1 The Poetics of the Slap: Dostoevsky's Disintegrating Duel Plot

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In the world of Dostoevskian gesture, public slaps and the challenges they may or may not engender are the last remaining currency of a value system that no longer exists in the world of the late nineteenth century: the honour code.[1] Transposed into Dostoevsky's novels, gestures and acts that once carried symbolic value become decontextualized, transformed into the absurdities of the Underground Man's bumping duel or Stavrogin biting the governor's ear.[2] Such gestures frequently recur in the notebooks to the novels; they clearly play an important role in Dostoevsky's aesthetic conceptualizations of his novels, but they often seem to make little sense on the level of plot or characterization, eliding conventional causality, and often migrating from character to character. In what follows, I argue that the slap motif and the duel plot play a crucial role in Dostoevsky's late novels in revealing the state of semiotic crisis within which his heroes function.[3] While slaps and duels seem to evoke the fixed values and symbolic meaning-making system of the honour code, in fact they uncover the semiotic and social ruptures of the post-reform era, revealing the breakdown of the honour code and the lack of any other mutually agreed-upon semiotic system. The physical violence of Dostoevsky's late novels lies on the boundary between ritual and chaos, revealing the social flux of the new historical moment inhabited by his heroes.

According to the rules of the honour code, a slap functions as an insult which should draw a challenge. In *Notes from Underground* [Zapiski iz podpol'ia, 1864], the Underground Man explains the semiotic significance of the slap as an act of branding as he fantasizes about slapping Zverkov, the friend who has humiliated him:

> Still, I'll slap him first: it'll be my initiative; and according to the code of honor, that's everything; he's branded now, and no beating can wash away that slap, only a duel. He's going to have to fight.[4]

The slap publicly shames the slapped person, and according to the honour code, that shame can be effaced only by the ritualized violence of a duel. The duel creates a structure by which the insult can be translated into a contest of social equals where violence is tamed, ordered, and transformed into an easily readable sign. Traditionally a slap escalates but ultimately resolves a conflict over an individual's wounded honour. Intended to provoke a challenge to a duel, it allows the insulted party to translate his own wounded pride into a physical demonstration of superiority, to impinge on another's physical inviolability, but also to transfer the insult to the symbolic plane, allowing the violence to be ritualized and thus translated into a rule-bound system mutually intelligible to slap perpetrator and victim.[5] In Dostoevsky's works the mutually agreed upon conventions of the honour code frequently break down, and the slap and the duel lose their symbolic power.

In her extensive study on Russian duelling in the nineteenth century, Irina Reyfman has shown how Dostoevsky's use of the slap marks a new stage in the duel plot in nineteenth-century Russian literature. For Reyfman, the significance of the slap in Dostoevsky lies in its position at the intersection of two ethical-semiotic systems, the Christian non-resistance of the Sermon on the Mount on the one hand, and the honour code of the duel plot on the other.[6] The slap, she argues, threatens the victim's physical inviolability; it must result either in shame that can be effaced only by means of a duel, or by a radical Christian rejection of the honour code, a symbolic proffering of the other cheek for a slap. The latter scenario, suggests Reyfman, shows the slap victim's refusal to recognize his own bodily autonomy and his appeal to a larger ethical whole; we see this in the examples of Prince Myshkin and Father Zosima, both of whom are able to extricate themselves from duel plots without shame.[7] These Christian renunciation plots notwithstanding, the duel plots of Dostoevsky's late novels mostly end in scandal, in the subversion of expectation, the failure to shoot, and in the exacerbation of shame rather than its exorcism. I argue here that the unanswered slaps and failed duel plots of *Demons* [Besy, 1872] and *The Adolescent* [Podrostok, 1875] reveal more than just the collision of the honour code and Christian teachings; they reveal a world in a state of semiotic crisis, where the honour code has broken down but there is nothing to replace it. Where Reyfman's analysis of the duel in Dostoevsky underlines the writer's conservatism, asserting that he never condemned the honour code or duelling culture outright, mine emphasizes his radicalism, his persistent investigation of a new historical moment rather than a nostalgia for the old and his rejection of the honour code.[8] Rather than resolving ethical and semiotic conflicts and plots or allowing resolution on the symbolic plane, I

suggest, Dostoevskian slaps open up new semiotic quandaries. Instead of appealing to the fixed semiotic values of the honour code, they draw attention to coexisting and contradictory semiotic systems and open up contradictions between them.

