbbing so violently that he could scarcely speak... Myshkin's legs began to give way under him.... It was dark in the room... The sleeper was covered over from head to foot with a white sheet... the room became more and more still and deathlike" (Dostoevsky 2010, pp. 549 — 551). Rogozhin, the murderer, invites the innocent prince to lie down on the floor with him next to the corpse. Later, when the doors open, and people enter, they find Rogozhin in a delirious state and Myshkin gently stroking his head. Again, this amazingly surreal scene of murderer and jilted lover, of the demon of the piece and the "Fool for Christ" sharing a room with the victim adds to the amazing effect of this scene which is precisely what Dostoevsky meant when he said that he was a writer of "fantastic realism." Again, this last term is decidedly linked to a mystical sense of life.<sup>182</sup>

Furthermore, Myshkin, our "Holy Fool" is gently stroking the murderer's head with what can only be termed a compassionate love. In a mystical sense Myshkin has transcended his human grief and anger at the murderer for his dastardly crime and is portraying a Christlike compassion for him. Rogozhin is found "completely unconscious and raving" while Myshkin is transfixed and is seemingly in another world (ibid., p. 555) The outcome of this "fantastically real" scene is that Rogozhin is tried and sentenced to fifteen years of hard labour in Siberia while Myshkin is sent once again to Dr. Schneider's clinic in Switzerland, where he returns in an apparently worse

---

<sup>182</sup> Dostoevsky wrote in what is generally termed a style of "fantastic realism." Frank (2010) quotes a letter of Dostoevsky's where he describes his realism as fantastic because he argued that it was "more real" and "deeper" than that of those who criticised him for his lack of realism (p. 575).

physical and mental state than when he was first brought to the clinic several years earlier. The psychiatrist “does not yet say that recovery is out of the question, but he allows himself phrases of most melancholy possibilities” (ibid., p. 557). This slow reluctance of the doctor to come to hard and fast conclusions leaves the reader with a sense of paradox at the “fantastically real.” Dostoevsky is here working through his own conflicted struggle with the anguish he experienced in his life in relation to the finality of death on the one hand and the extraordinary mystical experience of unity with the spiritual world and the lure of a heavenly horizon on the other. In a more mystical sense, then, what we get in *The Idiot* is the Good Friday—Holy Saturday experience of the Easter Triduum, the period of suffering at its existential worst coupled with the indisputable anxiety of waiting for a seemingly elusive answer to the mystery of death summed up in the book’s central image, namely Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. From a spiritual angle, there is hope of a profound healing at hand, painful though the anguished waiting for it may be.

From a Yalomian perspective such a hope is written off as at best “wishful thinking” and at worst sheer irrationality. Picking up on what may be called the motifs of the religious symbolism, the promise of a further horizon of value and truth, vague enough as it may be perceived by many, is strongly hinted at in the mystical experiences recounted by Myshkin that capture the author’s own conviction of the reality of such healing encounters. Furthermore, let us recall that the definition of spirituality I offered embraces a two-way encounter, that is, that the *Other* or the Divine reaches out to the individual as well as that individual reaching out for God. Such would be the deeply held beliefs of Myshkin and his author Dostoevsky. The author’s own physical and mental experience with his epilepsy, his encounter with evil in all its incarnations in his life are all closely interwoven with the efficacy of suffering itself, when viewed from a

Christian frame of reference, in bringing the individual into closer contact with the Divine source and sustainer of all life. Such an approach to therapy based on a therapeutics that would acknowledge the spiritual dimension to life, in effect, would herald the recovery of a spiritual foundation of Existential Psychotherapy. In short, a therapy based on a spiritual foundation, or at least one open to such a foundation, offers greater hope of a deeper healing than could be allowed for in a merely humanist therapy, beneficial as such definitely is. In other words, while I have already argued and shown that Yalom's "ultimate concerns" are simply not deep or ultimate enough, in like manner, I infer that the healing offered by his approach is not deep or ultimate enough either.

### 6.3. *The Brothers Karamazov*: Finding Spiritual Sustenance in the face of Suffering.

The novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is deservedly recognised as one of the classics of world literature because it deals most dramatically and profoundly with all of the concerns and conflicts central to the human condition where the cast of powerful characters encounter the four "ultimate concerns" of death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness proposed by Yalom among many other existential concerns. It does so as we have seen through a polyphony of voices as one might hear at a performance of a Shakespearean tragedy. Dostoevsky's own personal spirituality is summed up in the novel's epigraph, a quotation from John 12:24, on which the whole work could be considered a commentary: "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." I will trace the journey of the three central brothers down into this symbolic death to the Self and thence back up into a new and stronger life in varying degrees from one to

another, and then I will trace how that spiritual vision is dramatically worked out in this novel.

In his dramatic portrayal of the human condition in this novel, the author is working through his personal spirituality in the face of the suffering and angst that the human condition presents each of us with, and that such a personal spirituality is presented dramatically through the interplay and interaction of the concerns of four brothers in their relationship with one another and with their father. In his own familial context, Dostoevsky experienced much guilt over the way he had treated his father when a young man and also over the death of his own son who died from epilepsy which he had inherited from the father. So, his spirituality had, therefore, to be worked out through engaging with this deeply felt guilt, another central existential concern along with the other four ultimate concerns.

Drama always fascinated Dostoevsky from a young age and he spent many pages recounting the importance of theatrical involvement for the prisoners in the Omsk *katorga* in Siberia.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, this interest comes across strongly in all his novels which contain much dramatic dialogue. It is little wonder, then, that he was haunted by the 1781 drama *The Robbers* by Friedrich Schiller. This, the first great play of this German philosopher and playwright, became most influential in the development of European melodrama. Schiller's play deals with the murder of a father and the rivalry between two brothers quite similar to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* though this novel presents us with four brothers, Dmitri, Ivan, Alyosha and Smerdyakov. These brothers are not quite as much at each other's throats as Schiller's duo. Frank (2010) recounts

---

<sup>183</sup> See Dostoevsky, F. (2010b) in a chapter entitled "The Theatricals" where he describes the Christmas concerts that the prisoners organised and presented for entertainment at Christmastide (pp. 151 — 169). As regards the importance of drama for the wellbeing of the prisoners Dostoevsky remarks: "These poor people were only allowed to do as they liked, ever so little, to be merry like human beings, to spend one short hour not as though in prison — and they were morally transformed, if only for a few minutes..."

that Dr Dostoevsky had taken his wife and his two older sons to see a performance of that great play and that Fyodor would write the following in a letter shortly prior to his death: “the tremendous impression I carried away from it acted very richly on my spiritual side” (pp. 33 — 34). The play largely deals with intense rivalry with respect to inheritance and it deals with the big issues of injustice versus justice and with the thorny question of the nature of moral evil. Furthermore, Frank (pp. 772 — 774) recounts that Dostoevsky’s second wife Anna tells us in her diary that her husband read that play several times during his composition of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and that, moreover, Fyodor had read it aloud to his family during that period. Again, Magarshack (Dostoyevsky, 1978a p. xii) reminds us in his introduction to this classic novel that while the author was imprisoned in Siberia he had met a former army lieutenant there called Ilyinsky, a man serving a twenty-year sentence for parricide, and that it was from this source that he had got the plot for his last novel. Dostoevsky was most likely also feeling a deep guilt at the tragic death of his own father who had died in mysterious circumstances.<sup>184</sup> Peace (1992) argues: “It is as though Dostoyevsky’s feelings of guilt as a son and his feelings of guilt as a father [his 3-year-old-son had died from epilepsy and the father blamed himself] have found artistic expression in his last great novel, for the reciprocal guilt of fathers and sons is the very substance of *The Brothers Karamazov*” (p. 220).<sup>185</sup> Furthermore, in this regard, the village of Chermashnya,<sup>186</sup>

---

<sup>184</sup> There exist conflicting versions of Dr Dostoevsky’s death from an apoplectic stroke to murder at the hands of his angry serfs who may have judged him to be a cruel master. In a footnote, Frank (2010) mentions that a neighbouring landlord may have promoted the rumour of his death at the hands of his serfs in order to make his purchase of the Dostoevsky lands much easier (p. 48).

<sup>185</sup> The child’s name was Alexey, of which Alyosha is a diminutive form, and it is no surprise that the most saintly and spiritual of the Karamazov brothers bears that sacred name. The name “Alyosha” is used 90% of the time in the novel because it is a pet or familial name that shows that he is close to all characters in the novel. The origins of the name lie in its root meaning of strong defender and is thus an apt name for the young monk who is a defender of the faith. In connection with guilt in the same novel Ernest Jones (1964) quotes Freud as saying in 1928 in a German critical edition of the same book that the author experienced the guilt connected with his father’s death to such an extent that it was as if he was experiencing “a parricide by proxy” (p. 590). Furthermore, that Freudian introduction argues that it is no

where old Fyodor Karamazov is murdered, is linked in all the sons' minds with their guilt while the name Alyosha is linked with the guilt of the father (Dostoevsky) at his son's death. Kearney (2016a), in attempting to tease out how writing literature might help the writer work through trauma, what he terms the "writing cure," maintains that Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as well as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *Odyssey* are "stories of fathers and sons, stories of transgenerational trauma, which I suggest, are transmitted and somehow transfigured in the writing of the stories" (pp. 77 — 78).

Christ, Bonanno and Malkinson (2003) point out that the death of a child at any age is a profound, difficult, and most painful experience and quote recent studies that suggest that parents of children who die from any cause are "more likely to suffer the symptoms of traumatic stress and experience more severe problems with emotional dysregulation than occurs with the death of a spouse" (p. 375). Kearney (2016a) refers to what he calls the "double bind of trauma" (p. 78), that is, the seemingly impossible task of wanting to express the profundity of one's grief and yet being unable to adequately express those feelings in appropriate words. In short, how do you describe the indescribable? This double bind was surely playing in the mind and heart of Dostoevsky as he sought to wrestle with his grief and, finally set that trauma free in words upon paper. Indeed, it is in the telling or writing of the story that healing is achieved, but never cure.

---

coincidence that some of the greatest works of world literature — such as *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, as well as *The Brothers Karamazov* — all concern parricide which, in Dostoevsky's case, the founding father of psychoanalysis links to the Russian's epilepsy.

<sup>186</sup> It is interesting to note that Dostoevsky names the priest of Chermashnya as Fr. Ilinsky as he had met a man of that name, who was convicted for murdering his father, in the katorga at Omsk. Ilinsky was wrongly convicted and was eventually pardoned when the real murderer was found. Here, too, we note how carefully the author chose the names of his characters.

Moreover, it is the breakdown of the Karamazov family that is the locus for the action of this novel, which is highly dramatic and consequently dialogue-rich. The paterfamilias, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, now a widower, has lived a profligate life, has been unfaithful to his wives in the past and is still a philanderer who cares little for the welfare of his three legitimate sons and has fathered another son outside marriage, Pavel Fyodorovich Smerdyakov, whom he employs as his servant. It is against this background of entangled and enmeshed relationships in the Karamazov family that the characters are at pains to construct an authentic Self, or to story their true identity: Dmitri seeks to do it by way of profligacy and wild abandon with a flair for excess and gambling (his father's equal profligacy perhaps makes the older Karamazov his unconscious model in life and who, in Girard's terminology, becomes his internal mediator). Ivan chooses an intellectual and atheistic materialism but ends up racked with anger, angst, shame, and guilt because of the inevitable consequences of his disbelief (see Dostoyevsky 1978, pp. 708 — 765). Again, it is in the nexus of the complex relationships between the four brothers that the great themes of this novel unfold — existential themes such as, the question of evil in the world, the problems of innocent suffering, freedom, belief and unbelief, materialism, nihilism, the meaning of life, the Christian message of love, forgiveness, healing, and redemption. In practically all the anguished scenes between the four brothers, it is always the monk Alyosha, a novice at the local monastery, who is the interlocutor, but most essentially the listener to the concerns and conflicts of one or other of his tormented brothers. I will be returning to this theme below as essentially, I argue, it is he who is acting as a counsellor or therapist for his three brothers. Dostoevsky is here working through his own conflicts in the dynamic interplay of the three major brothers, Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha and also through the shadowy presence of the minor brother Smerdyakov. Such conflicts are his

guilt at the death of his father and his unfaithfulness to his first wife, his agonising path to belief through the crucible of doubt and his deep grief at the deaths of his two young children. It is obvious that Alyosha is his favoured character, who is a well-balanced disciple of Fr Zossima, the very symbol of Orthodox Christianity. However, Dostoevsky gives each of the other brothers, who are representatives of various aspects of his personality, much more powerful and dramatic roles in the novel.

Rowan Williams' assessment of what Dostoevsky is about in any of his novels is succinct: "His way of defending Christianity was to try and show how it could cope with the most horrific and extreme of human situations. He never gives easy answers but expects his readers to face the worst the world can offer so that the scale of God's grace becomes even more astonishing."<sup>187</sup> In effect, the "astonishing" nature of God's grace is exactly what I mean when I emphasise the two-way movement of spirituality. In the point made by Williams, the *Other* or God is reaching out to the individual in a graced relationship that astonishes and transforms the recipient.

Furthermore, Dostoevsky is never polemical in his creative writing while he may be so in his journalistic pieces. His refusal to give the reader easy answers or contrived endings in his writing parallels an important principle in counselling and psychotherapy, namely the avoidance of any direct advice to the client or patient. The author prefers to have his readers struggle with him in his characters as he seeks to story himself authentically and ground himself in a sustaining spirituality. He wants them to think, to pose moral questions, to get involved in the arguments and not swallow anything whole and to work through their own suffering as he is doing in this novel. Casey (2018) in

---

<sup>187</sup> Retrieved on Dr Rowan Williams' website at <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2003/the-archbishop-on-dostoevskys-devils>. Accessed 20/05/2018.

commenting on M.P. Gallagher's take on the therapeutic value of reading Dostoevsky's work confirms what I am arguing here: his creative writings, he argues, "act as a reality check for approaches that are far too theoretical. His novels do this by portraying flesh and blood human beings in all their ambiguity" (p. 64). In so doing, he effectively makes the fictional autobiographical Self present to the reader.

Grant (1998) has wisely contended that the Self is not a homunculus within our heads but rather "a work-in-progress," "a perpetually recreated" phenomenon we are engaged in constructing (pp. 294 — 5). This is in line with what Nietzsche, Sartre and a host of other atheistic existentialists contended, that each person is called upon to accept the challenge of shaping, forming, or creating their own best Self, through making responsible choices in life. They did, of course, realise that this task required much courage. Sartre called this endeavour our life project.

However, that is only half the story. Dostoevsky, following Kierkegaard, portrayed in his novels a far more balanced picture of the nature of the individual. He appreciated that not alone was his identity or selfhood a project or task to be undertaken, but that it was at the same time a unique gift or grace to be discovered. The quest for identity or selfhood for Dostoevsky, then, was in effect a dual or two-way process that involved painful soul-searching on the one hand, as well as the discovery and acceptance of the multifarious gifts that are received gratis from some initially unknown beneficent giver. In brief, then, Dostoevsky saw life as at once project and gift, task and grace, exploration, and discovery. In his novels he engaged in the tough project of self-creation while remaining open to the discovery of ever further depths to the complexity of humanity that could only be explained by an openness to a spiritual depth.

We can argue that the notion of Self or identity that Dostoevsky is painstakingly creating is a Christian one. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, he is essentially storying or constructing that Self in a tripartite way through the lives of the three Karamazov brothers Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha, or in a quadripartite fashion if we count the illegitimate half-brother Smerdyakov. Up until this juncture all of Dostoevsky's novels had centred around one main hero whereas in this novel the author departs from this convention and locates its drama around three main characters, what Peace (1992) calls "the emergence of a collective hero" (p. 220). A "collective hero" is a concept that seeks to distribute the complex characteristics of the proposed protagonist among a few, in this case three characters, traits that would be far too compounded and confusing if presented in one character alone. Kearney (2016b) would see such an emergence as an account of their respective efforts to escape the loss of their absent, debauched, and profligate father. Through them Dostoevsky is working through his own struggle to escape both the loss of his father and of his son. I will deal with an analysis of each of these three protagonists further on in this chapter and recount how each is dealing with an aspect of Dostoevsky's personal conflicts. In the same essay Kearney interprets similar struggles in Shakespeare's and Joyce's literary works as "narrative catharsis," in this instance what he calls a "catharsis in lower case trauma" namely birth, loss, and death in contrast to the "upper case" variety which would include such heinous crimes as torture, rape, abuse and so on. Such catharsis offers healing, but never a once-off cure (pp. 140 — 141).

We can, of course, easily deduce from his oeuvre where Dostoevsky himself stood with regards to all the thorny and difficult questions of life — namely his firm belief in Christian principles — but one never feels that he is shoving his views down one's throat as the arguments presented by his unbelieving characters are often put far more

strongly than those of his chosen Christian heroes. Such an authentic approach where the author allows all his characters to develop as naturally and inevitably as they should without the author over-controlling them for his own purposes is his strength as an accomplished author. Such a natural and inevitable development allowed Dostoevsky to present the reader with a text that constituted a searching quest, essentially his own, one mirrored in that of his characters. In other words, in and through the text, the author is struggling with his own deep spiritual quest to make sense of the suffering, physical, mental, and moral that he himself had to endure as a human being and with his own deeply-felt sense of guilt with respect to his father's and his son's deaths. <sup>188</sup>

Having established some of the biographical details of the novels in Dostoevsky's own spiritual quest, I will now turn to closely examine the character and interactions of the four Karamazov brothers and analyse the role of Alyosha in that nexus of relationships. I will also highlight what he and his mentor Fr. Zossima <sup>189</sup> believe forms the true and authentic Self of any mature individual. In so doing, I will indicate where they illustrate where Dostoevsky is working through not alone the conflicts of his characters but very much his own personal struggle with the problems of guilt, freedom, suffering, death, meaning and meaninglessness and so on in his own life, not just the four "ultimate concerns" as proposed by Yalom.

Dostoevsky is essentially storying or constructing his identity and struggling to attain a deep spirituality to face the trials and tribulations of life in this novel. He does this in a tripartite way through his portrayal of the three adult children of the grossly

---

<sup>188</sup> Again, it is helpful to recall that Kearney (2016b) would see that Joyce was dealing with the conflicted relationships of guilt around his relationship with his father in *Ulysses* and Shakespeare with his guilt concerning the early death of his son Hamnet in his play *Hamlet*. Moreover, this sense of guilt is expressed in Dostoevsky's use of the dramatic interplay of characters in dialogue, a strength of the latter's novels in general (see pp. 131 — 143).

<sup>189</sup> The Russian name "Zossima" means "strong in life," or rendered more prosaically, the "survivor."

irresponsible and recently murdered father Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov. Peace (1992) argues convincingly that there is no one hero in *The Brothers Karamazov*, but rather a “brotherhood” of heroes (p. 229). He maintains that it is possible to argue that in the character of Alyosha we have embodied the “soul,” in Dmitri the “emotions” and in Ivan “the intellect.” While this may be true on a more superficial level, we will find through character analysis that things are not quite as simple as that. Let us turn to such an exploration now.

