
Given that the demonic in Dostoevsky is so obviously a fruitful area of research, it seems strange that W. J. Leatherbarrow's book is the first lengthy, systematic and detailed analysis of the topic. Such is this book's scope, however, it seems unlikely that much more needs to be said.

Leatherbarrow's ambition is twofold. First, he seeks to show "how demonic markers derived from a variety of cultural sources pollute the narrative terrain of Dostoevsky's major fiction, carried either through the voices of particular characters or through those of the narrator or implied author; and, second, to analyze how such markers function as rhetoric through which that fiction mediates its most pressing ideological and artistic concerns" (p. 178).

As the author says, the devil (chert) is, in Dostoevsky, often in the details (chertochki). Leatherbarrow finds these details and their devils everywhere. Semiotic markers point to the demonic at almost every turn in the fiction. Indeed, according to this thesis, so prevalent are these markers that Leatherbarrow risks—but never quite succumbs to—a rather diluted notion of what, exactly, constitutes the demonic. As he concedes, the concept of the devil is, fittingly, a slippery one.

Such is the intertextual nature of Dostoevsky's fictional world, that to establish a pure source of any borrowed image in his novels is notoriously difficult, if not impossible. The topography of the devil from Russian folk tradition, as well as its synthesis into Russian Orthodoxy, is, naturally, one key source of the semiotic markers that betray his presence in the novels. But Dostoevsky was equally versed in the European literary canon, meaning that the Romantic and other non-folkloric representations of Satan also bedevil the fiction. None of the various guises of the unclean force commands sole semiotic authority. Each source is a rich mine. Leatherbarrow is well aware of this, and his introductory chapter makes clear the diversity of the demonic heritage in Dostoevsky's fiction.

Lotman and Uspensky's seminal characterization of Russian culture along binary lines opens Leatherbarrow's thesis to include the potential demonic space of everywhere that is not godly or holy. Hence, "what is not of this world and created by God must therefore be the 'other world' and be the domain of evil spirits" (p. 4). As such, this also connects the notion of the demonic to the liminal space that is neither one world nor the other. In this context, Bakhtin's notion of the threshold as a chronotope in Dostoevsky's fiction is also key to Leatherbarrow's argument. It "is infused with folkloric significance, in order to signal not only crises, but demonic eruptions" (p. 8).
So too does Bakhtin’s notion of carnival and its masks exploit “to the full the possibilities of liminality” (ibid).

But Leatherbarrow’s idea that the acts of reading and writing themselves can be considered demonic is one of the most intriguing aspects of his argument. Given its origins in the secular Enlightenment the novelist’s work itself belongs to the other world. “Thus the construction of Dostoevsky’s novels is founded upon a clash of Orthodox and novelistic sensibilities, where the desire to affirm God’s creation is paradoxically achieved through the demonically incited novel form relying on narrative invention.” (p. 25)

In a chapter assessing Dostoevsky’s short fiction, Leatherbarrow finds that the demonic theme becomes much more consistent and polemical after Siberia, affecting not only the poetics but also the structure of the texts and clarifying the author’s changed worldview. Thus Zapislci iz mertvogo doma is full of liminal and other demonic markers, culminating in the famous bania scene. Likewise, Igrok and Zimnie zapisiki o letnih vpechatleniakh are both loaded with demonic imagery, which in these works Dostoevsky begins to associate with the wider social malaise that he saw in Western Europe. In Zimnie zapisiki Leatherbarrow also finds this social depravity meeting the demonic imagery of the Apocalypse. His reading of Igrok is fascinating – particularly the revelation of Mr. Astley as the novella’s presiding demonic force.

Meanwhile, in the thoroughly liminal Zapislci iz podpol’ia, the Underground Man’s egoism, proud individuality, morbid self-consciousness, rationalistic mindset, and infinite capacity for revolt are all, in Leatherbarrow’s thesis, signs of his demonism (p. 49). Moreover, this “ultimately resides not just in the content of that tale, but more insidiously in the way that he tells it.” The antihero’s manipulation of his confessional narrative, “concealing himself behind evasions and generating lies, ambiguity and confusion,” also reveals the text’s sulphurous character (p. 51).

The demonism inherent in the individual’s faith in human, above divine, wisdom, becomes more explicit in Prestuplenie i nakazanie. Raskol’nikov emerges as both tempted (to commit his crime) and tempter (of Sonia). The narrative also carries “biblical resonances” that take the reader back to Genesis, “to original sin, and to the pivotal role of the devil in the process of man’s fall from grace and subsequent exclusion from paradise” (p. 70). In this interpretation, “It is the voice of the devil whispering in [Raskol’nikov’s] ear, and the crime it provokes may in turn be construed as a personal reenactment of the forces of the fall and exclusion from paradise, an analogy strengthened by Raskolnikov’s profound sense of alienation and estrangement in the days following the murders” (ibid). In the end, what rescues Raskol’nikov, argues Leatherbarrow, is his sense of the aesthetic: “His fear of ugliness serves to demonize his crime as surely as it demonizes his Napoleonic ideal through