I argue here that the collapse of the honour code leads to a crisis of emplotment in Dostoevsky's late novels. Theoretically, when the honour code is followed, the duel simplifies both the complexity of human relations and the multiple emplotment possibilities that such complexities entail. A duel has a fixed and finite set of outcomes. Yet in Dostoevsky's novels the duel complicates emplotment rather than simplifying it, diffuses the shame instead of containing it. Already in *Notes from Underground*, as the Underground Man fantasizes about challenging the friends who have humiliated him to a duel, we see the difference between the clarity the duel fantasy is supposed to provide, and the shame that it engenders as the Underground Man realizes that he lacks the resources (imaginative as well as social) to issue a challenge to Zverkov or his companions. Continuing to anticipate impediments in his mind, he envisages the difficulties he will have finding seconds, and the multiple obstacles that stand in the way of the duel ever taking place. The Underground Man still maintains the boundary between ritualized violence, with its attendant and readable codes, and random violence, being beaten by his opponents without warning. This boundary becomes increasingly porous in Dostoevsky's later novels, where violence threatens to lose the ordered semiotic and clarifying power invested in it by the honour code.

In what follows, I first examine the foundations of the slap motif and duel plot in *Notes from Underground* and the mobilization and rejection of Romantic models, then trace two different slap motifs through the notebooks and the finished versions of *Demons* and *The Adolescent,* examining the vestigial plots each brings into play, as well as the quintessentially Dostoevskian approach to emplotment that each reveals. In both novels, I suggest, the clear and acknowledged link to concrete Romantic texts that we find in *Notes from Underground* and *The Idiot* [Idiot, 1869] have been effaced. The slap motif, I contend, serves to evoke a plot that is never borne out in reality, that remains vestigial, and that invokes the genre memory of a Romantic plot while insisting on the incomplete nature of that plot. Slaps and failed duel plots serve as crucial elements in the staging of the dramas of Dostoevsky's two great aristocratic anti-heroes, Nikolai Stavrogin and Andrei Versilov, and in the two late novels that struggle most explicitly with the problem of changing social and semiotic codes in the age of modernity, *Demons* and *The Adolescent*.

Notes from Underground: Rewriting the Romantic Duel Plot

The slap emerges as a potent symbol of the Underground Man's shame in the first part of *Notes from Underground*.[9] He introduces the contradictions of his underground consciousness, revealing that, despite his self-love, he might nonetheless derive pleasure from being slapped (5:103). Here the slap is introduced as an isolated motif, unconnected to a duel plot, yet it carries unmistakable semiotic echoes of the honour code. The duality it projects immobilizes the Underground Man, rendering him unable to return the insult and symbolizing his incapacity to act. It emerges again following the analogy of the insulted mouse, the ultimate sign of hyperconsciousness, as the Underground Man imagines his reader-interlocutor implying that he himself must have received a slap and makes the claim that he has never been slapped (5:105). This claim, motivated solely by spite, undermines both the structure of his own argument and the reliability of his own claims about himself. The slap functions here both as the decisive proof of the palpability of the Underground Man's shame, and as something elusive, ontologically unstable yet semiotically stable. A slap is the ultimate sign of disgrace, and the Underground Man is defined by this disgrace, yet the shameful certainty of an actual slap eludes him; it remains within the realm of the theoretical, the impersonal. He is defined not by *having been* slapped, but by the *desire to be* slapped; therein lies his hope and his despair. The problem of clarifying the status, meaning, and significance of the slap as sign and its connection to larger social and historical systems becomes a central aspect of its use in Dostoevsky's later novels.