Firstly, Dmitri Fyodorovich Karamazov (also called by the diminutives Mitya and Mitri at times) is the only son by the old man’s first wife. At the time of the current action, he is 28 years old. He is portrayed as a sensualist, a man who loves drinking and gambling, a spendthrift and profligate womaniser. To a greater or lesser extent, Dostoevsky himself was an example of each one of these: he was a gambler and was in debt to that disease for a considerable period of his life and had at least one extramarital affair. Like the Prodigal Son, Dmitri has only come home recently to claim his inheritance from his father as he is now singularly bereft of money. In many ways, he is a lost soul and simply does not know what he wants in life. We learn very soon that he has broken off his engagement to his fiancée Katerina Ivanovna and has of late fallen head over heels in love with another woman called Grushenka. We also learn early on that his relationship with his father is one fraught with tension and conflict. Indeed, in an interesting twist, he and the father end up physically fighting over this latter woman with whom the father also falls in love as if caught in a Girardian triangle. Significantly, it is in his younger brother Alyosha that he finds a willing confidante — someone with whom he can be his most authentic or most real Self. It is through his interaction with Alyosha, who acts as a confessor or counsellor that he reveals his own inner torments, his being pulled at times to the extreme of the “ideal of Sodom” and

then on other occasions to the “ideal of the Madonna.” The surface sensualist is at bottom a conflicted human being laden down with guilt and torment. Dostoevsky would have experienced the same angst-ridden conflict that Dmitri experiences here, the lure of the flesh in his extramarital affair as his first wife was plainly dying from consumption and also the sense of guilt stemming from his deeply held faith. In an anguished passage, Dmitri confesses to Alyosha as a modern client or patient would to a trusted psychotherapist:

There’s a fearful lot of mysteries! Too many riddles oppress man on earth. Solve them as you can but see that you don’t get hurt in the process. Beauty! It makes me mad to think that a man of great heart and high intelligence should begin with the ideal of the Madonna and end with the ideal of Sodom...” (Dostoyevsky, 1978a, p. 123)

In other words, significantly, Dmitri is no cardboard-character sensualist — he is a deep thinker who agonises over his moral choices like his author Dostoevsky. He simply cannot comprehend how he had started out as a follower of the Madonna and is now tainted with the sins of Sodom. This duality in his character is most likely a characteristic of every human being and is captured well in St. Paul’s famous declaration that he often found himself precisely doing the thing he wished dearly to avoid. (see Romans 7: 19).<sup>190</sup>

A hint at Dmitri’s redemption lies in his inability to carry out his intention to seduce Katerina when he asks her to come to his room — the better part of his nature has revealed itself — the “Madonna” pole has conquered the “Sodom” pole. Furthermore, when he is accused of the murder of his father, a crime of which he is innocent, he begins to face the consequences of all his past immoral acts. Up to now he has lived with no regard for consequences. Being interrogated by the police and the

---

<sup>190</sup> See footnotes 121 and 171 on Dostoevsky’s love for the New Testament.

magistrate transforms him into a tragic figure in the novel. He now realizes that his past life is riddled with sin and duplicity and he is duly consumed with guilt. Again, much of this guilt is Dostoevsky's own at his unfaithfulness to his first wife and at the consequences of his profligate gambling on his family. Significantly, in an act that shows his reformation and contrition he is willing to accept the punishment for whoever else has murdered his father. We know through this intention that his suffering will reform his life, and for the first time there exists genuine hope for his conversion, indeed resurrection in symbolic terms. Girard (1976) sums up the essence of Dostoevsky's portrayal of Dmitri as tragic hero thus: Dmitri Karamazov does not die "a physical death but nonetheless he is restored to life. All Dostoyevsky's conclusions are fresh beginnings; a new life commences, either among men or in eternity" (p. 291).

I have described the second son, Ivan's character in chapter five as a 24-year-old university graduate who has been influenced by all the new westernising ideas that have blown in from decadent Europe: atheism, materialism, and nihilism. Employing Girardian theory, we can argue that Ivan blindly desires to be as clever as the westernising writers and intellectuals like Herzen or Belinsky or his university professors who act as internal mediators. I also underlined the fact that he is an extremely sensitive soul and is in no way arrogant or full of delusions of grandeur and power like Raskolnikov. The problem with him is that his head rules his heart and this mires him in a deep personal conflict that results in his having nightmares about a visit from the devil and in his eventual nervous breakdown. Healing could only ensue were he able to reconcile his heart with his head like Alyosha or his mentor Fr. Zossima.

Furthermore, issues relating to freedom and faith profoundly bother him, as they did Dostoevsky himself, an outstanding example of which is his introduction to a poem he calls "The Grand Inquisitor." The story, which has all the traits of a parable, is set

during the Spanish Inquisition, a period of cruel oppression of heterodoxy and heresy established in 1480 by the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. That Inquisition is often presented in popular literature and history as an example of Catholic intolerance and repression, and, indeed, Dostoevsky uses it as such.<sup>191</sup> “The Grand Inquisitor” finds its place in Book Five of the novel that deals with the “Pros and Contras” of belief. We readers are willing listeners to an impassioned debate, almost wholly one-sided where Ivan meets his brother Alyosha, the monk. Here, the older brother passionately espouses and defends the rationalist and nihilistic ideology that permeated Russia at this time. In this, Ivan reflects Dostoevsky’s own early thralldom to these beliefs, which he was to renounce later in his life. He informs the young monk that he rejects the world that God has created because, quite simply, it is built on a foundation of suffering, and the pain endured by the innocents of this world could never be justified by a benevolent God. In all of this anguished debate, Dostoevsky is working through his own tormenting struggle with respect to the suffering and painful death of his own three-year-old son Alyosha and he captures that anguish in Ivan’s character.

Then, Ivan begins his prose poem or parable which describes the encounter of the Cardinal or Grand Inquisitor with Jesus Christ who has made his return to earth. In this tale, Jesus is rejected by the Inquisitor who puts him in jail. The basis of the Cardinal’s arguments against Jesus is that he has come back to earth to meddle with the governance and power of the Holy Roman Church. Did Jesus not know by now that human beings did not want the burden of the freedom or of the truth? In short, they

---

<sup>191</sup> Dostoevsky viewed the Roman Catholic Church as a rather worldly church devoid of an authentic spirituality, interested only in wielding political power. True spirituality, he believed, obtained only in the Russian Orthodox Church. The Roman Church was also weighed down by much written dogma since splitting from the Orthodox Church which was more at home in the more mystical spirituality of the Greek Fathers. Also, the Roman Church was sullied, he felt, by being part of a corrupt, corrupting, and materialistic Europe.

preferred others to make their decisions for them and take the weight of accountability off their shoulders. Dostoevsky, here allies the question of freedom with a far deeper notion than that which Yalom would have in mind with respect to his concept of that particular ultimate concern. For Yalom, freedom involves the making of choices, that is, choices that are concerned with self-creation or in forming one's own "best self." However, for Dostoevsky freedom has much deeper moral and spiritual roots. For him, freedom is essentially, "the freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8: 21)<sup>192</sup> namely, that we are all children of a loving Father and we are rendered free from fear, for our faith gives us courage to face head-on all the trials and tribulations life throws at us. This is why Dostoevsky presents the denial of such freedom in the context of a tale from the times of the Medieval Church where an evil Cardinal Inquisitor accuses Christ of proclaiming a very costly freedom which the faithful are simply not able to shoulder. Instead, they would rather an authoritarian hierarchy make their decisions for them and save them the weight of responsibility. Dostoevsky's message, like that of Christ, is that human beings are able to face all the responsibilities that life throws at them, in and through their faith, and it is this essential moral and spiritual freedom that he has in mind.

"Why, then, did you come to meddle with us? For you have come to meddle with us and you know it... Was it not you who said so often in those days, 'I shall make you free'? But now you have seen those 'free' men," the

---

<sup>192</sup> This text reads: "creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." Speaking in a morning meditation in the Domus Sanctae Marthae, Pope Francis summed up such an experience of freedom as: "It will do us good to think of this", he added, "and to think that it is so beautiful to be children. This freedom of children is so beautiful, for the Son is at home. Jesus has opened the doors of his house to us, we are now at home. We now understand Jesus' words: 'take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven.' This is the root of our courage: I am free, I am a child, the Father loves me and I love the Father. Let us ask the Lord for the grace to understand his action properly". Thursday, 4 July 2013  
[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20130704\\_freedom-children.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20130704_freedom-children.html) , accessed 29/06/2020

old man adds suddenly with a pensive smile. “Yes, this business has cost us a great deal,” he goes on, looking sternly at him, “but we’ve completed it at last in your name. For fifteen centuries we’ve been troubled by this freedom, but now it’s over and done with for good. You don’t believe that it is all over? You look meekly at me and do not deign even to be indignant with me? I want you to know that now — yes, today — these men are more than ever convinced that they are absolutely free, and yet they themselves have brought their freedom to us and humbly laid it at our feet. But it was we who did it. And was that what you wanted? Was that the kind of freedom you wanted?” (Dostoyevsky, 1978a, pp. 293 — 294)

Human beings in their fallen state, the Cardinal Inquisitor maintains, are too weak to take on the task of forming themselves in freedom. He says that Jesus should not have given humans the burden of free will. At the end of all these arguments, Jesus silently steps forward and kisses the old man on his lips and quietly prepares to depart. The Grand Inquisitor, stunned and moved, tells him he must never return to earth, and guides him to the door.

The young monk Alyosha, after hearing his brother’s modern parable, goes over to Ivan and kisses him softly and solemnly on the lips. Ivan shouts with delight at this amazing gesture, because Alyosha’s action is taken directly from his prose poem. Of course, the reader is reminded of the spiritual and paradoxical weight of the symbolism of the kiss in the Gospels, namely that it is at once a kiss of peace and a kiss of betrayal there, while in the current context it is a kiss of brotherhood and compassion. Williams (2008) quotes Banerjee’s insight that Alyosha’s gesture “transforms Judas’s signal of betrayal into a sign of healing” (p. 31). The brothers then depart in this paradoxical and incongruous manner after their encounter, and the reader is equally left bathed in a parallel paradoxical experience beyond any clear comprehension. This passage shows a mystical touch that connects the novel with the Gospels and Dostoevsky’s own life.

The Jesus of the Gospels always remains quiet anytime he is interrogated or harangued, and in like manner so does Alyosha. Jesus' silence and his kiss are a sign of truth and holiness as are the silence and kiss of the young monk. In a mystical sense Jesus, the monk Alyosha and his mentor Fr. Zossima are healers or counsellors who have the courage to listen in silence. Again, all three share in that mystical presence Dostoevsky and his wife felt when they went to meet the saintly starets St. Ambrosius in the Optina monastery after the death of their little Alyosha.

The third and youngest son is Alexey Fyodorovich Karamazov (also called by the familial diminutives Alyosha or Lyosha) and is twenty years of age. Dostoevsky chose this name deliberately for the most saintly and spiritual of the three brothers in honour of his son who bore the same name and who died at the young age of three years. In the opening chapter the omniscient narrator tells us that this son is the true hero of the novel as does the author in the preface: "... though I call Alexey Karamazov my hero, I know perfectly well that he is not by any means a great man..." (Dostoyevsky, 1978a, p. xxv) He is described as immensely likable from the beginning: "He was simply a precocious lover of humanity... he loved people so much that all his life he seemed to have complete faith in people, and yet no one ever took him for a simpleton or a naïve person" (ibid., p. 17). In other words, he could never be cast as a character like Myshkin who is called an "idiot" by those who fail to understand him. It is also significant to point out the meaning of the name "Alexey" in Russian is the "helper." We are told also that he is a novice at the local monastery with the saintly Elder, Fr. Zossima as his mentor and spiritual advisor. Undoubtedly, Ivan and Alyosha serve as foils to one another to highlight the depth of passion with which each holds to his particular stance in life, that is, the atheist position versus that of the theist, respectively. Indeed, he acts as foil to each of his two other brothers also and is present in practically

every important scene with all the brothers including the illegitimate Smerdyakov and provides a calming, settling and equanimous focal point. His role is that of an observer, encourager, and positive commentator rather than that of an active participant. Peace (1992) sees his role as confessor to all the brothers, essentially the protégé and loyal disciple of the starets Fr Zossima by following the latter's injunction that he must "go out into the world" and bring to it "the values he has learned within the monastery walls" (p. 221).

I am arguing, building on Peace's declaration about Alyosha's role, that he acts as a sensitive counsellor or psychotherapist for his three brothers. Moreover, as a rounded character, he admits to being tempted physically when Liza Khokhlakova kisses him, and he admits to Ivan that he is on the first rung of the "ladder of sensuality" whereas the atheistic brother may be on the topmost rung (p. 237). Williams (2008) argues cogently that Alyosha is "anxious about the genuineness of his faith at a point when he is deeply aware of his kinship with his family's destructive heritage" (pp. 8 — 9). The young monk has already acknowledged in the affirmative his father's question as to whether God exists, yet in this scene with Liza he questions whether he genuinely believes in Him at all. With regard to Alyosha's conflicted faith stance here, John Henry Cardinal Newman would state that his predicament is explained by the fact that while he has given "notional assent" to the idea of God, he has not yet given Him what he terms the "real assent" of the true and authentic Christian deep in his heart.<sup>193</sup> Again, Alyosha's anxiety with respect to the authenticity of his faith must surely have mirrored Dostoevsky's struggle with his own as he sought to engage with a sustaining spirituality to help him through his on-going suffering. In fact, shortly before he died he

---

<sup>193</sup> For Newman "notional assent" was the assent we give to abstract propositions while "real assent" is given to facts learnt from experience. See Quinlan (1994) pp. 20 — 22.

forcefully underlined his battle to achieve an authentic belief: “It is not as a child that I believe in Christ and confess him. My Hosanna has passed through a great crucible of doubt.”<sup>194</sup>

Peace (1992) underscores quite rightly that “broadness” of character is an attribute of the three brothers mentioned (p. 237), though this does not extend to the illegitimate brother who is quite a cardboard character in comparison. However, it is also important from the point of storying human beings in their fullness that the novelist examine the question of evil and its motivations in different types of character. Dostoevsky does this in its purest form through the character of the Karamazovs’ half-brother Pavel Fyodorovich Smerdyakov. The author does not spare us the murky details of his birth as being the son of a poor deaf mute who was simply a woman of the street whom he calls “stinking Lizaveta,” and even the name he has been given means, we are told, “son of the stinking one.” Smerdyakov can convince Ivan that he was really the one responsible for his father’s death through his atheistic and nihilist influence by which he had convinced the illegitimate half-brother to commit the parricide in the first place. Smerdyakov grows up in the Karamazov house as a servant, working as Fyodor’s factotum and cook. He is morose and sullen, and, like Dostoevsky, suffers from epilepsy. Furthermore, the narrator makes sure we are aware of Smerdyakov’s evil propensities by informing us that as a boy he used collect stray cats to hang and bury them. Although Dostoevsky was dead at least ten years when first Freud began to write about his ideas on the unconscious (in the 1890s), nevertheless the Russian author was aware of the then unexplored motivations springing from the unconscious. In terms of later psychoanalysis, one could say that Smerdyakov represents the “id,” which Freud

---

<sup>194</sup> Quoted in Williams (2008), p. 44.

described as the mental expression of our base instincts and bodily impulses and was “a cauldron of seething excitations.”<sup>195</sup>

In terms of storying the Self, it would be anathema to Dostoevsky to omit its spiritual dimension — the truly “ultimate.” For him, the summit of human identity is found by recognising its spiritual source and destination. Within the human being lies, as it were, a spark of the divine, and it is by discovering this gift or grace that we are enabled to grow to our full potential. Therefore, Zossima is an important character from the perspective of Dostoevsky’s spiritual vision of humankind and of the meaning of life. I have quoted already in this dissertation the translator’s opinion that Zossima was mouthing mere pious platitudes, but when we explore both Dostoevsky’s personal life at the time of writing and the deep beliefs and words of this starets, the Elder of the local Russian Orthodox monastery, we realise that Magarshack’s opinion is just a very superficial one. Fr. Zossima is presented as strikingly human as well as deeply spiritual and does not go around like Fr. Ferapont seeing the work of the Devil everywhere and projecting his demonic fears onto others. Rather, he is a lover of life in all its incarnations: in fauna, flora and especially in humanity. In short, he sees God in all things — where Ferapont saw demons, the saintly starets saw angels. The old man had uncovered the lies in his own life, had faced his own inner demons, or had incorporated his “Shadow Self” in the words of Carl Jung. Indeed, early in the novel, Zossima challenges the levity and shallowness of old Fyodor Karamazov’s character by stressing the dreadful damage lying does: “Above all, do not lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point where he cannot distinguish any truth either in himself or anywhere around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others” (Dostoevsky, 2009a, pp. 43 — 44).

---

<sup>195</sup> Freud described the id as “chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations” dominated by impulses of aggression as well as sex. See Storr, A (1989), p. 61.

This is a significant point because Dostoevsky is struggling to do the same in his own life and is painfully working that angst-ridden task out in this novel. Myshkin's character was far too good to be true and really did not capture fully Dostoevsky's real-life existential troubles. However, Zossima effectively captures these tribulations for, like Dostoevsky who faces his own demons head-on, his gambling and unfaithfulness through the character of Dmitri and his dalliance with atheism and nihilism in Ivan, the old monk had also faced down his own demons courageously. For example, Zossima tells us that in his youth he had fought duels to maintain his honour as a gentleman and officer in the army, and that once, in a fit of anger, he had slapped his orderly till his nose bled. As a result of his being fully human, and therefore frail, this elder — unlike Myshkin in *The Idiot* — can put himself in the shoes of a sinner and empathise with the sufferer. In other words, Zossima makes a great counsellor whereas Myshkin is too far removed from ordinary humanity. The old monk, then, is essentially a “wounded healer.” He would have seen the ultimate lie as the lie to the Self, a refusal to face one's own truth in total authenticity. Indeed, Fr. Ferapont, in typical “demonic” obsession, notes that the old monk's body has begun to stink, a sign he sees as a denial of saintliness. However, Dostoevsky sees it as a sign of the real earthiness and humanity of a great human being who shared much with his fellow men, most of all his humanity. To be fully human within Eastern orthodox theology was to be truly saintly.

We encounter an authentic philosophy and a deep conviction about how life can be lived, despite its great suffering, at a genuine spiritual level in the person of Zossima. Therefore, his teachings can be seen as a theistic existentialism that can uplift the despairing soul. Firstly, in 1878, as I noted above, Dostoevsky's three-year-old son, Alexey, on whom Alyosha is based, died from an epileptic fit, and the father and mother had sought consolation from their faith and had made a pilgrimage to the Optina

Monastery. <sup>196</sup> Peace (1992) succinctly states that not alone does the portrayal of Zossima owe much to the historical starets Fr Ambrosius who impressed the parents considerably but “the words of comfort spoken by Zossima to the peasant woman who has lost a child are those by which Ambrosius sought to comfort Dostoyevsky’s own wife” (p. 219). Also, the well-balanced, equanimous attitude to life portrayed by the young monk Alyosha can be explained as a reflection of the teaching of this starets, who was the young man’s mentor and spiritual advisor. When we take this into account, we can understand to some extent what at first sight appears to be his precocious wisdom, his innocent simplicity and unreal optimism, is essentially a deep understanding of life where everything is shot through with a deep spiritual meaning.

