ARTICLES

GILES MITCHELL

PATHOLOGICAL NARCISSISM AND VIOLENCE IN DOSTOEVSKII'S SVIDRIGALOV

"It was fear, the ultimate fear of death, that made men mad."
—D. H. Lawrence

"He would willingly make of the Earth a Ruin of Lies / And swallow the World in one tremendous Yawning. / He is Ennui!"
—Baudelaire

I

EGO-IDEAL, APATHY, AND FEAR OF DEATH

Studies in the psychology of narcissism in its relation to fear of death have only recently begun, but they provide the basis of a new analysis of Dostoevskii's most complex image of evil. Svidrigalov is present in only about fifty-three pages of the novel, but "his shadow lies over Crime and Punishment long before he makes his actual appearance," and "he is so fascinating a
character...that he threatens to run away with the story."4 By the
time he appears, the reader knows that Svidrigalov has recently
attempted to seduce Dunia while she is employed as governess in
his house, thus causing her to lose her job. Later we learn from
Svidrigalov and others that he is a sexual predator; that he may
have caused the deaths of several people, including two children;
that he has visual and auditory hallucinations of apparitions;
and that he probably regards himself as a victim of women and
thus innocent. We learn also that Svidrigalov is chronically
bored and that he is still obsessed with Dunia, whom he plans to
possess sexually either through seduction with money or coercion
with the threat of revealing to the police his knowledge of
Raskol'nikov's confession of murder to Sonia. Dunia rejects
Svidrigalov's attempt at seduction, shoots at him twice, and then
puts the gun down. Feeling pity for her momentarily, Svidrigalov
asks her if she cannot give herself to him willingly. When she
replies that she cannot, he rushes her out of his room in order to
keep himself from seizing her. He pockets the pistol which Dunia
has dropped and goes to Sonia to give her the ten thousand roubles
with which he has tried to seduce Dunia. He has earlier per-
formed similar acts of seeming generosity. He then goes to the
house of his fiancee, where he leaves the last of his money, and
then eventually to bed in a hotel, where he has nightmares until
daybreak, when he shoots himself, although he is afraid of death.
In the following essay I will discuss (1) his fear of death and his
apathy; (2) his lust for Dunia and his role as victim; (3) his rage,
his dream of innocence, and his suicide; (4) and finally, his
pathologically omnipotent manipulation of time and eternity.

Before discussing death fear and apathy in Svidrigalov, it
will be necessary to describe the typical ego-ideal of the
narcissist. Pathological narcissism is a personality disorder
characterized by intense, excessive, and sometimes fatal de-
vo tion to the ego-ideal. In the normal person, the ego is nourished
by the ego-ideal, for it provides self-esteem and meaningfulness
and supports a realistic moral sense. However, in pathological
narcissism, aspirations and ideals become images of "perfection
and omnipotence"5 which weaken the ego so that in extreme cases
such as Svidrigalov's, "one dies for one's ego-ideal rather than

(1960), 407.
Today (Prague), 4 (1961), 371.