The slap fantasy recurs in the second part of *Notes from Underground* as the Underground Man, smarting from the disaster of Zverkov's birthday dinner at the Hôtel de Paris, dreams of revenging himself on the friends who have abandoned him for the brothel. His duel fantasies are inseparable from the dreams of humiliation that begin with his envy of the man he sees being thrown out of a tavern window one evening. That envy inspires him to seek out a fight, and when he is pushed aside by an officer at a billiard table, he experiences his desired shame and proceeds to plan his revenge. He imagines challenging his opponent to a duel, but becomes unmoored by the complexities of the honour code and by the gulf between theory and practice.[10] While that fantasy leads first to the "bumping duel," a motif that semiotically cross-fertilizes the rational egoism of the Chernyshevskian new man with the rule-bound practices of the honour code, rendering both equally absurd, it emerges once more following the dinner with his schoolfriends and his shame-filled apology for his actions, when Ferfichkin casts aspersions on his

fitness as a duellist and his self-loathing leads him to beg Simonov for money.[11]

After he is abandoned by his friends, the Underground Man insists, "So this is it at last: a collision with reality" (5:148; 81). Yet far from grounding himself in this supposed reality, he retreats into a duel fantasy which even he recognizes as inspired by Romantic literary models, most notably Pushkin's "The Shot" [Vystrel, 1831] from *Belkin Tales* and Lermontov's *Masquerade* [Maskerad, 1835]. The slap the Underground Man imagines is located at the intersection between the reality he seeks and the fantasy he cannot abandon: it offers a physical embodiment and palpable proof of his presence – which his friends repeatedly seemed to deny throughout the dinner – also promising a readable honour plot scenario that will allow resolution for the Underground Man. At the same time, it remains within the realm of his imagination, leading only to a vestigial, fantasy duel plot which is never realized within the story, as well as precipitating the reader's questioning of the Romantic models he references. As Reyfman points out, ultimately the Underground Man fails to slap Zverkov or challenge him to a duel because of his hyperconsciousness, the constant need to reflect, which renders him incapable of the kind of decisive action the honour code requires.[12]

The Underground Man imagines his duel scenario playing out in the following way: he will be arrested, exiled to Siberia, and then return fifteen years later to demand his revenge before offering forgiveness. Here the fantasy flounders on the Underground Man's failures of imagination. He admits that the plot of the deferred revenge is taken from another source, Pushkin's "The Shot":

> I was on the point of tears, although I knew perfectly well at that instant that all of this was out of Silvio and Lermontov's *Masquerade*. And all at once I became terribly ashamed, so ashamed that I stopped the horse, climbed out of the sledge, and stood there in the snow in the middle of the street. (5:150; 84)

Pushkin's "The Shot" and Lermontov's *Masquerade* serve as the two main examples of the honour code not just for the Underground Man, but for many of Dostoevsky's characters.[13] Given the overall theme of Part Two of *Notes from Underground*, the intellectual origins of the Underground Man's hyperconsciousness in Romanticism, the invocation of two of Russian Romanticism's most canonical anti-heroes, Silvio and Arbenin, is not surprising.[14] However, these two texts provide highly ambiguous and non-standard examples of the duel plot, and their centrality to the

system of representation of the duel plot raises more questions than it answers.

"The Shot" tells the story of a duel plot deferred, in which Silvio, the protagonist, cuts short the duel he has provoked against his enemy, the Count (whose slap serves as the pretext for the challenge), and waits several years to enact his revenge at an unexpected future moment. The honour code is at first egregiously flouted, then awkwardly recuperated by the end of the story as Silvio saves the Count's life again but also redeems his honour. Pushkin's story ultimately reveals a gulf between human relations as organized through the honour code and the messiness of those relations outside of the code, and serves as a usable model for registering historical change.[15] In *Notes from Underground* and later in *Demons* and *The Adolescent*, the motif of deferral of the duel gets repurposed by Dostoevsky for a new historical moment that yearns for the order of the honour code, but in which multiple new codes of behaviour have begun to operate simultaneously and messily. The deferral motif offers both the genre memory of Pushkin's story, with its suggestions of narrative order and control, and a sense of anticipation of the porous boundary between the duel plot and random violence, which is hinted at in "The Shot," but which becomes explicitly thematized in Dostoevsky's late novels.