The following is a quotation from one of Fr. Zossima’s orations, a speech one could argue that quintessentially represents this novelist’s vision, the central point of his theological anthropology — a vision that is firmly humane, ecological, and mystical, and is rooted in the teachings and actions of Christ:

Brothers, be not afraid of men's sin. Love man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an abiding, universal love. Love the animals: God has given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled. Do not, therefore, trouble them, don't harass them, don't deprive them of their happiness, don't work against God's intent. Man, do not pride yourself on superiority to the animals; they are without sin, and you, with your greatness, defile the earth by your appearance on it, and leave the

---

<sup>196</sup> In the 19th century, the Optina Monastery was the most important spiritual centre of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was particularly renowned as the centre of Russian Orthodox eldership (staretsdom). It is located near the town of Kozelsk some 500 Km from St Petersburg.

traces of your foulness after you — alas, it is true of almost every one of us! Love children especially, for they, too, are sinless like the angels; they live to soften and purify our hearts and as it were to guide us. Woe to him who offends a child!” (Dostoyevsky, 1978a, pp. 375 — 376)

In this paragraph Dostoevsky has Zossima use the word “love” thirteen times, a fact that underlines the importance he placed on it in his scheme of things, in his way of looking at the meaning of life as firmly rooted in the unconditional reality of the love of God. This is the Dostoevskian vision: the universe as the gift or grace of a loving benefactor called God. Murdoch (1999) argues for a “morality of love” and offers a definition of love as being “the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real” (p. xvi). Love for Dostoevsky, and philosophers like Murdoch, draws us out of our preoccupation with our world of isolated Self into a world comprising a society of other Selves, a real community of true others. To be open to, and to acknowledge the gratuitous love of God for all of creation along the lines of Dostoevsky would as such render the Divine extremely real in the lives of those open to such rich experiences.<sup>197</sup>

Dostoevsky’s intention was that Fr Zossima’s sermon should refute Ivan’s indictment of God which I have discussed in the last chapter and in detail above. It is characteristic that he should have called both intense and closely argued long monologues “the climax of the novel,”<sup>198</sup> a statement that shows how even-handed he was in setting out contrary viewpoints. However, he always believed that his spiritual vision, unlike that of atheistic materialism, was far more powerful as it was at once sustaining, uplifting, healing and bore the promise of immortality. Furthermore, Kjetsaa

---

<sup>197</sup> Taylor (2010) remarks discerningly that one of the Russian author’s “central insights” was the way we human beings can “close or open ourselves to grace” (p. 451). Grace may be described as the unmerited gift of divine favour, which in our context here is love, a love that is ultimately and truly healing.

<sup>198</sup> See Kjetsaa, G. 1987, p. 343.

(1987) argues that for Dostoevsky it is by virtue of being immortal that human beings have absolute dignity: “To deny the immortality of human beings is equivalent to denying human beings themselves, as the suicide does” (p. 328). Williams (2008) refers to this deep Christian sensitivity as a form of Russian personalism that comprises a sharp reaction against collectivism, a personalism which he describes as “a fascination with the unfathomable in each person” (p. 25) where simply everyone counts and is valued highly. Not alone does everyone count, but in Zossima’s mystical understanding of life all of nature is to be respected and loved as it is a gift of a loving creator. This philosophy of life is essentially that of Dostoevsky himself as he was approaching the end of his life. Again, this oration quoted above cuts to the heart of my argument for the recovery of a spiritual foundation of Existential Psychotherapy as it sets out the dynamic nature and potential of such a vision. Firstly, it embraces the Self as a gift from a loving Creator with all its inherent potentiality. Secondly, it incorporates the utter uniqueness of the personhood of the other in our lives. This principle has strong ethical implications as Zossima stresses later in this oration in that it requires believers to make themselves “responsible for all men’s sins,” that they are, “in fact responsible for everyone and everything” (Dostoyevsky 1978a, p. 375).<sup>199</sup> Thirdly, it emphasises the transformative power of gratitude in our lives, a lesson that we learn from encountering our own fragility and mortality. Fourthly, it is open to the love and action of the other, a loving God, whom I have described above as the ineffable and transcendent other who reaches out to us just as we, too, reach back. The psychiatrist Kübler-Ross (2000), acknowledged expert on grieving, speaking of love in the context

---

<sup>199</sup> This message is also repeated by Dmitri and by Zossima’s dying brother Markel in the same novel. Murdoch (1997), while stressing that this may make sense in a religious context, emphasises that such total responsibility may be so crushing on the ordinary person that it results in total irresponsibility (p. 139). However, Levinas’ doctrine of Infinite Responsibility where we are all responsible for everyone else is a crucial concept that strongly backs up Dostoevsky’s contention here. In fact, Levinas acknowledges that he originally got the idea from the Russian author. Infinite responsibility to the other is the defining feature of Levinas’ ethical approach. See Levinas (2000) p. 12.

of loss, and certainly Alyosha is experiencing the loss of his mentor who is dying, stresses that the “love we have felt and the love we have given cannot be lost” (p. 91). In the Christian sense, Dostoevsky through Zossima, would see the unconditional love of God as eternal and never to be lost. Fifthly, it is a spiritual vision that also reaches out to all of creation, both fauna and flora as reflecting the loving care of that Creator God. This vision is one which is truly inclusive and its associated love is inspired and sustained by a caring God who created all and sees that it was profoundly good. It is in this sense, that true healing of any human being may be brought about in an Existential Psychotherapy that has recovered a spiritual foundation. Love, not so surprisingly, is the one element of therapy that Yalom (2017) admits he had omitted in his account of the nature of Existential Psychotherapy and readily states that it was “a huge omission” (p. 274).

#### 6.4. Conclusion

The *Idiot* was to remain Dostoevsky’s favourite of all his works though he did admit it was far from perfect. While Myshkin, the author’s hero, remains unwaveringly good from beginning to end, he was a paradigm of virtuous living and perfect selfhood whom Dostoevsky initially believed could be the perfect ideal for people to emulate. However, the writer quickly realised that such pure unadulterated goodness would be impossible for most of us, and if it were, it would lead to naivety and even idiocy. In short, he realised all too well that his hero was inherently badly flawed. Despite that major fault, I have argued that Myshkin possesses profound mystical and aesthetic insights not apparent to a superficial or mere cursory reading. Such profundity can be deemed foolishness in worldly terms. That mystical level is inextricably bound up with

the issues of suffering related to death which are existential issues or “ultimate concerns” if we use Yalom’s language.

However, Dostoevsky pushes those “ultimate concerns” much further than Yalom, right on into the very heart of suffering to paradoxically experience a consolation or healing accomplished at a deeper spiritual level. This transcendence of the barriers, apparent in Yalom’s reduced sense of “ultimate,” results in a mystical sense that is also strongly reflected in his style of writing that he himself termed “fantastic realism.” In other words, as a writer he described the world in his novels and stories in both its good and bad manifestations and would have seen this tension of opposites as shot through with a mysterious or mystical element which could only be traced back to its divine creator.<sup>200</sup> Frank (2010) quotes a letter of Dostoevsky’s where he describes his realism as fantastic because he argued that it was “more real” and “deeper” than that of those who criticised him for his lack of realism. His critics’ realism, he argued, was shallower. His “more real” realism plumbed the moral and spiritual depths of his readers and suggested a mystical dimension to life (p. 575).

In this chapter, I have related two examples of where Dostoevsky recounts two mystical experiences from his own life which transformed utterly his way of looking at the world. That profound transformation resulted in Dostoevsky’s turning away from the westernising beliefs which like most Russian intellectuals of the 1840s he had embraced with enthusiasm as a young idealistic man. It also resulted in a new, profound, and intense appreciation for the giftedness of life and his embracing of the Christian vision of existence along Russian Orthodox lines. This transformation of his outlook, which helped him cope with all the suffering and death he experienced in his

---

<sup>200</sup> Johnston (2006) speaks of the “coincidence of opposites” as being crucial to his experience of mysticism and insightfully links this with the “todo y nada” or “all and nothing” experience of the great mystic John of the Cross (p. 52).

own life, then, is firmly rooted in an existential experience of an intense spiritual depth which is strongly reflected in Myshkin's approach to living.

By the time he wrote *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky had abandoned this utopian idea of spirituality embodied in one perfectly good man for the more realistic treatment of spirituality embodied in the community of believers represented by the old monk Fr. Zossima and his novice or protégé Br. Alyosha. Now the community which ideally could be based upon the spiritual wisdom of the monastery guided by elders of the calibre of Fr. Zossima can be the locus of a profound and renewing faith. Such renovation of belief is based on an ideal of love and care as outlined in the above quoted sermon of the holy starets of Optina monastery. While the novel *The Idiot* is concerned primarily with a mystical approach to death and the suffering related thereto, *The Brothers Karamazov* deals with many profound issues related to the mystery of suffering in general, the thorny question of unbelief in all its incarnations and the slow and painful working out of a personal spirituality on the part of the author that can transform suffering into a deeper and more sublime appreciation for the good things in life. Such a spirituality is a hard-earned one that leads the individual through the valleys of suffering and death, a journey that can only be sustained with the help of the Christian vision for Dostoevsky. This is precisely what Frankl (2000), a fervent Jew, means when he avers that religion or spirituality reveals itself in such existential struggles "as the fulfilment of what we may now call the 'will to ultimate meaning'" (p. 153). It is noteworthy here that Frankl uses the word "ultimate" in a far stronger sense than Yalom, in the very sense that Tillich used the word "ultimate" in the first place, namely, to refer to the ultimacy of faith or belief in God. This is the spirituality of the quest for ultimate meaning that the deeply grieving Dostoevsky and his wife Anna found uplifting in their pilgrimage to the Optina monastery and through their encounter

with the holy starets Fr. Ambrosius on whom Fr. Zossima is based. It requires a deep faith to see that there is a value in suffering. For Dostoevsky it is something more than the awful pain associated with either illness, grief, or guilt. In fact, for him suffering is a moral quality that drives the human being to self-understanding, and thereby gives him the chance to be purified and to be free at last. In essence, it is an experience deeply connected to a religious vision of human life, one that brings us on a search for meaning that is rooted in God. It is also a spiritual vision that brings the author, in effect, into literary space.

The spiritual vision that the wise and holy elder Zossima proclaims is essentially that of Dostoevsky and it is based on the brotherhood of humankind. Its central message is that it is only by loving life in all its great variety that any meaning can be found at all in the world. Zossima's great sermon can be read as a deep prayer or meditation on the value of loving all of creation as gifted to us by a loving creator. It is no wonder, then, that this novel ends on a hopeful note. Dostoevsky, always a lover of children, leaves us with the scene of twelve boys (deliberately based on the number of Jesus' apostles) gathered around Br. Alyosha after the funeral of the young adolescent Ilyushka. This death unites the boys in a brotherhood where Alyosha makes them promise never to forget their friend. It is apparent that he will be their spiritual father now that Zossima is dead. Alyosha's words to the twelve boys echo the sentiments of Zossima's impassioned sermon: "O boys, o my dear young friends, do not be afraid of life! How beautiful life is as soon as you do something that is good and right!" (Dostoyevsky, 1978b, p. 912). This vision is at once moral as well as spiritual and requires an openness to life and the courage to live, a courage which can only be gained by following the Christian path. It is an existential therapeutics based on the novelist's personalist Christian vision that must, of necessity, have a strong spiritual foundation.

It is this foundation that marks Dostoevsky's existential therapeutics out from Yalom's and arguably gives substance to what Yalom otherwise means by "ultimate."

# Chapter Seven

## Conclusion:

### Drawing the Threads Together: The Recovery of a Spiritual Dimension for Existential Therapeutics: A Synopsis of the Argument

#### 7.1. Chapters One and Two: Spelling out the Problem and Elucidating a Double Hermeneutic

In this dissertation I have explicitly described the narrative structure of selfhood as being the best practical approach to describing what the phenomenon of Self is in practice for any individual whether he or she comes to therapy or not. All individuals have a uniquely personal story to tell, and in their recounting of that story they effectively express as best they can their true selves, sometimes in spoken story, sometimes in written story; sometimes in and through the space generated in conversation with a trained therapist and sometimes in and through novelistic space; more often perhaps with the help of significant others or friends. Not alone does storying help the person to acknowledge and accept the Self, but it also restores and heals the person from much emotional hurt. I have argued that storying takes place in two modes, that is, on the one hand in the oral manner between the Self and significant others and in some cases with the help of a therapist, and, on the other hand, in the case of an author in his or her written work. The oral approach to storying the Self has traditionally been called talk or talking therapy while the second has been designated written or writing therapy.<sup>201</sup> However, I have discovered that there is a yawning gap between the breadth of the storying process used by Irvin Yalom and that used by

---

<sup>201</sup> It is worth recalling that in medicine there is a long-standing practice used by all doctors, namely taking a case history in order to diagnose the malady. In an enlightened sense, this could involve an attentive listening to the story of the patient's encounter with his or her illness as well as clearly noting down a catalogue of the medical symptoms. Informed medical practice affirms that the patient is more than his or her disease.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, the former being decidedly narrower in focus than the latter. In other words, Yalom's vaunted "ultimate concerns," his four co-ordinates of storying, are not ultimate enough for a properly existential therapeutics. In this concluding chapter I will recap on the main argument of my thesis in an attempt to draw the threads together.

In chapter one, I explicated Existential Psychotherapy in detail and situated it within the broader compass of the philosophical movement of existentialism. I defined existentialism as a broad development that emphasises that the individual is the free and responsible agent determining his/her own development. In this regard, it is a term that can be described as showing a particularly sharp sensitivity to human issues and what it means to be human in the actuality of living. As such, it can be applied to authors who have shown a deep awareness of the human condition throughout the history of civilisation as well as to any reflective human being who walks the streets of our modern world. In the same chapter, I discussed in detail the contributions of the psychiatrist Professor Irvin Yalom to Existential Psychotherapy as he has written what is now regarded as a foundational textbook in the subject as well as continuing well into his eighties to both practise and write in the field. He represents the central tenets of modern Existential Psychotherapy from an atheistic and humanistic perspective. It is he whom I have chosen as the exponent of storying the Self in talk, or more precisely through the talking cure. I also gave a detailed account in chapter one of each of Yalom's four ultimate concerns, namely (i) dying and death, (ii) freedom, (iii) existential isolation and (iv) meaninglessness. I set out my contention early in chapter one that Yalom's concerns were not ultimate enough, that is, they did not at all take account of what Paul Tillich meant when he first coined the term "ultimate concern" to refer to such ultimate issues as faith in God and the prospect of the existence of a

transcendent realm beyond what is perceived as everyday reality. I argued in chapter one that Yalom's use of the term "ultimate" muddies the interdisciplinary waters between, on the one hand, religion/theology/spirituality and, on the other, psychology/psychotherapy/experience while at the same time eclipsing the power of his words and the effectiveness of his message for a more aware readership. Moreover, while both approaches to storying differ greatly in emphasis, both Dostoevsky's and Yalom's central concern is the healing of the Self through the process of storying, both thinkers offering a form of therapeutics that springs therefrom.

In chapter two, I described in detail what I called a double hermeneutic, the first prong of which allowed me to talk about how the therapeutics of talk therapy or how the process of storying, works in practice in any session of Existential Psychotherapy. Furthermore, I advanced another existential method in tandem that employs the Girardian theory and structure of "triangular desire" to account for how I could interpret Dostoevsky's literary oeuvre as being in a significant sense the author's own struggle with himself. It is an existential method that highlights the therapeutics at work for the author in and through his written work whereby a spiritual transformation results. This allowed me to interpret Dostoevsky's creative work as being the author's "dialogue" with the Self. (Girard, 1997, p. 102) In the same work Girard expresses the same point somewhat differently, but no less effectively, by averring that Dostoevsky "exorcises his demons, one after the other, by embodying them in his novels" (p. 32).

The first prong of my double hermeneutic takes account of how storying is used in the clinical setting of the consultation room. Yalom's existential method uses story to help the patient to connect his or her experience to that of others and hence to feel part of something beyond the singular Self. This method, therefore, allows the patient to encounter the other (the therapist in this case) in a positive and meaningful way,

hence establishing trust and a corresponding ability to “open up” not alone to the therapist but also to life. Yalom shares stories in such a way that they address the more isolating aspects of the human condition. In practice, then, his storying relates back to the patient or client and thereby establishes the conditions of self-revelation in response to the self-disclosure of the therapist. It is this connection that is so critical for Yalom in creating the conditions of encounter in the therapeutic relationship and he spends much time and effort emphasising the crucial importance of therapist self-disclosure in helping the patient express his or her story.

Yalom’s existential method of storying may be described as having four co-ordinates which help him map out or put shape on the unknown terrain of the existential encounter with a new patient or client. He calls these four co-ordinates “ultimate concerns” which I have listed above. These four are the main burning issues for any person, according to Yalom, and around these issues constellate the major conflicts that patients present with in therapy. Chapter two deals in detail with a discussion of these four “ultimate concerns” and how any person’s encounter with them leads to corresponding core conflicts in their lives regarding those issues. Patients, in effect, then, story themselves through recounting their experiences or conflicts with one or more of these concerns. Having worked in an existential context both in his academic studies and in his daily practice as a psychiatrist and therapist, Yalom advances the theory that all the major crises suffered by individuals coming to therapy can be summarised under one or more of these four headings. However, while Yalom’s concerns may be effective in treating certain existential crises they do not do justice to the full range of human experience. Their parameters focus very much on a narrower terrain than does that offered by Dostoevsky’s therapeutics of text. My argument is that Yalom’s ultimate concerns are too narrow in scope to adequately help narrate the

complex stuff of human reality. In that sense they remain limited to a wholly immanent<sup>202</sup> frame of reference with no acknowledgement of the transcendent dimension within human experience that can be encountered in what Christians call the mystery of suffering and evil.

I have shown that Dostoevsky's use of storying is far broader and more encompassing of the complexity that the human phenomenon is by acknowledging all the elements that Yalom includes as well as the depths and heights of human experience. Dostoevsky is not a likely candidate to compare to Yalom with respect to a therapeutics of the Self as he is a novelist and literary convention reminds us that story and biography are different genres. However, on closer examination we find that the creative act of writing is an expression of a quest that can be understood as a form of storying that is in essence therapeutic. This is precisely the reason I introduced in chapter two what I called the second prong of my double hermeneutic namely the Girardian theory and structure of "triangular desire" to account for how I could interpret Dostoevsky's creative writings as reflecting in a crucial sense the author's own struggle with himself. It is an existential method that highlights the therapeutics at work for the author in and through his written work whereby a spiritual transformation results. Authors of the calibre of Dostoevsky, according to Girard, have the ability to portray in their creative work the very essence of human relationships that are by their nature shaped by intersubjective drives and forces (driven by mimesis or competitive imitation). In short, the author is working out his or her own struggle with Self in the

---

<sup>202</sup> The word "immanent" is used with different nuances in the fields of theology and philosophy. The word itself was first used in the mid -16th century: from late Latin meaning 'remaining within,' from 'in' + 'manere', 'to remain,' giving it a primary significance of some quality that is inherent or innate to something or someone. For theologians, immanence refers to the way God "dwells in" the physical world. However, for philosophers, immanence refers to the state of being enclosed solely within the Self and not reaching out to any possible transcendent reality like God. For Charles Taylor, citizens of late modernity live within an "immanent frame," that is, within a horizontal dimension only, with no reference to any vertical or transcendent dimension. It is in its philosophical sense that I use the word in this dissertation.

literary text. As Girard succinctly puts it: “literature accurately described human relationships long before psychology, anthropology and sociology were established as academic disciplines.”<sup>203</sup>

Furthermore, Dostoyevsky’s therapeutics through storying often comprises a descent into the anguish of human suffering allied with the spiritual transformation wrought in the person by an openness to the divine working in his or her life that allows them to experience a renewal or type of rebirth. I have addressed, then, the aporia in Yalom’s concept and practice of storying by deploying Dostoyevsky’s more powerful model of storying that is far more comprehensive in its acknowledgement of the breadth of mystery that makes up the human phenomenon. The Russian author does not restrict himself to an immanent frame — he is open to the full range of human experience which means that his approach is far more truly ultimate than is that of Yalom. It was with such considerations in mind that I chose Dostoevsky as the author who, I believe, best storied himself, and in the process healed himself, in an existential context through a wide-ranging literary oeuvre which showed amazing insight into the motivations and behaviours of human beings across the whole spectrum from normal to abnormal psychology, while all the time being open to the broadest understanding of the human phenomenon. Consequently, in this dissertation I have not been looking at Dostoevsky’s novels for their literary merit but rather I have been exploring them as existential products of the author’s own searching quest. In this regard, I have used the existential method of René Girard to help me in this task. In brief, then, it is the therapeutic process of storying, while differing greatly for both authors, which is of great benefit to both Yalom and Dostoevsky for that very reason.

---

<sup>203</sup> Quoted in Antonello, P. and Webb, H. (2015) (eds), p. xii.

In addition to his profound psychological insights into the human condition, I also selected Dostoevsky as his existential approach is decidedly Christian whereas that of Yalom is clearly atheistic humanist. Dostoevsky is widely acknowledged as one of the first great Christian existentialist writers since he clearly expressed in his novels and stories a philosophical anthropology upon which can be built a solid Existential Psychotherapy animated by a Christian vision. In short, I have shown that he is an exponent of the storying and healing of the Self in “text.” This dissertation has explored the similarities and differences in approach that Yalom and Dostoevsky would have both to life in general and Existential Psychotherapy in particular. It is a creative approach to the storying of the Self which is also a therapeutic device employed by both men as writers. It explores such factors as how one’s sense of Self is deeply rooted socially and culturally as well as psychologically. For Dostoevsky storying the Self, if it is to be truly therapeutic, that is healing in the deepest possible sense, must also involve a spiritual dimension.

In contrast, Yalom, a second-generation immigrant to America recounts in his memoir that he rejected early in life the religious practices of his parents and continued to do so for the rest of his life. He underscores many times the fact that he is an atheist both in that book and elsewhere, statements that would leave him unwilling to accept any possible spiritual base or goal for therapy. In short, he is unwilling to admit that Existential Psychotherapy can benefit from having a spiritual dimension available in the therapeutic process of storying oneself with one’s interlocutor.

In short, then, I described this glaring spiritual lacuna or gap in Irvin Yalom’s approach to Existential Psychotherapy over the course of the first two chapters and in the remaining four chapters I outlined progressively and in full Dostoevsky’s broader approach to storying which accounted for the breadth and depth of human experience.

While Yalom does not accept that there is a spiritual dimension to therapy, he certainly does remain open to accepting it as a major part in the lives of some of his patients. Yalom's criticism of Frankl, who is perhaps the greatest twentieth century proponent for a spiritual base to Existential Psychotherapy, is illuminating in this context. In his much-lauded textbook *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980), he praises Frankl for having made one of the most prolific and helpful contributions to psychotherapy by emphasising the role of meaning-making as the most crucial element for the patient in the whole process, but strongly refuses to accept the validity of a spiritual foundation in the process of meaning-making and thereby limits the scope of storying for the project of selfhood. When his foundational textbook *Existential Psychotherapy* was written in 1980, Yalom was then quite a strident atheist: "... many scholars find Frankl's method offensive... he makes ex cathedra proclamations... he is obliged to develop treatment methods that apply to all patients, atheists and devout alike... it is clear that Frankl's approach to meaning is fundamentally religious" (p. 442). In his memoir, written almost forty years later, Yalom is a little less critical, though he does go on at length about Frankl's self-absorption and adjudges his autocratic style to be rather like Freud's.<sup>204</sup>

Yalom's critique of Frankl is important for this study as it highlights the great lacuna in his masterly ground-breaking book on *Existential Psychotherapy* as it ignores a possible spiritual dimension illustrated by the very obvious anti-religious bias just highlighted. This bias was sustained throughout his career but not with such an openly hostile tone. That is precisely what I tried to show, in a style that Yalom himself is prone to, in my imagined dialogue between Yalom and Dostoevsky in the prologue to

---

<sup>204</sup> These comments, made in 1980, are obviously more stridently atheistic than those of his later works as I have illustrated in the imagined therapy session with Dostoevsky.

this dissertation. I aimed there to set up the conversation between the two protagonists in question that would show that the psychiatrist's scientific approach to reality, especially to the human phenomenon, is too narrow as it reduces the expansiveness of the mystery of the individual to the narrowness of a wholly immanent reality. Humanity is more than Yalom's reductionism allows.<sup>205</sup> Again, let me underline the fact that I strongly contend, and also have illustrated extensively in this dissertation, that the ultimate concerns as envisaged by professor Yalom are simply not ultimate enough to capture the extensive breadth of the human phenomenon because he rules out the possibility of a spiritual dimension to his Existential Therapeutics.

The issue that I have been exploring has to do with the manner in which both Dostoyevsky and Yalom differ with respect to the degree to which both thinkers engage in reflection and self-analysis. Dostoevsky's writings are full of characters whose views and ideas he pushes to extremes as if to test his own beliefs. While Yalom is one of the most popular and universally acknowledged pioneers of Existential Psychotherapy, he uses philosophy to back up his therapeutic positions, rather than engaging in philosophy as a critical way of thinking, interrogating that thinking and most essentially questioning his own presuppositions. In his acceptance speech for the Oscar Pfister prize in 2000 he stated: "But philosophy has always served me more for confirmation than for inspiration" (p. 304). While he reads voraciously from philosophy, he quarries only those insights from it that bolster his own clinical positions and theories. The therapists, Van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker (2005) describe Existential Psychotherapy as an "applied philosophy" that needs to exercise the "rigorous standards of philosophical

---

<sup>205</sup> Yalom is prone to indulge his reductionism, even scientism, when he puts his hard atheistic and intellectually fortified hat on to argue for the strict empirical nature of medical science but is quite open to allowing his patients express their religious grasp on life and even to facilitate their spiritual progress in self-awareness. He is, of course, always keen to point out that he could never accept such an irrational approach to life himself. It is almost as if such a spiritual stance could only be taken by those who are intellectually inferior.

research” as well as practising the highest standards of human interaction required by therapy (p. 14).

In sum, then, having spelled out the problem and elucidated the double hermeneutic in the first two chapters, I next turned to the gradual unfolding and explication of Dostoevsky’s therapeutics of text that offers a far deeper healing than Yalom’s narrower approach allows.

### 7.2. Chapters Three to Six: The Unfolding Story of Self in Dostoevsky’s Life and Work and the gradual elucidation of a Spiritual Foundation to Therapeutics

Chapter three begins with a biographical account of Dostoevsky’s life. A dissertation that examines the therapeutics of text, which offers a deep and authentic storying of the Self, cannot afford to neglect the salient aspects of the author’s own life that provided much material for that storying. Existential encounters with what Yalom calls the four ultimate concerns is particularly noteworthy in the Russian author’s life. He encountered dying and death from his earliest years with both parents having passed away by the time the author was 18 years old, his closest sibling Mikhail having died as a young man, his first wife within a few years of their marriage and two children from his second marriage departed life as toddlers. He encountered the ultimate concern of freedom through the loss of it by his imprisonment both in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg and in a prison camp in Siberia. In both those hellish captivities he would have encountered Yalom’s final two ultimate concerns, namely existential isolation, and sheer meaninglessness. His novels bear the influences of these basic existential deprivations which his keen imagination wrought into powerful stories.

Furthermore, in chapter three, I introduced the concept of “presenting problem” as used in the field of psychotherapy in general. By that I meant that patients present

themselves to a therapist with a problem or conflict with which both the therapist and they will engage over the course of the therapy in the hope of resolving. In life, we begin storying the Self by encountering all the problems the world throws in our path. Dostoevsky's storying of himself follows the same existential trajectory. In chapter three, I began laying down the foundation stone for my argument. I discussed in detail what is undoubtedly the starting point for all therapy, namely the excruciating feeling on the part of the client of not being whole, in short, experiencing one's selfhood as being broken or fragmented. By examining the two novels *The Double* (1846) and *The House of the Dead* (1860 — 1862), chapter three traces this initial feeling of fragmentation that a client coming to therapy usually feels.

The first of these two novels, *The Double*, presents us with a very anxious hypochondriac, one Mr Golyadkin who is completely riddled with self-doubt, not knowing what his purpose in life is, but who desires promotion in the Russian civil service that will elevate him to the level of semi-nobility. On one superficial level, this novel can be read as a straight-forward Gothic tale of a man haunted or possessed by his exact double along the lines of a tale from Gogol or one from the then popular Hoffmann, predating by some forty years R. L. Stevenson's classic horror story *Jeckyll & Hyde* (1886) However, on a deeper level, the story can be interpreted as presenting Mr Golyadkin as a very confused person who simply cannot make a decision and who is most definitely on the cusp of a complete mental breakdown. We can trace in this story the protagonist's excruciating encounter with what Yalom calls the "ultimate concerns" of freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness. These "ultimate concerns," which are interpreted here along Yalomian lines, are not ultimate enough and what is needed to fully grasp the significance of the spiritual transformation at the heart of this example of Dostoyevsky's work is a proper spiritual dimension which will become ever

more apparent in Dostoevsky's later work. Furthermore, Dostoevsky, who was only 24 years at the time of writing, shows amazing insight into the psychological make-up of a human being experiencing such a mental disintegration. In this sense, it is a very modern story to the extent that modernity and post-modernity are periods where people present with identity crises and self-fracture not alone in the consulting rooms of therapists but also as characters in works of literature and the Arts in general.

All suggested medical intervention have actually failed abysmally or have been ignored in that Mr. Golyadkin is in no way healed, not even partially. In fact, he has descended into the hell of utter fragmentation. I interpreted Mr Golyadkin as a beleaguered, self-doubting, incompetent character who desires to climb to the next highest rung on the ladder of success, just as Dostoevsky himself had desired to rise higher in virtue of his increased accomplishments in the literary world of nineteenth-century Russia. I further pointed out that in authoring this novel, Dostoevsky is in fact expiating his own fears of mental breakdown through a therapeutics of text, by facing his demons in the hallucinations of the personality of his protagonist. This novel was written in 1846 before what is called "the talking cure" appeared on the scene. In it we discover the dreadful fate that would be in store for a broken human being in the backward Russia of the early nineteenth century. Dostoevsky himself had suffered from depression from early on in life and had also experienced a certain level of fragmentation of Self, experiences that render this novel a very authentic expression of mental ill-being. When Mr Golyadkin refuses all medical intervention as prescribed by his doctor, we feel sure that nothing short of incarceration in a mental institution will lie in store for him. Our early suspicions come true when at the end of the story he is indeed carted away to such an iniquitous place. Even if the ending of this novel leaves

the author still grappling with fragmentation, it nonetheless represents, albeit in part, Dostoyevsky's own searching quest for wholeness.

The second novel treated in chapter three is *The House of the Dead* (1860 — 1862), which recounts in novelistic form scenes from Dostoyevsky's four-year imprisonment in the *katorga* system of penal labour in the Russian Empire during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I. Again, I argued that what we encounter here is the fragmented Self of the imprisoned person as they strive for survival within a very punitive and dehumanising system. While all of Yalom's "ultimate concerns" are encountered by Mr Goryanchikov, the character most like Dostoyevsky in this highly autobiographical novel, the core conflict of freedom, obviously, is the main one experienced. Amazingly, this novel lacks any form of bitterness though it does paint vividly for us the deplorable and dehumanising conditions and treatment of the inmates who were certainly reduced to little more than animals. No matter what the weather, the prisoners were forced to perform free labour for the state under harsh conditions and all these prisoners, including Dostoyevsky, bore the mental and physical scars of being subjected to both dehumanising conditions and brutalising guards. Whether we confront ourselves by presenting ourselves in the conventional process of therapy, or whether we confront ourselves by presenting ourselves to the rigours of our own conscience or by reflecting in writing on the often-difficult experiences life throws at us, in each situation we encounter ourselves as broken and fragmented and in need of healing. Again, this shows the willingness of the subject to go beyond his or her illusions, to unmask the lies in their lives and face the truth head-on.

By interpreting the two novels mentioned above in the way I have, that is, I introduced what I refer to as the presenting problem for any person coming to a process of therapy, namely the fragmentation of the Self which seeks some form of restoration,

some promise of relief and some hope of healing. The act of presenting oneself in therapy is an acknowledgement of our fragmented Self. Those who present themselves to therapy are ready to face their illusions, to face head-on the lies they have been telling themselves, and by that very act of presenting they show a commitment to overcome their self-deception. Likewise, when a writer presents himself or herself at the writing desk each morning, as if in a mirror, they are acknowledging their readiness to learn more about their true Self and their preparedness to face their own illusions. In other words, they strongly express a commitment to ongoing change and improvement in their own lives. In this way, Dostoyevsky's storying, no more than Yalom's storying, helps to bring together the disparate parts of the Self.

In chapter four, I explored these limits by considering the promise of relief and the hope of healing in a further two novels, *Notes from Underground* (1864), and *Crime and Punishment* (1866). These novels introduce us to two women who play a secondary role but are particularly important for the self-development and healing (partial or whole) of the protagonist. In *Notes from Underground*, we meet an anonymous alienated man who not alone lives in an underground flat, but also very much inhabits the underground level of his mind, namely a world not unlike Freud's irrational world of the *Id*, a murkier world of desires and instincts that are distinctly antagonistic to the rational world of the conscious mind. He grows somewhat in authenticity in the course of the novella, but he is unable to make the final courageous leap into a wholesome authenticity of Self or any commitment to another human being.

However, we do get a glimpse of a more authentic, real, and committed character in the presence of the young prostitute Liza, albeit for a few short scenes, whom the protagonist encounters during the course of the narrative. She would have offered him the possibility of some redemption and healing had he been courageous

enough to accept her offer of love. Instead, he contemptuously dismisses her with the offer of money which is rejected by the more authentic and real person of the lowly prostitute. The issue here is that the Underground Man is closed in on himself and unable to open up to the other, thereby reducing the other to a figment of his narrow ego. He is refusing healing that comes from the outside or from a genuinely transcendent source like a neighbour, a friend, or a newly encountered caring human being.

*Notes from Underground* was specifically written with the intention to counter the all-too-narrow understanding and application of reason as proposed by the “rational egoism” of Chernyshevsky, one of the main proponents of the philosophy of social utopianism and the distinct brand of Russian nihilism that would eventually inspire Marx and Lenin. *Notes* deliberately parodies the shallow optimism of the Enlightenment that gave rise to such a narrow understanding of reason and applied it to all human situations. Such a restricted notion of reason (where 2 by 2 always and everywhere equals 4) the Underground Man simply cannot accept because a human being is more than just a narrowly rational animal. In this regard, he is a bit like Ivan who refuses to live in the world where too much evil exists, and, in rejecting Liza, he is in effect giving his ticket back.

The complexity of a human being can truly be communicated through his or her encounters with Self and others in either talk or text, especially by being open and honest with both. In this case, the story of the unnamed man’s engagement with the army officer, his erstwhile school friends and Liza is far too closed, one in which he does not risk the disclosure of his vulnerability. The complexity of the human being is such for Dostoevsky that a treatment of its immanent nature like that suggested in the therapeutics of Yalom is not open and transcendent enough to deal with the depths of

evil and suffering that occur in daily life. Bakhtin (1984) has argued that there are many distinct voices working in Dostoevsky's oeuvre where "a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices," with "a plurality of consciousnesses.... combine" (p. 6). In effect, the novelist presents his readership with a rich and diverse cast of characters who portray a comprehensive concept of human nature that is a far wider and more complex phenomenon, often motivated by unconscious desires and impulses, and sometimes even imbued with a spiritual vision that cannot be encompassed by a narrow rational egoism.

Again, it was with the same motivation that he set about writing *Crime and Punishment* as his main purpose was to expose the falsity and indeed the definite danger of modern thinking as a whole, that cold and shallow rationalism that underpinned a naïve and indifferent utilitarianism that was widely advocated by Western culture. Such shallow and narrow thinking about the nature of humanity could even possibly propose, as Dostoevsky does in his protagonist Raskolnikov, that the murder of an ugly, useless old moneylender could be rationally defended as a way of saving his family from poverty, his sister from an arranged marriage and his beloved from prostitution. Such a narrow rationalism would simply eliminate ethics and morality completely. The complexity of the human being cannot be reduced to the rational alone. All human beings are a complex aggregation of irrational urges, non-rational motivations, cares and concerns, disappointments and achievements, losses and gains as well as rational thinking and evaluation.<sup>206</sup> In their complexity, they are often drawn to the evil as well

---

<sup>206</sup> Keats, in a letter to his brothers George and Tom in December 1817, spoke of the complexity of humanity and of the skilful art of great poets and writers to describe the complexity of humanity as being a process that involved an appreciation for what he called "Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." (Quoted in Gittings, R. (Ed.) 1987 p. 43) In other words, reason is far too narrow to account for the full mystery or complexity that any human being is. Great writers like Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, among many others, are able to sustain such negative capability, whereas, as the social psychologist Festinger (1957) pointed out, a lot of us experience such complexity as conflicts that result in "cognitive

as the good in life and taste of its woes as well as its joys. In the engagement with this complexity, the ultimate concerns advanced by Yalom are simply not ultimate or strong enough to bear the weight of such an existential entanglement. A spiritual horizon is lacking and is needed to bear such a burden as Dostoevsky so ably illustrates in his novels.

Raskolnikov is revealed to the reader as one extraordinarily complex character in this regard. His very name alone means “split in two.” His importance lies in his complexity of motivation, the on-going battle of opposites within his very psyche, the struggle of good and evil within his character, the effects of his crime on his personality, the struggle to come to terms with the weight of his guilt, his slow and painful admission of his crime, his gradual acceptance of how heinous it was in the first place, the struggle with remorse and the vague possibility of redemption glimpsed through the intercession of his beloved Sonya. Rationality can only bring us so far. Unconscious motivations, deep unexpressed desires demanding expression plus the higher values of love and compassion, feelings of grief, guilt and remorse, expressions of penance and pardon, the possibilities of forgiveness and redemption also round out the very complexity of humanity for Dostoevsky. In describing this more complex vision of humanity presented in the text, I offered an analysis of the ongoing therapeutic encounter between the murderer Raskolnikov and his lover Sonya. This storying of the selfhood of Raskolnikov is a psychological and spiritual *tour de force* by Dostoevsky as he traces the thoughts, feelings, and reactions of a murderer before, during and after his heinous crime. It is a particularly profound treatment of the subject in that it holds out the probability in Raskolnikov’s case, of redemption and healing because it does not

---

dissonance” which we wish to rid ourselves of by way of avoidance or denial as quickly as possible in order to feel more comfortable in ourselves.

dismiss any human being as lost, that it allows for the presence of some goodness in everyone.

Sonya is the channel through whom Raskolnikov is redeemed as it is she whom he deliberately selects to be his confessor, or in my reading of the text, his counsellor or psychotherapist. In fact, while she is a working prostitute who believes God “does everything for her,” she is only pursuing this way of life to earn money to feed her starving siblings. She is incredibly good, forgiving, and humble even to the extent of having compassion for her axe-wielding lover and murderer of her friend. The two scenes where Raskolnikov and she meet are deeply intense and angst-ridden scenes which plumb the depths of guilt, remorse, forgiveness, and redemption in a profoundly human and compassionate way. From what we know of Dostoyevsky, and in line with the second prong of my double hermeneutic, it is probable that the author is in fact storying his own guilt which persisted throughout his life, his guilt at his selfishness and consequent pressure on his father to keep his living standards up when a young student, his remorse for his unfaithfulness to his first wife and his extreme guilt over his gambling which had a destabilising effect on the material and emotional wellbeing of his family. By storying his own guilt, albeit in a highly provocative and imaginative way, or what Girard calls his own “negative mimesis” the author, through his novels, is advancing his own healing. Much of this remorse and shame is also present in *Crime and Punishment*. As a Christian, Dostoevsky was gradually learning to accept redemption and forgiveness from God.