If "The Shot" offers a discordant and ambiguous model of the duel plot and the honour code, Lermontov's *Masquerade*, with its Russian rewriting of the *Othello* plot, provides an even less clear-cut model of the honour code. When Arbenin, the play's protagonist (and former gambler), discovers that his wife Nina's bracelet is missing and in the possession of Prince Zvezdich, he suspects his wife of infidelity and his first instinct is to challenge the Prince to a duel. However, he decides instead to invite him to a gambling den, where he cheats and humiliates him at cards, refuses to fight a duel with him and forces him to live with his shame.[16] As Ian Helfant observes, while the Prince behaves in accordance with a strict adherence to the honour code, and Arbenin's fellow gambler, Kazarin, is guided only by extreme cynicism, Arbenin is an ambiguous figure who doesn't subscribe to a particular code of behaviour, whose actions reflect a continually shifting set of social codes.[17] During the rigged card game that results in the injury to the Prince's honour, Arbenin tells him the story of a husband who takes revenge on his wife's lover by slapping him in the face:

ARBENIN: So are you curious to know
What her husband did? He chose some minor pretext
And slapped his foe in the face …

And you, my Prince? If you were in his place,
What would you do?
PRINCE: I would do the same. And later?
Did they square off with pistols?
ARBENIN: No
PRINCE: Did they fight with swords?
ARBENIN: (*smiling bitterly*) No, no
KAZARIN: Did they make up then?
ARBENIN: Oh, no.
PRINCE: And so, what did he do?
ARBENIN: The husband was avenged,
And closed the case.
And left his foe.
With that slap in the face.
PRINCE: (*laughing*) But that is against all the rules.
ARBENIN: What code contains the law or prescription for hatred and vengeance?[18]

Here the slap serves as an ambiguous sign that is read at cross purposes by the Prince and by Arbenin and the husband. According to the honour code it should be the immediate grounds for the challenge, forcing the lover's hand and allowing the husband to fight his rival and avenge the insult to his honour, and this is what the Prince anticipates. In fact, the slap becomes the sole form of vengeance; the duel plot is aborted, and the situation remains unresolved. According to the honour code, the shame is never truly effaced. Arbenin, like the husband, rejects the honour code, leaving his opponent's and his own honour stained. This foreshadows the card sharping that will allow Arbenin to refuse to fight the Prince, another serious violation of the honour code. As Helfant explains, "Arbenin forestalls each attempt by Zvedich to gain any authority over the narrative they are now performing"; he names Zvedich "a scoundrel who has forfeited his right to participate in social discourse with honorable men."[19] In fact, Arbenin's insistence on the Prince's dishonour masks his awareness of his own shame, which, together with his guilt at the murder of his wife, eventually drives him to madness.

Arbenin's final question in the passage quoted above reveals the gulf between his own self-aggrandizing Romantic ideology that rejects all fixed systems, and the honour code.[20] His manipulation and repurposing of particular elements of the honour code in order to disguise his own cowardice and weakness is a central element of his Romantic personality. In his simultaneous mastery of and rejection of social codes as well as in his shame masked by pride, Lermontov's card sharp has

much in common with Dostoevsky's Underground Man; the invocation of *Masquerade* reveals Arbenin as one of the Underground Man's literary progenitors. However, where Arbenin's manipulation of the honour code makes him unique within Lermontov's play, a character ahead of his time and at odds with his world, the Underground Man's retreat into the honour code and simultaneous recognition of its disintegration harmonizes with and reflects the new post-Emancipation world to which he belongs.

It is clear that Dostoevsky's Romantic models undermine the honour code and the duel plot more than they exemplify them. The deferred duel plot of "The Shot" and the polysemic slap and aborted duel of *Masquerade* inform the half-baked fantasies of the Underground Man, undergirding the instabilities of the slap and the fragmented duel plot in *Notes from Underground*. At first sight the references to "The Shot" and *Masquerade* seem to suggest nostalgia for a functional honour code, a retreat into a world of readable signs and legible codes where the Underground Man can symbolically re-establish his injured selfhood. On closer examination, these textual examples offer no semiotically stable ground, no lost unity, seeming rather to bolster the idea that shame cannot be effaced. Furthermore, they are invoked at moments in the text that threaten to undermine the possibility of semiotic stability. In Dostoevsky, Romantic models offer no defence of the honour code, but they do offer possible models of emplotment that can be repurposed and filled with new content reflective of a moment of new semiotic challenges and conflicts.[21] If even in the duel's heyday, it apparently offered little hope for the re-establishment of fractured selfhood, Pushkin's and Lermontov's ambiguous slaps and deferred shots herald a sense of semiotic uncertainty that by the time of *Notes from Underground* has become era-defining, and that helps to explain how the Romantic fantasist of Part II became the hyperconscious protagonist of Part I.