In introducing the spiritual quest in chapter five, I had to explicate what I mean by spirituality. I argued there that any self-reflection and analysis requires a depth engagement with one’s experience, or with what I call a spiritual dimension. Various authors have described this spiritual dimension as a “journey of discovery,” a “quest for

meaning,” a “path to fuller life,” and even a “way of love” that can only be experienced through encountering other human beings. Indeed, the Self needs others to mediate its very sense of being a distinct individual. This means that self-knowledge can only develop through our understanding of our relation to the world and of our life with and among significant others as we grow up in community. Identity, then, is culturally mediated through symbols and language and a host of other cultural factors including class, wealth, education, religion, gender, and spirituality. I have argued that spirituality and human identity are linked experiential structures for the generality of human beings. I emphasised that my notion of spirituality encompasses both the areas of psychology and religion and seeks to find shared ground between both disciplines. Consequently, I gave my own description of spirituality as the nexus of relationships we engage in where we relate to or connect with (i) the Self, (ii) the Other and (iii) the *Other* whom some call God. In that definition, I attempted to capture both the human and divine dimensions of spirituality within the context of the dynamism of relationships. It has been my argument in this dissertation that the philosophical anthropology advanced in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky does exactly that, that it provides a shared foundation between psychology or Existential Psychotherapy and religion by suggesting that spirituality is the depth dimension of all human experience if we have the courage to venture deep enough into the labyrinth of personal experience. Taylor’s (2010) analysis of Dostoevsky’s contribution to the modern identity shows how the Russian novelist mines the Self more honestly than many philosophers of his time by virtue of his refusal to give up on a vision of life that is essentially good, an essential goodness heralded by the Romantic writers of the preceding centuries. Dostoevsky in his stories and especially in his character Fr. Zossima in his last novel *The Brothers Karamazov* stressed the vision of the wonderful bounty and beauty of life, by engaging in what

Taylor (2010) calls “the power of the imagination” that enables us not alone to see but to rejoice in “the goodness of being” that exists in all of creation, not just its human dimension (pp. 449 — 454). In doing so he offers us genuinely ultimate concerns that anyone attempting to authentically story the Self must inevitably encounter. Yalom’s narrower approach to storying the Self does not allow space for the “power of the imagination,” no matter how bad the existential crisis may be in any patient’s life, to illuminate the dark stretches of human experience and thereby open the interlocutor to “the goodness of being.”

In chapter five I also dealt with the question of evil, in both its moral and existential aspects, as it intruded on Dostoevsky’s growth in selfhood and spirituality. I argued that the way this author dealt with the mystery of evil in life led him to descend into the depths of his being, and in and through that very struggle he eventually encountered some healing; a healing that came ultimately through his faith stance. To cope existentially with the depth of such evil and its consequent suffering, Dostoevsky needed to engage with a spiritual dimension. Such a spiritual dimension is ruled out in Yalom’s approach. In more contemporary therapeutic terms, it is as if Dostoevsky is assuring his readers through the interactions of his characters and the stories he tells that we human beings are stronger than we at first think, that with a genuine head-on encounter with the reality of our lives and with the help of compassionate others we can develop an inner resilience. In this chapter, I likened his experience of evil in his personal life to the traditional Catholic mystical experience of what St John of the Cross (1542 — 1591) called “The dark night of the senses” where the pilgrim on his spiritual journey encounters the distinct feeling of emptiness or absence of God in the lack of any consolations through the senses. It is here that we find an extra dimension to his existential therapeutics — one which I argue is genuinely ultimate.

The inter-related mysteries of evil and suffering regularly impinge on all of us in our onward journey to an integrated personhood and Dostoevsky spends much of his literary oeuvre in dealing compassionately with these issues. No wonder, then, that Oscar Wilde was to remark that what made the Russian authors so attractive was “the pity” they put into their novels, by which he meant their depth of compassion for all human beings.<sup>207</sup> The three novels I dealt with in this chapter are *The Gambler* (1866), *Demons* (1871 —1872) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) which display an amazing breadth of understanding of a vast cast of characters as well as undeniable sympathy for the plight and suffering, physical and mental of those characters. The first of these novels, which deals with the addiction to gambling, was completed in much haste as failing to present it to the unscrupulous publisher, Fyodor Stellovsky, who had advanced Dostoevsky money to clear his gambling debts, would mean the forfeiting of the copyright to his novels for many years to come. The anxiety of the author, then, adds feverish tension and burning pace to the narrative as the writer rushes to meet the impending deadline. The hero, like the author, is riding an emotional roller coaster between exhilaration and despair as his emotions alternate between the highs of winning and the lows of losing. From an existential point of view, this novel deals with one of the compulsions some humans are heir to, the compulsion to throw caution to the wind and risk all they possess on the spin of a roulette wheel or the throw of a die. Again, addiction serves to keep the person fragmented rather than increase his/her integration and in *The Gambler* we are left in little doubt about just how compulsive and fragmenting it is as a craving.<sup>208</sup> It is as if Dostoevsky is asking us the question whether it is possible to overcome our multiform addictions on the road to selfhood. In this

---

<sup>207</sup> Quoted in A.D.P. Briggs (2009b), p. vii.

<sup>208</sup> Gambling, like other addictions, prevents the sufferer from connecting authentically with Self and others and thereby leaves the unreformed addict fragmented.

novel, the answer seems to be very much in the negative. However, there are two existential “wins” here for Dostoevsky, the real-life gambler, which represent deep personal healing, associated with this novel. They are his winning of a new lover and real-life partner in his life, his assistant and soon to be second wife Anna Snitkina, and his reaching the publisher’s deadline with no little help from her. It was through her on-going help and persistence that he eventually overcame his compulsion to gamble. So, while the thrust of the novel may be negative, its very success in publication marked a graced positivity in its author’s life. He was to describe his addiction to gambling as one of the two “hellish enslavements” of his life.<sup>209</sup> Therefore, while spiritual consolation often seemed so far away during the gambling phase of his life (what we find reflected in his novel *The Gambler*), his deep faith sustained him in his darkest moments. Such an existential therapeutics was only possible for Dostoyevsky through faith and he believed that it led him to a healing relationship in his strong and sustaining marriage with Anna.

Moreover, the depths of Dostoyevsky’s fragmentation were no ordinary depths: they had a demonic dimension in the absence of a spiritual vision. *Demons* presents us with a disturbing world picture where our worst nightmares have come true, where nihilism inspires all who are in power, and sheer chaos reigns with crime escalating out of all bounds. In my interpretation of this novel, Dostoevsky is facing head-on in allegorical form what he would have seen as the legions of demons that were attacking the national identity and the moral fibre of Russia as well as his own identity as a patriotic and loyal man of his native soil. *Demons* relates the tale of the social disintegration of a mid-nineteenth-century fictional Russian town as it descends into chaos and becomes the focal point of an attempted revolution, orchestrated by master

---

<sup>209</sup> Letter to the critic N.N. Strakhov, 1863, quoted in Briggs (2010), p. xxi.

conspirator Peter Verkhovensky. In this novel, Dostoevsky is arguing that "demonic" forces have taken possession of the town in the persons of Peter, his father Stepan and the irredeemably evil character Nikolai Stavrogin. The demons that have possessed this evil triumvirate are the evils that stem from westernising ideas that have assailed Russia from decadent nineteenth century Europe such as nihilism, materialism, rationalism, and utilitarianism, all based on a strident atheism. These evils can be attributed to the failure of society in general, and ruthless and amoral leaders in particular, to embrace any moral principles or spiritual vision. Girard (1976) highlights how the loss of the old hierarchies in the modern period leads to an increase in mimetic desire and "contagion" (p. 282).<sup>210</sup> He therefore argues that Raskolnikov's vision of swarms of locusts descending on Europe represent a critical juncture for the author whose intuitions about his own negative mimesis reach fever pitch (p. 181) as the author himself nears the point of what Girard calls "resurrection" or the sublime conclusion of the great novel as is instanced in the denouement of *The Brothers Karamazov* "where the last distinctions between novelistic and religious experience are abolished" (p. 314).

Furthermore, Dostoevsky faced head-on his fears and anxiety about the future of his country in this novel by presenting a vivid portrayal of societal and communal breakdown as a result of outright godlessness. If *Demons* reveals anything about Dostoevsky's psychology of relationships or of the Self in relation to others it reveals their collapse or implosion without a spiritual dimension; something he must have come close to experiencing himself. His characters encounter all the "ultimate concerns" outlined by Yalom, but they simply are not able to sustain their onslaught on them.

---

<sup>210</sup> Mimetic contagion refers to the rapid and spontaneous spread of mimetic desires through a society. Such desires may begin small, but as they grow they gain momentum. Desires are not only toxic but contagious on the level of a virus: "This sickness is contagious... it turns individuals one against the other... Raskolnikov is describing ontological sickness... which triggers an orgy of destruction" (op. cit., p. 282).

They are truly consumed by their own evil as is shown essentially by the sad and lonely death of Dostoevsky's most evil character Stavrogin by his own hand. A real existential therapeutic for Dostoevsky had to confront such an onslaught on the hero and allow for his/her return from the abyss, healed and more whole from the experience. A good example of such a descent into the abyss and his transforming return therefrom in *Demons* is the conversion of the half-decent character Shatov. His assassination mirrors exactly that of the real-life Ivan Ivanov who attempted to leave the 1860s cell of five nihilistic revolutionaries of which he was a member. Shatov is recently converted to Christianity and wishes to leave the group of evil conspirators mentioned above, and much of his newly-found decency is based on the birth of his newly-born son with whom he is besotted and whom he perceives as a gift from God. Dostoevsky modelled Shatov's reaction to the birth of his son on that of his own reaction to the birth of *his own* son Fyodor who was born the same year as that of the publication of this novel. This fact supports Girard's (1976) contention that in *Demons* Dostoevsky "transcends the slavophile ideology" in his depiction of Shatov's conversion to more ethical ways that decried demonic nihilism (p. 190). In other words, Dostoevsky is emphasising that this positive mimetic modelling by Shatov in opting for life is a far better option than the negative sort of mimesis that is blindly followed in either acts of terrorism or suicide, both of which were embraced by Stavrogin. Dostoevsky is himself making a strong option for life over death and destruction in this portrayal of Shatov.

In the third section of chapter five, I continued to explore the inner depths of the Self, beyond what Yalom's "ultimate concerns" permit. I dealt with the problem of evil as an argument for the impossibility of the existence of a good God or any deity at all. This is not merely an intellectual explanation but it is also often one that grows out of an anguished grappling with the problem at an experiential level. The argument is

advanced dramatically in story form by Ivan, the intellectual Karamazov brother in the eponymous novel. In this way, Dostoevsky is facing down all the demons he has encountered in his life and is setting the scene to counter such arguments in the persons and good example of his own admitted heroes of Fr. Zossima and his protégé Br. Alyosha.

One of the main criticisms of the humanistic approach to therapy under Rogers *et al* is its failure to take account of the question of evil in the world and in the lives of individuals who are either its perpetrators or its victims. The twin evils of moral turpitude and suffering present problems for everyone whether they engage in a talking cure or not. Dostoevsky faces these problems head-on, a stance that is peculiar to his existentialist approach to therapy, what I have been calling the therapeutics of the text. Indeed, it is the ability to face the problems of pain and suffering head-on that is the strength of Existential Therapy in particular (Yalom, 1980), and Hayes (2005), founder of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), highlights the acceptance of such existential problems and a commitment to a positive engagement with them as the road to healing.<sup>211</sup>

However, for Dostoevsky more than an acceptance of life's problems and a commitment to handling them positively is needed. I have argued that this Russian writer's work strongly confirms that an openness to a spiritual dimension to life, which includes a genuine openness to our fellow human beings, can and does help those who are suffering. I have also stressed that Dostoyevsky's Existential Therapeutics, and the narrative approach to storying the Self that is peculiar to his searching Self, in particular can help the ordinary person who follows in his therapeutic footsteps to cope with such

---

<sup>211</sup> Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT, is a mindful approach to accepting the hardships in life, and most especially the feelings that arise from them, to improve one's overall quality of living by committing to (i) a positive engagement with these difficult conflicts, (ii) becoming mindful, and (iii) choosing a direction that will improve things, and then acting accordingly.

obstacles as evil presents to their own personal growth and wellbeing. Furthermore, I believe that engaging not only in a therapeutics of talk with storying of the kind that Yalom employs, but also, significantly, in a therapeutics of text with the stories that Dostoevsky's life has wrought, are ways of so doing therapy. Literature of the quality and depth the writer offers his readers is one of the most effective means of enabling such coping as it brings an existential therapeutics to a new level.

Briefly, then, in chapter five, I likened Dostoevsky's deep existential suffering to St John of the Cross's notion of the "dark night of the senses" where the pilgrim or mystic paradoxically and mysteriously experiences God's presence in his apparent absence. That absence of God and of apparent meaning would have tormented many sensitive souls like it did Ivan. In that chapter my emphasis was essentially on the mystery of evil and how Dostoevsky sought to understand it through his novels. In chapter six, I sought to put a greater emphasis on the personal suffering experienced by the author as portrayed in the characters of his great novels, that is, I looked at the issue of suffering as a further and deeper reflection on a truly ultimate concern. In this chapter I explored the paradoxical notion of Dostoevsky's deep encounter with the divine at the very heart of his suffering. I contended there that he was experiencing the third dimension of spirituality as I defined it in chapter five, namely, the reaching out of the *Other* or God to the person in the very midst of his or her torment and travail. This again is in itself a most profound mystery and Dostoevsky employed the wide spectrum of his many experiences and his great gifts as a creative writer to explore this enigma in a most comprehensive and profound manner without any simplification as one would expect from an existential writer. By presenting both the believer's and unbeliever's stance and a vast range of views in-between, he introduced the reader to what Bakhtin (1984) calls a polyphony of many voices (p. 6) with as many points of view.

I have argued in chapter five that the spiritual experience is in fact a two-way encounter where the individual reaches out to God while God is simultaneously experienced as reaching out to him or her. In traditional theological terms, faith is seen as a response to the self-revelation of God, and the consequence of this is that spirituality is experienced as a loving response to the felt communication of the presence of God in the believer's life, a God who has loved the individual from the beginning, and an action that sparked the faith or spiritual response in the first place.<sup>212</sup> Again, the paradox that God can be encountered in the midst of suffering, I argue is what St John of the Cross named "the dark night of the soul" and is in fact the experience that Dostoevsky recounts in the two novels dealt with in this chapter namely *The Idiot* (1868/9) and his greatest novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. (1880)

Bearing in mind the agreement that a biographical element is at work in Dostoevsky's novels, I made the case that *The Idiot* is expressly about encountering God through mystical experience. Despite whatever suffering occurs, like the death by murder of his beloved, Myshkin still remains unbelievably compassionate to her murderer. This, I argued could only have been achieved by a character presented as unbelievably good. In fact, Dostoevsky set out to author a novel where the hero would be "an exceptionally good man" but acknowledged even before he had authored the book that the project would obviously end in failure (quoted in Frank, 2010, p. 562). As a gifted writer he knew that readers preferred novels where the protagonist, while morally good, has to struggle with fatal flaws. To present to the reading public an apparently flawless hero would be to court failure as a novelist (it was as if the audience

---

<sup>212</sup> In Catholic theology, through what is called an "analysis of faith," the authority of the God who reveals is seen as the "decisive factor" for believing in the first place. (O' Collins, G. & Farrugia, E.G, 1991, p. 10). Therefore, faith may be described as the response of the believer to the self-revelation or self-disclosure of God. This point is relevant as Zossima underlines the fact that it was God's first loving us that makes us capable of loving all of creation. In a Christian context, spirituality refers, consequently, to how we systematically respond in faith to God's self-disclosure through various forms of ritual, sacraments, and prayer.

had thrown down the gauntlet which Dostoevsky readily accepted). However, his belief in the potentiality and perfectibility of humanity and the saintliness and mystical nature of certain individuals led him to persist in his project. Probably something of a mimetic relationship was at work here between him and his main character.

Here, too, Dostoevsky is telling a story to counter the rational egoism and nihilism advocated by the likes of Chernyshevsky. Consequently, Myshkin is the personification of spiritual wisdom versus rational reductionism. This flawless hero is the essence of purity on a wide sea of conceit, ambition and cunning. Indeed, it is hard to see how he could possibly survive given this great imbalance of good and evil. Indeed, on one level, Myshkin is presented as an idiot or a fool in the eyes of the world, yet on another level, he is a “Holy Fool” or a “Fool for God,” namely a person who sees into the depth of things, who realises that there is truly a deeper reality to life, that there is a deep or spiritual level beneath its surface appearance.

*The Idiot* offers a mystical take on experience, that is, it sees into the depth dimension of reality beyond the “ultimate concerns” of which Yalom speaks. Dostoevsky, through the reporting of Myshkin, offers the reader an account of his own experience of a mock execution when he and others, convicted for their part in a revolutionary organisation, were made face a firing squad and had stood hooded as the rifles were raised before their sentence was commuted by the Tsar through a messenger riding in on horseback.<sup>213</sup> That truly traumatic experience was a liminal one for the writer. The minutes before the drumroll would be sounded seemed like an eternity for

---

<sup>213</sup> On 23 April 1849 thirty-five members of the Petrashevsky Circle were arrested by Tsarist police and taken to the St. Peter and Paul Fortress. The Petrashevsky Circle was a Russian literary discussion group of progressive-minded intellectuals in St. Petersburg in the 1840s, organized by Mikhail Petrashevsky. Among those arrested was the 27-year-old Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky who was accused of reading aloud at a meeting an outlawed letter from Belinsky to Gogol attacking the church and Tsarist regime under Nicholas I. The condemned were taken by carriage on 22 December 1849 to the Semyonov Square drill grounds — now called Pionerskaya Ploschad — where they endured a mock execution. (See Frank, 2010, pp. 173 — 183)

the condemned man and sights of the gilded domes in the distance blended into a unity with nature. This experience of liminality was a doorway into a religious or depth experience that resulted in what the literary scholar Peace (1992) referred to as the “triumph of aesthetics” (p. 59) where beauty meets the transcendent truth or the depth level of all experience in the divine.

The second such mystical experience is associated with Dostoevsky’s own illness, namely epilepsy. Medical science speaks about the “aura” experienced by sufferers of the malady and some commentators comment that it is often described as a sublime experience akin to a religious or a mystical experience. At these times, Dostoevsky’s consciousness of Self and his appreciation for life were multiplied in intensity many times over. It was as if his mind and heart were flooded with extraordinary light before the contorting fit threw him violently to the ground. In other words, I am underlining here my strong contention that Dostoevsky is, in this unusual and extraordinary novel, working through his own conflicted struggle with the anguish he experienced in his life with respect to the finality of death versus the extraordinary mystical experience of unity with the spiritual world and the lure of a heavenly horizon he felt at the very heart of his own suffering. This is, of course, an interpretation, one that is rooted in Girard’s hermeneutics, but also based on ample evidence to support the case. Dostoevsky’s own experience of life is mystical and to that extent he maintained that he always sought to present his stories through what he termed a “fantastic realism” where even the most horrific or even banal scenes are shot through with a deeper presence which only first-hand experience can fully render. <sup>214</sup> Panichas (2005)

---

<sup>214</sup> Frank (2010) quotes a letter of Dostoevsky’s where he describes his realism as fantastic because he argued that it was “more real” and “deeper” than that of those who criticised him for his lack of realism. His critics’ realism, he argued, was shallower. His “more real” realism plumbed his own moral-spiritual depths and that of his readers and suggested a mystical dimension to life (p. 575).

interprets this as essentially the writer's refusal to divorce "elemental reality from ultimate reality" (p.31).

Dostoevsky presents us with a contrast between the more esoteric iconographic representation of Christ in the Russian icons, whose features the hero Myshkin bears, with the realistic and frightening portrayal of the dead Christ in Hans Holbein's eponymous painting. Myshkin is the only one who can see that this painting represents a prelude to the resurrection not the desolation of death. It is the strength of Dostoevsky's talent as a writer that he allows the starkness and finality of death to apparently win out against his own very deep belief in the resurrection. Pulling these personal and novelistic threads together, then, we glimpse Dostoevsky's therapeutics in a most acute manner, one that Girardian prong of my double hermeneutic helps us to discern. The achievement of authoring the novel says something other than death and destruction because the very act of writing is itself a form of self-transcendence, a type of resurrection, an act of overcoming the apparent finality depicted in Holbein's work.