Where *Notes from Underground* openly acknowledges its models and thematizes the breakdown of the Romantic duel plot as part of the ideological and narratological journey of the Underground Man from disillusioned Romantic to divided and impassioned poet of the dependence of the self on the other, Dostoevsky's later novels go further in their representation of the dissolution of the honour code and the semiotic instability of the slap motif and the duel plot, resisting the immediate acknowledgment of Romantic models and the direct mobilization of the duel plot. In these works, the slap becomes dislodged from its place within the duel plot and takes on a life of its own. It becomes a motif that evokes the duel plot, but which resists mobilizing it fully.

Demons: Deformation of the Duel Plot

A slap, the ensuing mark of shame, and a deferred duel plot, which violates the honour code, play a crucial role in *Demons* in revealing both the moral and psychological fractures at the heart of the novel's elusive protagonist, Stavrogin, and the contradictory set of semiotic codes according to which the novelistic action unfolds. Shatov slaps Stavrogin soon after his return from abroad and Stavrogin fails to respond. Characterized as a coward by the son of a man he had previously insulted, Gaganov, he then issues a challenge to the latter, thus substituting the original slap for the later insult. He refuses to follow the rules of the duel and shoots into the air, enraging his opponent and leaving the conflict unresolved. The slap motif is central to Dostoevsky's plans for the novel, first appearing in the early plans for *Demons* but recurring throughout (11:32, 34, 51, 54). As is the case with Myshkin in *The Idiot*, the slap is a test of the protagonist's moral qualities, yet from the earliest notebooks for *Demons,* the social shame it generates is emphasized. In a story begun in 1868, a slap brings shame to the titular Kartuzov, a character who shares many traits with the future Captain Lebyadkin. Altogether, in the notebooks, variants of the word "slap" [poshchechina] appear fifty-six times. Although initially the Prince is the one slapping the teacher, later Shatov (11:68, 81, 82, 83, 84, 89, 96, 117, 118, 123, 126, 127), he soon becomes the one on the receiving end of Shatov's slap (11:131, 133, 134). The gesture becomes part of a putative duel plot in March 1870, when we find the formulation, "slap and duel without a shot," [poshchechina i duel'bez vystrela] (135). Though in "Kartuzov," the slap is invariably coupled with the duel that must inevitably result from it, which must efface the shame it evokes, it soon begins to appear in and of its own right, functioning as a motif severed from its broader plot, yet carrying with it suggestions of the duel plot (11:136, 137, 140, 142, 145, 154, 176). This action becomes one of the central motifs of the notebooks, together with the hero's action of hanging himself and his rape of the girl, later Matryosha, a defining characteristic of the Prince, later Stavrogin, as he develops over time. (12:163)

In the finished version Shatov administers his slap to Stavrogin in front of a large audience at the end of the scandal scene that concludes Part I of the novel. The blow and its aftermath, including Lizaveta's faint, serve as cliffhangers at the end of the section, creating suspense for characters and readers alike. By bringing shame and conflict out into the open with a violent incursion into another's space, it promises a resolution of that shame and conflict and a clear plot progression. Though the blow generates a host of questions about motive and plot, it also creates the

expectation that those questions will soon be answered. It cuts through the hermeneutic tension which the narrator has been building throughout his confused and confusing account of the prehistory of the main plot in Part I of the novel and promises clarification, a clearing away of the obstacles to interpretation that have been accumulating throughout Part I.[22] However, instead of dissipating emotional and hermeneutic tensions, the slap aggravates them.