The second novel I discussed is his last creative work and it presents an account of the conflicts and torments endured by a dysfunctional family called Karamazov after the murder of the paterfamilias, Fyodor. He has four sons and they are all very conflicted persons who are enmeshed in dysfunctional relationships. In my interpretation, which again draws on the biographical elements, Dostoevsky is working out his personal spirituality in the face of his own conflicts, especially his suffering and guilt. He is narrating or storying the Self in a profoundly deep and spiritual manner. In his own familial context, he experienced much guilt with respect to the way he had treated his father, how blameworthy he felt over the death of his son Alexei from epilepsy and his own addiction to gambling which caused suffering to his wife and children. In short, then, Dostoevsky was dealing with a double guilt — the guilt of a

father and the guilt of a son. Where would the healing for this guilt be found? In this novel, he was to argue that it was to be discovered in the liberating and healing message of faith, hope, and love as found in the teachings of the dying elder of the local monastery, namely the articles of faith as expounded by the old monk Fr. Zossima.

Girard's (1976) words are again particularly apposite with respect to *The Brothers Karamazov* i.e., that Dostoevsky is continuing to describe "all the lies of which he is in the process of ridding himself" (p. 208) or, in other words, persisting to disabuse his mind and his heart of all his delusions on the road to individuation and healing; a process that his writing helps expiate. Again, Girard expresses the same point somewhat differently, but no less effectively earlier in the same book where he states that Dostoevsky "exorcises his demons, one after the other, by embodying them in his novels" (p. 32). Furthermore, Dostoevsky is also growing in spiritual strength by way of finding meaning in his own suffering — what I equate with St John of the Cross's notion of "Dark night of the soul." In *The Brothers Karamazov*, then, I contended that he is engaged in these particular tasks in a tripartite way in the characters of Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha or even in a quadripartite mode if Smerdyakov is counted in, where roughly speaking we could say that Dmitri represents the world of the senses, Ivan that of the intellect, Alyosha that of the spirit or soul while Smerdyakov represents that of the Freudian *Id*. Again, such a comprehensive exploration of the psychology of his characters illustrates the profundity of Dostoevsky's insight into human nature.

The mystery of evil and suffering plays itself out through the dynamic interaction of the four brothers, Dmitri, Ivan, Alyosha and Smerdyakov as they try to come to grips with both their sadness and guilt at the death of their father. They are each struggling for answers from all sources in their dramatic encounter with one another. In that encounter, Alyosha offers truly little by way of argument, being merely

satisfied to be the attentive listener to the trials and tribulations of his three brothers. The dual mysteries of evil and suffering are dealt with from an emotionally confused and sensual point of view by Dmitri, from an anguished intellectual angle by Ivan, from an instinctual level by Smerdyakov and from a balanced or equanimous point of spiritual insight by Alyosha who is strongly reflecting the spiritual power of his mentor or spiritual director, Fr. Zossima. This holy elder represents the healing power of a spiritual therapeutics for Dostoevsky who readily admitted that he had modelled the character of Zossima on the real-life starets, Fr Ambrosius of the Optina monastery, whom he and his wife had visited for healing their deep grief after the death of their little boy Alyosha. Their suffering was assuaged after their moving encounter with the saintly elder.

One important focal point, then, of *The Brothers Karamazov* is in fact the teaching and lived example of the wise and dying old monk, Fr. Zossima, who is able to reveal his vulnerability to all; who has learnt the lessons of life that growth only comes through the acknowledgement of our own faults and failings; that we must set those failings right by engaging in penance and restitution; that suffering is to be endured, not as a punishment from a malign deity but as an opportunity for our personal growth and healing; and finally that we can learn anew an appreciation of the wonderful bounty and beauty of life, by engaging in what Taylor (2010) calls “the power of the imagination” that enables us to see “the goodness of being” in all of creation along the lines of the Creator God of Genesis who saw all he created as good (pp. 449 — 454). Fr Zossima offers, in short, a deeper vision that can be seen as a spiritual basis for a life lived with fuller and more truly ultimate concerns than those offered by Yalom’s therapeutics. He is deliberately portrayed as a character who is the polar opposite to Ivan as he gives the other side of the story about the place of suffering in God’s plan for the world and for

humankind. It is arguable that Ivan's argument is at first glance the more convincing as it is based on rationality alone, but when one takes into account Dostoevsky's criticism of the narrowness and shallowness of reason to account comprehensively for the mystery and complexity that lies at the very heart of humanity, Zossima's argument becomes all the stronger. His message is based on love and compassion for all of nature from the heart of the suffering he has endured during his life and is now experiencing on his death bed.

Fr. Zossima's life story is presented as strikingly human as well as deeply spiritual. He is contrasted with Fr. Ferapont who saw the work of the Devil everywhere and who always projected his demonic fears onto others. Zossima was a lover of life in all its incarnations: in fauna, flora and especially in humanity. In short, and I stress this major point, he saw God in all things — where Ferapont saw demons, the saintly starets saw angels. The old man had uncovered the lies in his own life, had faced his own inner demons, or had integrated his "Shadow Self" in the words of Carl Jung. This is a significant point because Dostoevsky was struggling to do the same in his own life and was painfully working that angst-ridden task out in this novel.

Taylor's (2010) analysis of Dostoevsky's approach to literature and writing is particularly relevant here where he argues that the Russian author went beyond the then (and, indeed, the contemporary) approach to art that questioned (and questions) the very "goodness of being" through its "stark rejection of a spiritual dimension" (p. 448). He contends that, with Dostoevsky, we see the flowering of a biblical vision of art wherein "we can learn to cope with crises (of affirmation) through a transfiguring of our vision" (p. 448). Such a vision sees our planet and all in it as intrinsically and ultimately good, based on a new and re-imagined Biblical way of seeing all of creation, no matter how

lowly or spoiled, as good. Dostoevsky's work is, in effect, then, a vivid description of such a radical re-imagination of the world under the influence of a spiritual vision.<sup>215</sup>

Myshkin's character was far too good to be true and really did not capture fully Dostoevsky's real-life existential troubles. One of the towering flaws of the characterisation of Myshkin is that Dostoevsky gives us extraordinarily little or none of his backstory as he appears out of nowhere, having been released from a mental sanatorium, an institution into which he mysteriously disappears once again at the end of the novel. On the other hand, Zossima has a military backstory of some wide experience. Similar to Dostoevsky who faced his own demons head-on by recounting his gambling and unfaithfulness through the character of Dmitri and his dalliance with atheism and nihilism in Ivan, the old monk had also faced down his own demons courageously. As a result of his being fully human, and therefore frail, this elder — unlike Myshkin in *The Idiot* — could put himself in the shoes of a sinner and empathise with the sufferer. In other words, Zossima, and indeed Dostoevsky himself, would make great counsellors whereas Myshkin was too far removed from ordinary humanity to be one. The old monk, then, was essentially a “wounded healer.” He would have seen the ultimate lie as the lie to the Self, a refusal to face one's own truth in total authenticity. Such stories of the “wounded healers” who still bear their scars despite their spiritual healing, portray individuals who have dived deeper into the wells of the Self beyond the “ultimate concerns” that Yalom articulates as central to his existential therapeutics, and more than Yalom's storying of the Self would allow. Yalom's

---

<sup>215</sup> The comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of Zossima's vision is strongly expressed in what Taylor (2010) sees as “the rise in the power of the imagination,” newly unleashed after the traditional romantic vision of a powerful spiritual “current running through nature” had seemingly been given a death blow by the burgeoning of urbanisation and the growth of modernity (a term whose origins is often ascribed to the French author Baudelaire) in the Arts in the nineteenth century (see pp. 450 — 454). Modernity had no time for the transcendent, which by definition is far beyond our reach. However, one of its compensations was that it left room for the creative power of the imagination to see things anew which, according to Taylor, is especially shown to great effect in the works of Dostoevsky.

storying of the Self does not go as deep at all, probably because, as he has admitted in his memoir, he had not suffered enough himself to have experienced a healing power that was beyond him at some transcendent depth or height. This is quite possibly a cultural or status characteristic more than a personal weakness on the part of Yalom, because as Camus, who had visited the United States in the 1950s, was to declare: there existed a striking lack of anguish in America where “nothing was properly tragic,”<sup>216</sup> what Taylor (2003) calls the “flattened self” is arguably a feature of this lack of depth that manifests itself in “a shutting out, or even unawareness, of the greater issues or concerns that transcend the Self, be they religious, political, historical. As a consequence, life is narrowed or flattened” (p. 14). In brief, Dostoevsky’s Self project confronts the spiritual problems of an age.

### 7.3 Conclusion: Summary of the Argument

My argument in this dissertation has been that while Yalom’s therapeutics of story, which is the vehicle of the healing relationship, does not go far enough or deep enough, that is, it does not push his concerns in an ultimate fashion at all. Ironically, there are limits being imposed on the storying process by the very lack of ultimacy involved in his understanding of what he means by “ultimate concerns.” In short, the issue is that Yalom’s co-ordinates of story, which his ultimate concerns are, present us with a process of storying that represents an immanent vision alone, one limited by and within the very borders of human vision. They are, in effect, something akin to Carl Jaspers’ “limit situations,”<sup>217</sup> but without their liminality which would allow access to the rich

---

<sup>216</sup> Quoted in Bakewell (2016), p. 170.

<sup>217</sup> Salamun (1988) points out that Jasper’s original term “‘Grenzsituation’ is translated in English by ‘limit’ or ‘boundary’ or ‘limiting’ or ‘borderline’ situation” (p. 318). According to Jaspers, a limit situation is evident in the inevitable fact that we human beings are always in situations where we cannot live without much struggling and suffering. Death is an obvious limit situation that is a powerful source

numinous realm of the transcendent. Such a reduced account of these major concerns or core conflicts by Yalom closes them to a wider and deeper dimension of belief. Yalom's purely immanent vision of ultimate concerns, I have argued, is a problem for Existential Psychotherapy as it simply is not inclusive of all human experience because it rules out its religious faith from the start. In sum, Yalom's vision of therapy is decidedly a secular immanent one that does not take full account of human reality.

I have confronted this aporia in Yalom's immanent vision of the four core conflicts or ultimate concerns through analysing the power of storying in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. A nineteenth-century novelist would seem an unlikely candidate to address such a yawning gap in Yalom's account of the power of storying in the practice of psychotherapy. After all, he was not a practising therapist, but rather an accomplished and well-practised writer for whom story-telling was his chief talent. On closer examination, I have found that writing is essentially an engagement with the Self, with exploring one's core identity. I have shown that the writer's quest is a form of storying that is in essence therapeutic; it brings about healing or wholeness to the Self. Dostoevsky did not limit himself to an immanent frame of reference as all his novels explore the full range of human experience from the depths of depravity, depression, and desolation to the heights of religious ecstasy, beauty and loving compassion and much existential ground between both extremes. His was a transcendental vision, one that pushes beyond each of Yalom's four ultimate concerns or core conflicts.

I will briefly recap here on Dostoevsky's achievement. With respect to Yalom's first ultimate concern of death, Dostoevsky continually pushes that encounter to a more ultimate degree than would Yalom as illustrated in Markel's (Zossima's younger

---

of fear and anxiety, even of nihilistic despair. It can, and often does, push us to live life more fully and authentically as a result. Yalom would concur strongly with all of this. However, unlike Yalom, Jaspers would allow for a liminality or openness to the transcendent in his notion of "Grenzsituation," in other words. that one can encounter a horizon in the distance.

brother's) account of his own painful dying in *The Brothers Karamazov* where the young man's experience of suffering is transformed into a deeper understanding of the apparent gratuitousness of this life. By being open to the grace of God, he experiences a deeper love and respect for all living things under the transforming power of the Christian promise of immortality and the eternal endurance of love. Loving the world and ourselves in it, Taylor (2010) argues, echoing Ivan's words, is "a miracle" despite "all the evil and degradation that it and we contain" (p. 452). Such a love as described in Zossima's orations and expressed in the dying Markel's acceptance of his fate is transforming and transfiguring because we experience ourselves as being loved unconditionally and thereby enabled to love both Self and others in return.

Likewise, with Yalom's ultimate concern of freedom, Dostoevsky pushes that encounter further by placing freedom in the context of the radical decision to accept truth and responsibility in our lives, even if that may bring us pain and suffering, over and against the more superficial rewards of society such as success, power, wealth, and happiness. Again, that ultimate concern is positioned in the context of a radical choice for ultimate freedom as shown in Dostoevsky's powerful parable of the meeting of Jesus Christ with the Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition. He is arguing that we are far more comfortable choosing a lesser freedom where we select our own immediate happiness, our own instant gratification, and comforts far more readily than accepting our responsibilities for following where the truth will lead us in any given situation.

With respect to Yalom's core conflict of existential isolation, Dostoevsky's novels are replete with examples of this core existential concern where major characters constantly engage in internal self-analysis when they are in isolation or alone with themselves. Raskolnikov, the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* is a prime example of such self-examination during sustained periods of existential isolation. In those

periods he questions himself most radically indeed as he traverses the whole gamut of emotions from, on the one hand, the feeling of exhilaration and power in planning a so-called “rational murder,” the rush of panicked excitement he experiences in its execution, the frenzied necessity to murder a witness and on the other, the self-doubt and contradiction of revisiting the murder site, his gnawing rehearsal of the heinous crime in his mind, the growing regret and examination of his motives, his inner torment and consequent mental and behavioural disturbance, his growing sense of moral responsibility through his relationship with his beloved, his remorse and eventual confession of overwhelming guilt. These are all pushed beyond their limits by his experience of deep healing love and the promise of forgiveness and redemption through a deep conversion to Christian principles.

With regard to Yalom’s fourth and final ultimate concern of meaninglessness, I have shown that it is clear that Dostoevsky’s novels are crammed with characters who experience their lives as meaningless and who more often than not see suicide as the only way out of their predicament like Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment*, Stavrogin in *Demons* or Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*. However, Dostoevsky sees the possibility of the transformation of meaninglessness into meaning through the exercise of the imagination of the newly converted person to see the sheer wonder and beauty in life. This transformation is most particularly captured in his portrayal of the conversion of one of the members of the terrorist group in *Demons* who is prepared to squeal on the planned explosion. The character in question is Shatov who is not alone converted from his terrorist inclinations but deeply moved by the beauty and hope of life captured in the birth of his first child. For him, a new and deeper meaning has replaced the meaninglessness and consequent triviality of life as reflected in a destructive terrorism or in the act of suicide. This sense of wonder at the awesomeness of life, rendered all

the more powerful against the inevitable backdrop of evil and suffering and life's eventual extinction in death, is itself a powerful gateway to religious experience. That openness to an ultimate dimension or horizon beyond death is strengthened by faith, which, like philosophy itself, can begin and be strengthened in wonder at the sheer magnificence of the range of the human experience of life.<sup>218</sup>

Furthermore, love is central to a therapeutics extrapolated from Dostoevsky's oeuvre, a dynamic vision of living summarised above in Zossima's great orations. Early in *The Brothers Karamazov*, speaking of his admitted hero Alyosha, he describes him as "simply a precocious lover of humanity... he loved people so much that all his life he seemed to have complete faith in people, and yet no one ever took him for a simpleton or a naïve person." (Dostoyevsky 1978a, p. 17) People, for Dostoevsky, are transformed by being loved by God in the first place. This, in turn, helps them to love others all the more. This is exactly why Taylor (2010) remarks discerningly that one of the Russian author's "central insights" was the way we human beings can "close or open ourselves to grace" (p. 451). Grace may be described as the unmerited gift of divine favour, which in our context here is love, a love that is ultimately and truly healing. <sup>219</sup> Yalom (2017) admits in his memoir, written at the age of 85, that he had never considered the role of love and its power to heal a human being in his discussions of the practice of psychotherapy and stated that he now readily acknowledged it as "a

---

<sup>218</sup> "Wonder is the only beginning of philosophy," Plato has Socrates say at 155d of the *Theaetetus*. And at 982b of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle says, "it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophise."

<sup>219</sup> Murdoch (1999) argues for a "morality of love" and offers a definition of love as being "the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real" (p. xvi). To be open to and to acknowledge the gratuitous love of God along the lines of Dostoevsky and Taylor would on such an understanding render the Divine extremely real indeed.

huge omission”<sup>220</sup> (p. 274). Such an omission of love, which ultimately is from beyond the Self, effectively rules out a spiritual dimension. In short, this means that Yalom’s ultimate concerns fall considerably short of offering a therapeutics ultimate enough to effect the deepest healing of the fragmented Self.

#### 7.4. Limitations and Opportunities

This dissertation has argued for the recovery of a spiritual dimension to Existential Psychotherapy. Surely, then, the appeal to a nineteenth century reactionary writer like Dostoevsky, whose religious convictions were rooted in a conservative Russian Orthodox Church that supported the autocratic rule of the Tsars is a severe limitation to recovering such a dimension? How then do I counter this limitation? The answer, I believe, may be found in the following important distinctions and clarifications.

##### (i) The Religion and Spirituality Distinction:

Religions may be roughly defined as the organised, institutional or hierarchical expression of what has been traditionally termed (i) the Creed (doctrines), (ii) Code (moral laws) and (iii) Cult (liturgy) of any particular major group of believers. Spirituality on the other hand, I have defined in this dissertation as the web of connections, or graced relationships, we have with (i) Self, (ii) the Other and (iii) the Ultimate Other, whom many of us call God. Importantly, I should point out that religious structures at their best have preserved and effectively communicated the religious experience generated by their founder and obviously do not necessarily impede the personal spirituality and the various devotions of their faithful followers.

---

<sup>220</sup> Listening to a sermon at a recent Christmas service motivated Yalom “to reconsider the role of love in my own profession. I became aware that I have never, not once, used the word love or compassion in my discussions of the practice of psychotherapy.” Of course, Yalom obviously did practise love and compassion for his patients. He is alluding to his not acknowledging this quality more strongly in his academic writings. See *ibid.*, p. 274.

However, in practice, due to the fallibility and sinful nature of all human beings, many religious structures and hierarchies of various religions have covered up corruption and abuse within their ranks thereby eclipsing the enlivening spiritual dimension that should of necessity dwell within their particular religion. In fact, we have seen all too clearly documented in our daily news media that religions and some of their spiritual practices have been found to contribute to the fragmentation of the self in a number of abused believers. In effect, as the philosopher Eric Voegelin so well put it, the structures in these cases have failed to effectively embody the “engendering experience” of their founder.<sup>221</sup> In other words, they have lost effective contact with the enlivening spirituality of their originator.

I believe that I have offered a strong argument that Dostoevsky’s novels are more underpinned by an enlivening and courageous spirituality than by any of the more negative restrictions of a reactionary church. He is open to the “engendering experience” of faith (his acceptance of the gospel) and is in no way enclosed in the suffocating rules of a harsh orthodoxy in his novels. Indeed, he recounts the unbelief of atheists in a stronger manner than he does the faith stance of convinced believers. For Dostoevsky, his Hosanna (or faith) came from the “crucible of doubt.” It is his openness to experience in all its colours from doubt to belief and to the spiritual depth of his experiences that can be mined for an authentic spiritual and healing quest that can be effectively applied to all religions and none, and indeed to all cultures and creeds. My main finding in this dissertation that spirituality is the depth dimension of ordinary human experience undergirds this last contention. Obviously, non-believers would not be open to this depth dimension in its spiritual profundity, but they do experience

---

<sup>221</sup> The “engendering experience” in the case of Christianity would be seen as the enlivening message of the Good News as experienced by the early Christian community and faithfully passed on by the proclamation of the Gospel over the centuries. See Federici, M.P. (2002), *Eric Voegelin*, pp. 1 — 25.

healing in an immanent and human sense which no doubt they claim is good enough for them.