The blow itself is half-slap, half-punch, lending it an ambiguous status on the boundary between the ritualized violence of the first element and the base violence of the second:

> Shatov had a particular way of delivering the blow, not at all the way a slap on the cheek is usually delivered (if one may put it that way); not with the palm of the hand, but with the whole fist. (10:164)[23]

Stavrogin's failure to respond to the blow reveals a rupture between the social reputation he has gained over time and the inexplicable image he currently projects within the town, between past and present Stavrogin.[24] When he eventually responds to an insulting letter sent by the son of the man whose nose he had pulled, but then flouts the duelling code by firing off to the side, the whole duel plot is revealed as just one more of the destabilizing plot developments that threaten to undermine the novel's very structure. Stavrogin's gradual disintegration in the prehistory of the novel's main plot, from follower of the honour code to instigator of inexplicable violent outbursts, prepares the ground for the aborted duel. Early on the narrator reveals Stavrogin's history with excessive duelling during his time in Petersburg, when he simultaneously upheld the honour code and transgressed it, fought two duels, killed one opponent and crippled another, and was reduced in the ranks (10:36). His excessive penchant for duelling is abruptly transformed into chaotic violence that seems to completely transgress all the rules of physical inviolability:

> Suddenly our prince, for no apparent reason, carried out two or three impermissible outrages against various people, – the important thing being, in other words, that these outrages were completely without precedent, completely unimaginable, completely unlike anything usually done, completely rotten and childish, and the Devil knows why, completely without provocation. (10:38; 49)

Stavrogin's two strange and violent gestures – his act of pulling Gaganov round by the nose and his act of biting the Governor's ear – resist being read according to the legible script of the honour code. Both acts

deform and reframe the face, marking it as no longer sacrosanct, and thus create a more lasting shame than the simple incursion of the slap. They set the stage not only for Stavrogin's complete rejection of the plots of the honour code but also for the ambiguity of Shatov's blow. Stavrogin's and Shatov's gestures belong to a moment of semiotic transition and cause confusion in those who receive and witness them.[25]

The culminating scene of the shame plot in *Demons* is when Shatov delivers his blow to Stavrogin at his mother's house in front of Lizaveta Nikolaevna and her entourage as well as his mother. The scene unfolds in slow motion, the narration saturated with temporal expressions, and is partially focalized through the perspective of Lizaveta Nikolaevna, who "is dominated by some kind of new impulse" [ovladelo kakoe-to novoe dvizhenie], whose face is the first marker of emotion and who serves to register the shame that accrues. Shatov's half-slap, half-punch carries with it the suggestion of uncontrolled violence, rather than functioning as a readable stage in an unfolding orderly duel plot. As Reyfman points out, the emphasis is on Stavrogin's face, which first seems to disintegrate into its constituent parts following impact with Shatov's fist and then comes together again in a mask-like covering.[26] The long and strange scene, in which the passing of time is repeatedly mentioned, ends in a staring contest between Shatov and Stavrogin and then Liza's faint. The narrator's focalization of the scene through Lizaveta Nikolaevna's perspective, combined with the description of Shatov's unorthodox move, creates a moment of true potentiality. While Lizaveta's response points towards the expected sense of shame, Shatov's fist and Stavrogin's failure to respond either by returning it or challenging Shatov to a duel lead out of the world of the honour code and into semiotically uncharted waters.

The opening chapter of Part II reveals a shift in the narrator's focus as the slap becomes the pretext for an examination of the progression of rumours and gossip rather than an attempt to get to the truth behind the blow itself (10:231). The question of why Stavrogin was slapped is subordinated to the problem of how the story of the slap is being told. This has the effect of undermining causal mechanisms within the novel and reorienting its focus from narrating the plot to reflecting on the possibilities of such narration. As Anne Lounsbery has observed, a central dynamic of *Demons* is the illusion of a vast and nebulous network of vague connections between people and events, which models the revolutionaries' "belief in a vast web of conspiracy, linking and controlling everything and everyone."[27] The slap as response to some chain of events is swept aside in favour of the slap as narrated event, the beginning of a new story, rather than the playing out of an old one. The motive for the slap falls

out of the narrator's zone of inquiry, as does its ability to provide insight into Stavrogin's character and motivations.

The origin of the rumours is revealed as Gaganov, who is desperate to avenge the insult to his father five years before, sends a letter that refers to Stavrogin's "slapped mug" [bitaia rozha]. Using Shatov's slap as a pretext, Gaganov attempts to insert himself into Stavrogin's shame plot and re-establish the honour code. By invoking the plot of the deferred duel, *Demons* evokes the memory of "The Shot," and Silvio's delayed revenge, but the duel plot that plays out looks quite different. Gaganov has left the army, partly as a result of the stain on his family's reputation after the incident with Stavrogin. He has just spent a month insulting Stavrogin in an attempt to provoke a duel. As a prelude to the narration of the duel, the narrator-chronicler provides a predictably colourful account of the background to Gaganov's conflict with Stavrogin in which he traces Gaganov's sense of shame to the Emancipation of the serfs:

> Strange though it is to write it, this initial intention, or rather, impulse, to retire came from the manifesto of February nineteenth on the emancipation of the peasants. Artemii Pavlovich, the wealthiest landowner of our province, was himself capable of being convinced of the humaneness of the measure and almost of understanding the economic advantages of the reform, suddenly, after the appearance of the manifesto, felt himself personally offended, as it were. This was something unconscious, like a sort of feeling, but all the stronger the more unaccountable it was. (10:224; 316)

The fact that the narrator tells us that Gaganov has not lost much revenue as a result of the Emancipation is significant; the "manifesto of February nineteenth" functions here not as a real historical event but as a sign of a historical event.[28] Gaganov is shaken not by a loss of income but by the Emancipation's semiotic reverberations, by the suggestion of the transformation of the meaning of himself and of his social estate. He thus falls back on semiotic certainty – provoking a duel that will serve as a grand substitution and allowing him to erase not only the shame inflicted on his father by Stavrogin, but also the shame inflicted on himself and his estate by the Emancipation and its changes. The slap and the duel here do not function as motifs within a coherent honour code plot; instead they serve as vessels of potential new plot generation, or vestigial Romantic plot fragments that are repurposed to deal with a new historical moment and a new crisis of semiosis.

The duel plot here is a red herring that generates false expectations about Gaganov's motives and the possibilities of effacing the shame of his social position. Gaganov, as a post-reform aristocrat, seeks the meaning

and certainty in the honour code that he fails to find in service following the Emancipation. The duel offers him the possibility of effacing the concrete shame of his father's past humiliation instead of the shapeless shame of his own present socio-historical humiliation. He fears that the duel will not take place and demands absolute fidelity to the duelling code, rebuffing Kirillov's attempts to effect a reconciliation. Uncertainty and lack of definition are his greatest fear, and when Stavrogin insists on firing into the air, even after Gaganov has grazed his finger with his first shot, Gaganov is overcome with a new kind of shame that can no longer be effaced. A post-Emancipation Russian aristocrat with a penchant for medieval pageantry, Gaganov is himself a historical anachronism, and his shame is formless and indefinable, suffused throughout the novel's fluctuating networks, rather than easily definable and effaceable. This is the duel as farce, but also as a plot adrift, only nebulously connected to the slap motif, conducted in order to reverse the imminent historical extinction of his social estate and its modes of behaviour.

The slap and the "duel without a shot" in *Demons* continue the process of the disintegration of the honour code begun in *Notes from Underground*. In *Notes* Dostoevsky depicts a world with a tangible memory of the honour code, where Romantic models still theoretically offer the Underground Man the promise of rehabilitating his honour (though this promise is occluded by a closer examination of those models). *Demons* depicts a world where such a memory no longer exists other than as empty comfort for those such as Gaganov, who declare vengeance on historical progress itself. The slap becomes distorted, its symbolic meaning attenuated by ambiguity and the suggestion of raw violence with no possibility of resolution. The slap motif and the aborted duel plot symbolize the semiotic confusion that characterizes the broader atmosphere of a world adrift, unmoored by moral or philosophical values.

The Adolescent: Decoding the "Slap at Ems"

The story of the slap sustained by Versilov in *The Adolescent* and the duel plot it engenders also reveals the semiotic confusion of a world on the brink of modernity. Here too the slap is also present from the very earliest period of work on the novel and occurs twenty-nine times in the notebooks. Unlike in *Demons*, it is not always associated with the same protagonists; rather, various characters perform the slap: the young prince, later Arkady, a little boy who later commits suicide, the princess who is involved with him (16:7, 10, 12, 17, 18, 21, 23, 27, 35). However, it is always performed on the predatory type, the future Versilov. As Jacques Catteau observes, "Dostoyevsky is not so much interested in the

person who performs the action as in the one who suffers it."[29] Like Myshkin and Stavrogin before him, Versilov absorbs the slap and then fails to respond, leading to social shame, his estrangement from society, and an aborted duel plot in which his son involves himself. Short-hand, in the notebooks it becomes the "the story of the slap. The bearing of the slap," [istoriia poshchechiny. Perenesenie poshchechiny] marked by the potentiality of emplotment that it offers (16:17). Though the notes seem to prefigure the slap as Versilov's burden, connecting him with the ideological and spiritual legacy of Stavrogin, in the novel itself it functions differently, becoming a marker of plot potentiality, the node of two different historically determined and mutually anachronistic scenarios. As with Shatov's slap and Gaganov's duel, an old honour plot is reworked here to respond to new historical and social needs.