(ii) Redemption and Forgiveness: Opportunities for Deeper Healing

Dostoevsky allows his characters to be real, that is, they are allowed to develop without the author restricting their authenticity. He never offers trite answers to real questions but allows characters and their respective stories to lead inevitably where they will. He portrays characters of the highest moral rectitude like Fr. Zossima and Br. Alyosha while at the same time exploring the depths of depravity in characters like Raskolnikov and Stavrogin. However, Dostoevsky's Christian idealism leaves him open to the twin realities of redemption and forgiveness. For example, Dostoevsky through his own painful experience of incarceration with many criminals had learnt the hard way not to judge others, that there was good in some of the worst convicts, that redemption and forgiveness were possible for those willing to repent. That is why Raskolnikov is portrayed as a repentant nihilist who has struggled to firstly confess his great sin, secondly to realise that he is loved by Sonya and thirdly to eventually accept that he is loved unconditionally by a forgiving God. His is a painful journey to healing and he sleeps with the New Testament under his pillow to sustain him. Dostoevsky records in his diary that he, too, did exactly the same in prison. In short, a necessary part of his healing was learning that God in his infinite love is a forgiving God. Belief in a forgiving God must surely lead to self-forgiveness and deep healing. Unconditional love, then, is essentially healing, and as I have noted above, Yalom admitted that his omission of it from his theory of Existential Psychotherapy was a huge error. A therapeutics extrapolated from the powerful storying of Dostoevsky would of necessity embrace both unconditional love and forgiveness as avenues to the deepest healing of

the human spirit and in this therapeutic sense would be truly ultimate concerns in line with Tillich's understanding of the term.

(iii) Opportunities for a spiritual therapy

What are the implications of this research for therapy? The spiritual foundation of Existential Psychotherapy finds its locus in the inevitable suffering life throws at the patient and how both therapist and patient face that mystery head on. It is the task of the therapist to be a guide, or better still a companion for the latter on that painful journey. In all of this tribulation, the telling of stories is both helpful and healing, especially when it does face suffering head-on. In this regard Bausch (1995), writing about the characteristics of storytelling, describes one of the paradoxes associated with this art as providing its listeners with the promise that "triumph grows out of suffering." (p. 72) This contention reinforces Dostoevsky's abiding belief in the healing power of suffering. This in itself, of course, is the deepest of mysteries that can only be explored, never explained away. If anything, a spiritual approach to therapy would be singularly averse to cheap answers and its method would be a gently probing one indicating imaginatively possible paths ahead, all the time pointing to the goodness in life if only we are open and brave enough to see its sheer giftedness and bounty like Markel facing his death from TB in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Indeed, counsellors or psychotherapists in a spiritual existential therapy would themselves need to be "wounded healers" like Fr. Zossima in that same novel. Such healers appreciate the depths of mystery at the heart of existence and see their goal as leaders of their patients or clients into exploring that mystery. However, tracing that mystery is beyond the purview of the current thesis and is, consequently, a story for another dissertation.

# Bibliography

## A. Primary Sources

### 1. Yalom

- Yalom, I. D. (1970). *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (5th edition). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Yalom, I. and Ginny Elkin (1974). *Every Day Gets a Little Closer: A Twice —Told Therapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Yalom, I (1975). *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, New York: Basic Books.
- Yalom, I.D. (1976). Using the here-and-now in group therapy. *Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference of the Group Therapy Department*. Washington Square Institute for Psychotherapy and Mental Health.
- Yalom, I & Greaves, C. (1977). Group Therapy with the terminally ill, *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 134: 4, (pp. 396 — 400)
- Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Yalom, I. (1991). *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*. London: Penguin.
- Yalom, I (1996). *Lying on the Couch*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Yalom, B. (1998). *The Yalom Reader: Selections from the Work of a Master Therapist and Storyteller*. New York: Basic Books.
- Yalom, I. (1999). *Mama and the Meaning of Life: Tales of Psychotherapy*. London: Piatkus
- Yalom, I. (2002a). *The Gift of Therapy: Reflections on being a Therapist*. London: Piatkus.
- Yalom, I. (2002b). Religion and Psychiatry: Acceptance Speech at the 2000 Oscar Pfister prize. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*. Volume: 56 Issue: 3, (pp. 301 — 316)

- Yalom, I. (2003). *When Nietzsche Wept: A Novel of Obsession*. New York: Perennial Classics, HarperCollins.
- Yalom, I. (2005). *The Schopenhauer Cure: A Novel*. New York: Perennial Classics, HarperCollins.
- Yalom, I. (2009). *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death*. San Francisco: Jossey—Bass.
- Yalom, I. (2011). *I'm Calling The Police*. New York, NY: Basic Books
- Yalom, I. (2013). *The Spinoza Problem: A Novel*. New York: Basic Books.
- Yalom, I. (2015). *Creatures of a Day and other tales of Psychotherapy*. London: Piatkus.
- Yalom, I. (2017). *Becoming Myself: A Psychiatrist's Memoir*. London: Piatkus
- Yalom, I & Yalom, M. (2021) *A Matter of Death and Life: Love, Loss & What Matters in the End*, London: Piatkus.

## 2. Dostoevsky

- Dostoevsky, F. (1917). *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to His Family and Friends*. (Eliasberg, A. & Colburn Mayne, E., translators). New York: Macmillan Co.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1962). *The Possessed*, translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew, New York: A Signet Classic, The New American Library.<sup>222</sup>
- Dostoevsky, F. (1970). *Three Short Novels: Poor Folk, The Double & The Eternal Husband*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Dostoyevsky, F (1976a). *The Double*, translated by Jennie Coulson. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1976b). *Notes from Underground and The Double*, two-book volume, translated by David Magarshack, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

---

<sup>222</sup> The spelling of the novelist's surname differs from edition to edition, and obviously from translator to translator.

- Dostoyevsky, F. (1977). *Crime and Punishment*, translated by David Magarshack, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1978a). *The Brothers Karamazov 1*, Translated by David Magarshack, Middlesex: Penguin.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1978b). *The Brothers Karamazov 2*, Translated by David Magarshack, Middlesex: Penguin.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1983). *The Devils*, Translated by David Magarshack, Harmondsworth: Penguin. (This novel is also known in the West as *The Possessed*.)
- Dostoevsky, F. (1984). *The Grand Inquisitor*. New York: Continuum.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1985). *Netochka Nezvanova*. London: Penguin Books.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1988). *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky: Selections from his Works*. Illustrated by Fritz Eichenberg. New York: Plough Publishing House.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1992). *Notes from the Underground*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Dostoevsky, F. (2000). *Crime and Punishment*. translated by Constance Garnett, London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (2008). *White Nights & Other Stories*, New York: Dover Publications.
- Dostoevsky, F. (2009a). *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett, London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Dostoevsky, F. (2009b). *Devils*, translated by Constance Garnett, London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Dostoevsky, F. (2010a). *The Idiot*, translated by Constance Garnett, London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Dostoevsky, F. (2010b). *The House of the Dead & The Gambler*, translated by Constance Garnett, London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Dostoevsky, F. (2013). *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*. London: Alma Classics.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (2015). *The Meek One: A Fantastic Story*, London: Penguin Books.

Dostoyevsky. F. (No Date). *Humiliated and Insulted*. London: Amazon

Dostoyevsky. F. (No Date). *Uncle's Dream*. London: Amazon.

Dostoyevsky. F. (No Date). *The Permanent Husband*. London: Amazon.

Dostoyevsky. F. (No Date). *Poor Folk*. London: Amazon.

Dostoyevsky. F. (No Date). *The Adolescent*. London: Amazon.

## **B. Secondary Sources**

### **1. Psychotherapy, Psychology & Mental Health**

- Alcoholics Anonymous (2002). *The Big Book*, Fourth Edition. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc.
- Adams, M. (2013). *A Concise Introduction to Existential Counselling*. London: Sage Publications.
- Anderson, R. and Cissna, K.N. (1997). *The Martin Buber — Carl Rogers Dialogue: A New Transcript with Commentary*, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Barry, H. (2017). *Depression, A Practical Guide: The Flag Series*. London: Orion Spring.
- Bayne, R., Horton, I & Bimrose, J. (Eds.) (2003). *New Directions in Counselling*. London: Routledge.
- Berry-Smith, S. (2012). *Death, Freedom, Isolation and Meaninglessness and The Existential Psychotherapy of Irvin D. Yalom: A Literature Review*. (Masters Dissertation) Retrieved from <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/4611>, 15/09/2018
- Binswanger, L. (2004). The Existential Analysis School of Thought. In R. May, E. Angel & H.F. Ellenberger (Eds.) *Existence*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Incorporated.
- Brazier, D. (2001). *Zen Therapy: A Buddhist Approach to Psychotherapy*. London: Robinson
- Brazier, C. (2003). *Buddhist Psychology*. London: Robinson.

- Brinich, P & Shelley, C. (2002). *The Self and Personality Structure*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Brodley, B & Bradburn, W.M. (2015). Did Carl Rogers' Positive View of Human Nature Bias His Psychotherapy? *The Person Centered Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1 — 2, (pp. 81 — 112)
- Browne, I. (2008). *Music and Madness*. Cork: Atrium, C.U.P.
- Browne, I. (2013). *The Writings of Ivor Browne*. Cork: Atrium, C.U.P.
- Carlson, E.N. (2013). Overcoming the Barriers to Self-Knowledge: Mindfulness as a Path to Seeing Yourself as You Really Are. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 8(2), (pp. 173 — 186)
- Casserly, B. (2021). *Lessons from a Bedside: Wisdom for Living*. Dublin: Hachette Books.
- Christ, G.H., Bonanno, G., Malkinson, R. & Rubin, S. (2003). Appendix E Bereavement Experiences After the Death of a Child in M.J. Field & R. E. Behrman (Eds.) *When Children Die: Improving Palliative and End-of-Life Care for Children and Their Families*. Washington, D.C: National Academic Press.
- Cooper, M. (2003). *Existential Therapies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Correia, E. A., Cooper, M. & Berdondini, L (2014). Existential Psychotherapy: An International Survey of the Key Authors and Texts influencing Practice. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* Vol 45, (pp. 3 — 10).
- Corey, Gerald (2005). *Theory & Practice of Counselling & Psychotherapy*, 7th Edition USA/UK: Thomson, Brooks/Cole.
- Doidge, N. (2019). Foreword to J. Peterson *Twelve Rules for Life*. London: Penguin Books.
- Douglas, B. & James, P. (2014). *Common Presenting Issues in Psychotherapeutic Practice*. Los Angeles & London: Sage.
- Dryden, W. & Spurling, L. (2000). *On Becoming a Psychotherapist*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Dryden, W. (2006). *Handbook of Individual Therapy*, London: Sage Publications.

- Duffrene, A. (2004). Interview with Dr Irvin Yalom, *Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal*, Vol, 15, July, issue 6.
- Epstein, M. (1995). *Thoughts without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*. New York: Basic Books.
- Epstein, M. (1995). *Going to Pieces without Falling Apart*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Epstein, M. (2001). *Going on Being: Buddhism as a Positive Psychology for the West*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. York: Continuum.
- Freud, S. (1914 —1916). *Mourning and Melancholia*. SE, 16, (pp. 243 — 258)  
London: The Hogarth Press
- Freud, S. (1923), *The Ego & the Id*, SE 19, (pp. 3 — 68) London: The Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1932). *My contact with Josef Popper-Lynkeus*. SE, 22 (pp. 219 — 224).  
London: The Hogarth Press
- Frankl, V. E. (1985). *The Unconscious God*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Frankl, V.E. (1985). *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Frankl, V. E. (2000). *Man's Search for Meaning*. London: Rider.
- Frankl, V. E. (2000). *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*. New York: Basic Books.
- Frankl, V. E. (2004). *The Doctor and the Soul*. London: Souvenir Press.
- Gaffney, M. (2011). *Flourishing*. Dublin: Penguin Ireland Ltd.
- Groopman, J. (2005). *The anatomy of Hope: How People Find Strength in the Face of Illness*. London: Simon & Schuster
- Hardiman, M. (2001). *Healing Life's Hurts*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd.
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K.D & Wilson, K.G. (2011). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change* (2nd ed.). New York and London: Guilford Press.
- Hofmann, E. (2009). Rollo May on Maslow and Rogers: "No Theory of Evil." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* Volume 49 Number 4, (pp. 484 — 485).

- International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. Retrieved from Encyclopedia.com:  
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/psychology/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/driveinstinct>, 30/01/2019
- Jacobsen, B. (2003). Is Gift-Giving the Core of Existential Therapy? A Discussion with Irvin D. Yalom. *Existential Analysis*, 14:2.
- James, W. (1917). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. London and New York: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Jones, D. (2008). Running to Catch the Sun: How we cope with Death in Psychology, *Journal of The British Psychological Association*, Vol. 21, Issue 7, (pp. 580 — 583).
- Josselson, R. (1996). On Writing Other People's Lives: Self-Analytic Reflections of a Narrative Researcher. *Narrative Study of Lives*, Vol, 4. (pp. 60 — 71).
- Josselson, R. (2002). The Hermeneutics of Faith and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion. *Narrative Inquiry*, 14(1), (pp. 1 — 28).
- Josselson, R. (2006). Narrative Research and the Challenge of Accumulated Knowledge. *Narrative Inquiry* 16: 1. (pp. 3 — 10).
- Josselson, R. (2008). *Irvin D. Yalom on Psychotherapy and the Human Condition*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc.
- Koole, S.L., Greenberg, J and Pyszczynski, T. (2006). Introducing Science to the Psychology of the Soul: An Exercise in Experimental Existential Psychology. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, October 1.
- Kübler-Ross, E. & Kessler, D. (2001). *Life Lessons: How our Mortality can Teach us about Life and Living*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Laing, R.D. (1990). *The Divided Self*. London: Penguin.
- Lajoie, D. H., & Shapiro, S. I. (1992). Definitions of transpersonal psychology: The first twenty-three years. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 24(1), (pp. 79 — 98).
- Leonardi, J. (Ed.) (2010). *The Human Being Fully Alive: Writings in celebration of Brian Thorne*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.

- Maslow, A (2010). *Toward a Psychology of Being*. Blacksburg: Wilder Publication s Inc.
- May, R. (1982). The Problem of Evil: An Open Letter to Carl Rogers. In *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 22(3), (pp. 10 — 21).
- May, R., & Yalom, I. (2000). Existential psychotherapy. In R. J. Corsini, & D. Wedding, *Current psychotherapies* (6th Edition.) (pp. 279 — 302). Itasca, Illinois: Peacock.
- May, R., E. Angel & H. F. Ellenberger, H.F. (Eds.) (2004). *Existence*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Incorporated.
- May, R. (2009). *Man's Search for Himself*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Milligan, S. & Clare, A. (1994). *Depression and How to Survive it*. London: Arrow Books Ltd.
- Nolan, P. (1995). An Integrative Approach to Psychotherapy. In E. Boyne (Ed.) *Psychotherapy in Ireland*. Dublin: The Columba Press.
- O'Mahony, S. (2016). *The Way We Die Now*. London: Head of Zeus Publishing.
- Peterson, J. (2019). *Twelve Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. London: Penguin Books.
- Pennebaker, J. P. & Seagal, J. D. (1999). Forming a Story: The Health Benefits of Narrative. In *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 55 (10), (pp. 1243 — 1254)
- Priest, R. (1996). *Anxiety and Depression: A Practical Guide to Recovery*. London: Vermilion.
- Purton, C. (2010). Spirituality, Focusing and the Truth beyond Concepts. In J. Leonardi (Ed.) *The Human Being Fully Alive: Writings in celebration of Brian Thorne*. (pp. 112 — 127) Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- Rabinowitz, I. (Ed.) (1998). *Inside Therapy*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Raynor, E., Joyce, A., Rose, J., Twyman, M. & Clulow, C. (2005). *Human Development: An Introduction to the Psychodynamics of Growth, Maturity and Ageing*, 4th Edition. London: Routledge.
- Rogers, C.R. (1995). *A Way of Being*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

- Rogers, C.R. (1999). *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.
- Rogers, C.R. (2003). *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory*. London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.
- Rowan, J. & Jacobs, M. (2003). *The Therapist's Use of Self*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Rowe, D. (1996). *Depression: The Way Out of Your Prison*. London: Routledge
- Rowe, S. (2001). *The Vision of William James*. London: Vega.
- Russell, J. (2003). Feminism and Counselling. In R. Bayne, Horton, I & Bimrose, J. (Eds.) *New Directions in Counselling*. (pp. 247 — 260) London: Routledge.
- Salamun, K. (1988). Moral Implications of Karl Jaspers' Existentialism in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 49, No. 2, (pp. 317 — 323). The International Phenomenological Society.
- Salinky, J. (2004). Medicine and Literature in *Education for Primary Care* 15 (pp. 666 — 70), Radcliffe Publishing.
- Solomon, A. (2016). *The Noonday Demon: An Anatomy of Depression*. London: Vintage
- Storr, A. (1975). *The Integrity of the Personality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Spinelli, E. (2015). *Practising Existential Psychotherapy: The Relational World*. Second Edition, London: Sage.
- Tacey, D. (2013). *Gods and Diseases: Making Sense of our Physical and Mental Wellbeing*. London: Routledge.
- Thorne, B. (2003). *Person-Centred Counselling and Christian Spirituality: The Secular and the Holy*. London: Whurr Publishers Ltd.
- Van Deurzen, E. (1988). *Existential Counselling in Practice*. London: Sage Publications.
- Van Deurzen, E. (2006). Existential Therapy in *Handbook of Individual Therapy*, London: Sage Publications, (pp. 166 — 193).

- Van Deurzen, E. & Arnold-Baker, C (2005). *Existential Perspectives on Human Issues: A Handbook for Therapeutic Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wedding, D. & Corsini, R.J. (2013). *Current Psychotherapies*, Tenth Edition, Independence, Kentucky: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of Narrative Practice*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Winston, C. (2015). Points of Convergence and Divergence between Existential and Humanistic Psychology: A Few Observations. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, vol. 43, (pp. 40 — 53).
- Wolpert, L. (1999). *Malignant Sadness: The Anatomy of Depression*. London: Faber & Faber.

## 2. Dostoevsky

- Adelman, G. (2001). *Retelling Dostoyevsky: Literary Responses and Other Observations*. New Jersey: Associated University Presses.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Berdyayev, N. (1918). The Revelation about Man in the Creativity of Dostoevsky, on-line article: Retrieved from:  
[http://www.berdyayev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1918\\_294.html](http://www.berdyayev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1918_294.html) accessed 20/09/2016.
- Berdyayev, N. (2009). *Dostoevsky (sic): An Interpretation*, translated by Donald Attwater. Salem: Semantron Press.
- Bloom, H. (2004). *Bloom's Major Literary Characters: Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov*. Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Bloom, H. (2005) (Ed.). *Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, Langhorne: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Brazier, P.H. & Rae, M. (2016). *Dostoevsky: A Theological Engagement*. Oregon: Pickwick Publications.
- Briggs, A.D.P. (2009a). Introduction. *Devils*. London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.

- Briggs, A.D.P. (2009b). Introduction. *The Brothers Karamazov*. London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Briggs, A.D.P. (2010). Introduction. *The House of the Dead & The Gambler*. London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Byatt, A.S. (2004, Jun 26). Prince of Fools. *The Guardian, Culture Section*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jun/26/highereducation.classics> accessed 27/02/2018.
- Cardinal, A. (2010). Introduction. *The Idiot*. Translated by Constance Garnett, London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Carabine, K. (2000). Introduction. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated by Constance Garnett, London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Corrigan, Y. (2017). *Dostoevsky and the Riddle of the Self: Studies in Russian Literature and Theory*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Frank, J. (1968). Dostoyevsky's Discovery of "Fantastic Realism." *Russian Review*, Vol. 27, No. 3, July 1968.
- Frank, J. (2010). *Dostoevsky: A Writer in his Time*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Freeborn, R. (2003). *Dostoevsky*. London: Haus Publishing.
- Freemantle, A. (1984). Introduction, *The Grand Inquisitor*. New York: Continuum.
- Grossman, L. (1974). *Dostoevsky: A Biography*. (Translated Mary Mackler). London: Allen Lane.
- Hingley, R. (1978). *Dostoyevsky: His Life and Work*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Jones, J. (1983). *Dostoevsky*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jones, M.V. (1990). *Dostoevsky after Bakhtin: Readings in Dostoevsky's Fantastic Realism*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kantor, V.K. (2015). Berdyaev on Dostoevsky: Theodicy and Freedom. *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 53, no. 4, (pp. 324 — 337).
- Kaufmann, W. (2004). *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New York: Plume Books.

- Kjetsaa, G. (1988). *Fyodor Dostoyevsky: A Writer's Life*. London: Macmillan.
- Koehler, L (1985). Five Minutes Too Late. *Dostoyevsky Studies*, Vol. 6, (pp. 113 — 124).
- Magarshack, D. (1983). Translator's Introduction, *The Devils*. pp. vii — xvii. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (This novel is also known as *Demons* and *The Possessed*.)
- Mills Todd III, W. (2004). *The Idiot* (Introduction). London: Penguin Classics.
- Mochulsky, K., (translator, Michael A. Minihan) (1973). *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Morrison, G.S. (2016, Sept 21). Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *Britannica on-line*, retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fyodor-Dostoyevsky>, accessed 22/11/2016.
- Packer, J.I., Muggeridge, M. & Gordon. E. (Eds.) (1988). *The Gospels in Dostoyevsky: Selections from his Works*. New York: Plough Publishing House.
- Panichas, G.A. (2005). *Dostoevsky's Spiritual Art: The Burden of Vision*. London: Transaction Publishers.
- Peace, R. (1992). *Dostoyevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels*. London: Bristol Classical Press.
- Pickett, D.E. (2009). Spirituality on the Ground: A Review Essay of The Brothers Karamazov. *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care*, Institute of Spiritual Formation, Vol. 2, No. 1, (pp. 122 — 128).
- Pridmore, S. & Pridmore, W (2015). Suicide and Related Behaviour in Dostoyevsky Novels. *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 16 (1), January — June 2015: (pp. x — xxx).
- Steiner, G. (1989). *Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky: An Essay in Contrast*. London: Faber & Faber
- Syrkin, A.Y. (1982). On the Behavior of the "Fool for Christ's Sake. *History of Religions* Vol. 22, No. 2, (pp. 150 — 171).

Taylor, C (1996). Dostoevsky and Terrorism. *Loneragan Review: A Multidisciplinary Review*, No. 4, (pp.130 — 150).

Terras, V. (2002). *A Karamazov Companion: Commentary on the Genesis, Language and Style of Dostoevsky's Novels*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Wellek, R. (1980). Bakhtin's view of Dostoevsky: "polyphony" and "carnavalesque." In *Dostoevsky Studies*, (pp. 31 — 38).

Williams, R. (2008). *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*. London: Continuum.

### 3. Philosophy/Theology/Literature

Anand, A. (Ed.) (2019). *Remarkable Minds: A Celebration of the Reith Lectures*. London: Headline Publishing Ltd.

Antonello, P. and Webb, H. (Eds.) (2015). *Mimesis, Desire, and the Novel: René Girard and Literary Criticism*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Aristotle (2013). *The Poetics*. Edited and translated by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: OUP.

Armstrong, K. (2010). *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means*. London: Vintage.

Ataria, Y (2016). Traumatic and Mystical Experiences: The Dark Nights of the Soul: *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Volume 56, Issue 4, pp. 331 — 356

Atkins, K. (2004). Narrative Identity, Practical Identity and Ethical Subjectivity. *Continental Philosophy Review* 37, pp. 341 — 366.

Bacik, J.J. (1992). *Contemporary Theologians*. Cork: Mercier Press.

Baggini, J. (2018). *How The World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy*. London: Granta.

Bakewell. S. (2016). *At The Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Bausch, W. J. (1995). *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*. Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications

- Bausch, W. J. (1999). *The Yellow Brick Road: A Storyteller's Approach to the Spiritual Journey*. Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (1997). *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Books.
- Belangia, S. (2010) Metaphysical Desire in Girard and Plato. *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 2 (2), (pp. 197 — 209).
- Berlin, I. (1969). *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berlin, I. (2013). *Russian Thinkers*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Bethea, D. M. (1989). *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Bradbury, Malcolm (1990). *The Modern World: Ten Great Writers*, London: Secker & Warburg.
- Bloom, H (2001). *How to Read and Why*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Brown, P. (1969). *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Berger, P. L. (1971). *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. Harmondsworth: Pelican Books.
- Buber, M. (1937). *I and Thou*. (translated by Ronald Gregor Smith) Edinburgh: T & T. Clarke.
- Buber, M. (1958). *I and Thou* (translated by Ronald Gregor Smith), 2nd Edition, New York: Scribners,
- Buber, M. (1979). *Between Man and Man*. Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks.
- Bungum, D. (2016). Suffering and charity in the dark night of the soul. *Religious Studies*, 52(2), (pp.187 — 204), doi:10.1017/S0034412515000013.
- Camus, A. (1977). *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Publications.
- Carlisle, C. (2020). *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Soren Kierkegaard*. London: Penguin Books.
- Casey, T.G. (2018). *Wisdom at the Crossroads: The Life and Thought of Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J.* Dublin: Messenger Publications.

- Coleridge, S. T. (1975). *Biographia Literaria*. Edited, with an introduction, by George Watson. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.
- Conradi, P. (Ed.) (1997). *Iris Murdoch: Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. London: Penguin Books.
- Church, J. (2010). The Freedom of Desire: Hegel's Response to Rousseau on the Problem of Civil Society. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (pp. 125 — 139)
- Clarke, T & Bloomfield, S. (2020). *Think Again: The Best Essays from Prospect 1995 — 2020*. London: Prospect Publishing Ltd.
- Cuff Snow, S. (2016). The moment of self-transformation: Kierkegaard on suffering and the subject. *Continental Philosophical Review*, no. 49, (pp.161—180).
- Dainton, B. (2014). *Self: Philosophy in Transit*. London: Penguin.
- Daly, G. (1980). *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Daly, G. (1982). *Asking the Father: A Study of the Prayer of Petition*. Dublin: Dominican Publications.
- Eagleton, T (2009). *Reason, Faith & Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2015). *Living with a Wild God: A Non-believer's Search for the Truth*. London: Granta.
- Eliot, T. S. (1976). *Selected Poems*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Federici, M.P. (2002), *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order*. Delaware: ISI Publications.
- Figs, O. (2001). What is Russia? *Prospect: The Leading Magazine of Ideas*, January, (pp. 20 — 24.)
- Finnegan, J. (2008). *The Audacity of Spirit: The Meaning and Shaping of Spirituality Today*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Flynn, T. (2006). *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: O.U.P.
- Freire, P. (1977). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Fukuyama, F. (2019). *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*. London: Profile Books.
- Gaskin, J.C.A. (1984). *The Quest for Eternity: An Outline of the Philosophy of Religion*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Godamer, H-G. (1989). *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum.
- Golson, R. J. (2002). *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Girard, R. (1976). *Deceit, Desire & The Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press.
- Girard, R. (1997). *Feodor Dostoevsky: Resurrection from The Underground*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Gittings, R. (Ed.) (1987). *Letters of John Keats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gray, J. (2006). The Case for Decency. *The New York Review of Books*, 53 (12), (pp. 20 — 22)
- Griggs. E. L. (Ed.) (1956). *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol. 1: 1785 — 1800*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grimsley, R. (1969). *Existential Thought*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Groopman, J. (2005). *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Find Strength in the Face of Illness*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Gutting, G. (2002). *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Happold, F. C. (1970). *Mysticism; A Study and an Anthology*, London: Penguin.
- Hedderman, M. P. (2019). *Living The Mystery: What lies between Science and Religion*. Dublin: Columba Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1971). Building dwelling thinking. In M. Heidegger (Ed.) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (pp. 145 — 161) (Translation and introduction: Albert Hofstadter). New York: Harper & Row.
- Henry, D.M. (1999). How Christian is Christian Mysticism? *Irish Theological Quarterly*. Vol. 64/1, (pp. 29 — 54).

- Higgins, C. (2011). *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell
- Holman, J. (2005). *The Return of the Perennial Philosophy: The Supreme Vision of Western Esotericism*. London: Watkins Publishing.
- Hughes, M. & Mann, C. (2002). *Inside Hitler's Germany: Life Under the Third Reich*. London: Brown Bear Books Limited.
- Jones, M. (2009). *Leningrad: State of Siege*. London: John Murray Publishers.
- Johnston, W. (2006). *Mystical Journey: An Autobiography*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Kasper, W. (1983). *The God of Jesus Christ*. London: SCM Press.
- Kaufmann, W. (2004). *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, New York: Plume/Penguin.
- Kay, M. (2019). *Critical: Science & Stories from the Brink of Human Life*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Kearney, R. (1988). *The Wake of Imagination*. London: Hutchinson.
- Kearney, R. (2002). *On Stories*. London: Routledge.
- Kearney, R. (2003). *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*. London: Routledge.
- Kearney, R. (2011). *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kearney, R. (2016a). Writing Trauma: Narrative Catharsis in Homer, Shakespeare, and Joyce. In R. Severson, B. Becker & D. Goodman. (Eds.) *In the Wake of Trauma: Psychology and Philosophy for the Suffering Other*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Kearney, R. (2016b). Writing Trauma: Narrative Catharsis in Homer, Shakespeare, and Joyce. In B. Lee, N. Olsen & T. P. Duffy (Eds.) *Making Sense: Beauty, Creativity & Healing*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Kearney, R. (2018). The Healing Power of Story. *The Japan Mission Journal*, Vol. 72, No. 2, pp. 75 — 81
- Kenny, A. (2008). *A New History of Western Philosophy, Vol 4*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Kierkegaard, S. (1994). *Fear and Trembling & The Book on Adler*. Introduction by George Steiner. London: Everyman.
- Komonchak, J.A., Collins, M & Lane, D.A. (1987). *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Kundu, R. (2006). *New Perspectives on British Authors*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.
- Küng, H. (1968). *The Church*, London: Burns & Oates.
- Küng, H. (1978). *On Being a Christian*. Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks
- Küng, H. (1980). *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*. London: Fount Paperbacks.
- Lancaster, S (2018), Words that Kill in *Prospect*, March 2018, (pp. 30 — 31).
- Lane, D. (2003). *The Experience of God: Invitation to do Theology*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Lavine, T.Z. (1984). *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Lawton, G. (2019). *The Origin of (Almost) Everything*. London: John Murray Publishers.
- Leahy, B. & Walsh, D. (Eds.) (2013). *The Human Voyage of Discovery: Essays in Honour of Brendan Purcell*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Levinas, E (2000) *God, Death and Time*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Levinas, E. (2006). *Humanism of the Other*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Levy, Z. (1995). On Emmanuel Levinas's Concepts of 'Trace' and 'Otherness' and their Relationship to the Thought of Jacques Derrida. *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* URAM 14, (pp. 99 — 108).
- Mackey, J. P. (1987). *Modern Theology: A Sense of Direction*. Oxford: OUP.
- Macquarrie, J (1974). *Existentialism*. London: Pelican/Penguin.
- Macquarrie, J. (1978). *God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Macquarrie, J. (1979). *Principles of Christian Theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Magee, B. (2001). *The Story of Philosophy: The World's Greatest Thinkers and Their Ideas*. London: Dorling Kindersley
- Marcel, G. (1949). *Being and Having*, translated by Katherine Farrer, Westminster, UK: Dacre Press.

- McDonagh, E. (1986). *Between Chaos and New Creation: Doing Theology at the Fringe*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd.
- McDonagh, E. (1997). *Faith in Fragments*. Dublin: The Columba Press.
- McDonagh, E. (2007). *Immersed in Mystery: En Route to Theology*. Dublin: Veritas.
- McDonagh, E. (2010). *Theology in Winter Light*. Dublin: The Columba Press.
- McGrath, A. (2005). *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes & the Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- McGrath, A. (2011). *Why God Won't Go Away*. London: SPCK.
- Midgley, M. (2014). *Are You an Illusion?* London: Routledge.
- Moon, J. (2010). *Using Story in Higher Education and Professional Development*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Morgan, M. (2019). *Critical: Science & Stories from the Brink of Human Life*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Mulhall, S. (2011). Theology & Narrative: The Self, the Novel & the Bible. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol 69, No 1, Feb 2011, (pp. 29 — 43).
- Mulhall, S. (2016). *The Self & its Shadows: A Book of Essays on Individuality as Negation in Philosophy & the Arts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mullen, J. D. (1995). *Kierkegaard's Philosophy: Self-Deception & Cowardice in the Present Age*, New York: University Press of America.
- Mullin, G.H. (trans) (2009). *The Tibetan Book of Dying*. New Delhi: Roli Books Ltd.
- Mullin, G.H. & Kelly T.L. (2009). *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: An Illustrated Edition*. New Delhi: Roli & Jansen.
- Murdoch, I (1997). Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee. In Peter Conradi (Ed.) *Iris Murdoch: Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. London: Penguin Books.
- Murphy, R. (2021). Philosophers of the Intimate in a Time of Confinement: Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum. In *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*. No. 438, pp. 241 – 253.

- Nabokov, V. (1983). *Lectures on Russian Literature*. London: Pan Books Ltd.
- Nagel, T. (1987). *What does it all mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Neiman, S. (2014). *Why Grow Up: Philosophy in Transit*. London: Penguin.
- Nhat Hanh, T. (2009). *The Heart of Understanding*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- Nhat Hanh, T. (2011). *True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart*. Boston & London: Shambala
- Norwich, J. (2015). *Revelations of Divine Love*. Translated and introduced by B. Windeatt. Oxford: O.U.P.
- O'Collins, G., SJ & Farrugia, E.G., SJ (1991). *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*. London: Harper Collins.
- O'Donohue, J. (1997). *Anamchara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*. London: Bantam Press.
- O'Donohue, J. (1998). *Eternal Echoes: Exploring the Need to Belong*. London: Bantam Press.
- O'Donohue, J. (2003). *Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*. London: Bantam Press.
- O'Donohue, J. (2015). *Walking on the Pastures of Wonder: A Dialogue with John Quinn*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Ó'Murchú, D. (1997). *Reclaiming Spirituality*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd.
- O'Murchu, D. (2019). *When The Disciple Comes of Age*. New York: Orbis Books.
- O'Regan, C. (2013). The Brazen Contours of Philosophical Anthropology. In B. Leahy & D. Walsh (Eds.) *The Human Voyage of Discovery: Essays in Honour of Brendan Purcell* (pp. 27 — 43) Dublin: Veritas.
- O'Rourke, F. (2013). Person and Spirit. In B. Leahy & D. Walsh (Eds.) *The Human Voyage of Discovery: Essays in Honour of Brendan Purcell* (pp. 125 — 137) Dublin: Veritas.
- O'Shea, A. (2012). *Selfhood and Sacrifice: René Girard & Charles Taylor on the Crisis of Modernity*. London: Continuum.
- Ott, H. (1974) *God*. Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press.

- Otto, R. (1978). *The Idea of the Holy: Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*. Oxford: OUP.
- Pilardi, J-A. (1999). *Simone de Beauvoir: Writing the Self*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Purcell, B. (2016). *Where is God in Suffering?* Dublin: Veritas.
- Quinlan, T. (1994). *Faith and Theological Method in the Works of John Henry Newman*, Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy. Thesis in partial fulfilment of the degree of Licentiate in Sacred Theology.
- Quinlan, T. (2013). *Towards a Philosophical Psychology of Self: Exploring the Parameters of Identity in Key Twentieth Century Thinkers*, Thesis in partial fulfilment of the degree of M.A. in Human Development, Dublin, Ireland: D.C.U.
- Rafique, R., Powell, W. & Hudelson, R. (2000). Mystical Traditions in the Great World Religions. In *The McNair Scholars Journal*. (pp. 119 – 136). Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin-Superior.
- Rees, M (2019). Scientific Horizons. In A. Anand (Ed.) *Remarkable Minds: A Celebration of the Reith Lectures*. (pp. 46 – 59) London: Headline Publishing Ltd.
- Richardson, A. & Bowden, J. (1991). *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1994). *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Rinpoche, S. (1995). *Glimpse after Glimpse: Daily Reflections on Living and Dying*. London: Rider.
- Rinpoche, S. (1998). *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. London & New York: Rider.
- Rolnick, P.A. (2007). *Person, Grace, and God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Ltd.
- Rooney, S. (2019). *Psychology: From spirits to psychotherapy: tracing the mind through the ages*. London: Arcturus Publishing Ltd.

- Salamun, K. (1988). Moral Implications of Karl Jaspers' Existentialism in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 49, No. 2, (pp. 317 — 323).
- Sandoz, E. (1978) Philosophical Dimensions of Dostoevsky's Politics in *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 40, No. 3 pp. 648 — 674
- Sartre, J-P (1946). “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Lecture. Retrieved from: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.html> accessed 22/11/2016.
- Sartre, J-P. (1983). *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Sartre, J-P. (2009). *Being and Nothingness*. New York, London: Washington Square Press.
- Shetron, K. (2017) (Ed.). *Vincent Van Gogh: Creative Inspiration*. Poland: September Publishing.
- Shackle, E. (1978). *Christian Mysticism*. Dublin & Cork: The Mercier Press
- Shields, D. (2013). *How Literature Saved My Life*. London: Notting Hill Publications.
- Solzhenitsyn (2000). *One Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Spalding, J. (2005). *The Art of Wonder*. London: Prestel Publishing Ltd.
- Stammers, S., Pulvermacher, R. (2020). The value of doing philosophy in mental health contexts. *Medical Health Care and Philosophy*, 23, 743–752.
- Stevens, A. (2009). *The Two-Million-Year-Old Self*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Steinbock, A. J. (1997). Back to the Things Themselves. *Human Studies* 20, 127 — 135.
- Strange, R. (1981). *Newman and the Gospel of Christ*. Oxford: O.U.P.
- Swinden, P. (1933). *Unofficial Selves: Character in the Novel from Dickens to the Present Day*. London: Macmillan Press Limited.
- Tarnas, W. (1996). *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that have shaped Our World View*. London: Random House.

- Taylor, C (1996). Dostoevsky and Terrorism in *Loneragan Review: A Multidisciplinary Review*, No. 4, (pp.130 — 150).
- Taylor, C. (2003). *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, C (2010). *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, New York: Cambridge University Press. (Eleventh printing).
- Taylor, M.K. (1987). *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries*. London: Collins.
- The Van Gogh Museum (2018). *Face to Face with Vincent Van Gogh*. Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum.
- Thomas, J.H. (2000). *Tillich*. London: Continuum.
- Thubron, C. (2000). *In Siberia*. London: Penguin.
- Tillich, P (1957). *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Tillich, P. (1968). *Systematic Theology*. Welwyn, Herts: James Nisbet & Co. Ltd.
- Tillich, P. (1974). *Morality and Beyond*. Glasgow: Fontana Books.
- Tillich, P. (1977). *The Courage to Be*. Glasgow: Fontana Books.
- Tolstoy, L. (1904). *What is Art?* (Translated with introduction by Aylmer Maude). New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company.
- Vardey, L. (Ed.) (1995). *God in All Worlds: An Anthology of Contemporary Spiritual Writing*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Vernon, M. (2012). *The Big Questions: God*. London: Quercus.
- Wakefield, G.S. (1983). *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. London: SCM Press.
- Welch, J. (2008). Mysticism. *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, pp. 694 – 697.
- White, M. & Gribbin, J. (1992). *Stephen Hawking: A Life in Science*. London: Viking.
- Wilson, D. (2019). *My Life with Murderers: Behind Bars with the World's Most Violent Men*. London: Sphere.
- Wolpert, L. (1992). *The Unnatural Nature of Science*. London: Faber.

Woods, R.J. (2008). *Wellness: Life, Health and Spirituality*. Dublin: Veritas