The slap appears first as part of a story Arkady has heard through rumour in his first month in Petersburg. Versilov is supposed to have committed some kind of scandalous act the previous year in Germany, and to have received a slap from one of the Princes Sokolsky (soon revealed as Prince Seryozha, who is defined as "the man who gave him a slap"), to which Versilov never responded with a challenge and for which he is punished by social ostracism:

> Everybody turned away from him, including, by the way, all the influential nobility … owing to rumors of a certain low and – what's worst of all in the eyes of the "world" – scandalous act he was supposed to have committed over a year before in Germany, and even of a slap in the face he had received then, much too publicly, from one of the Sokolskii princes, and to which he had not responded with a challenge. (13:18)[30]

"The slap at Ems" as it becomes known, exists at the intersection of two different codes of behaviour and interpretation within the novel (13:88; 105). On the one hand, Arkady reads Versilov's failure to issue a challenge within the terms of the old honour code as a mark of shame on Versilov, a proof of his lack of honour. On the other, he is aware that Versilov is engaged in a court case over an inheritance against the very same Prince Seryozha. The litigation is the marker of a rule-bound society where the honour code has become superfluous, even meaningless, so Versilov's refusal to issue the challenge reveals him as a man of the modern age. The slap and its possible outcomes become a staging ground for Arkady's understanding of his own position in the world. Versilov's response to the slap becomes a test into which is inscribed Arkady's desire to see his father enact his aristocratic destiny and his own filial responsibility to make up for his father's failures but also his awareness of the semiotic

absurdity of such a response in the new world to which Arkady belongs. Arkady is no Gaganov, longing for a pre-Emancipation world, yet he longs for the narrative certainties he sees as his father's legacy, a contrast from the story of his own life as product of an accidental family.[31] The slap becomes a moment of pregnant possibility on the level of both *siuzhet* and *fabula*, on the level of both Arkady's autobiographical notes and Dostoevsky's novel; it reveals the breach between the world Arkady yearns for, in which he can overcome his illegitimacy and inherit his father's semiotic certainties, and the one he inhabits, in which semiotic values are in flux.

Versilov's failure to extract vengeance on the Prince becomes a twofold possibility for Arkady's own plotting. His planned challenge becomes the opportunity to claim Versilov as his father by defending his honour and also to efface the ambiguities of his social identity as Versilov's illegitimate son. As he tells Zveryev when he asks him to be his second:

> I knew the objections and at once explained to him that it was not at all as stupid as he supposed. First, it would be proved to the insolent prince that there were still people of our estate who understood honor, and second, Versilov would be shamed and learn a lesson. And third, and most important, even if Versilov, owing to certain convictions of his own, was right not to have challenged the prince and to have decided to bear with the slap, he would at least see that there was a being who was able to feel his offense so strongly that he took it as his own, and was ready even to lay down his life for his interests … in spite of the fact that he had parted from him forever. (13:116; 136)

The anticipated duel carries the traditional semiotically restorative function, the "wiping away of shame" that we saw in the Underground Man's fantasy, but is meant to restore not Versilov's honour, but rather Arkady's legitimate social status. Fighting a duel in Versilov's stead would imply his right to be considered a social equal of both Versilov and Prince Seryozha. To move to the level of emplotment, Dostoevsky again borrows the motif of the deferred duel from "The Shot" but substitutes one of the duellists, thus deconstructing the Romantic plot once again. The duel never comes to pass, since Zveryev refuses to be Arkady's second, objecting to the fact that Versilov is involved in a court case against the Prince. Instead of providing semiotic clarity, here the duel brings only semiotic confusion, the fragments of another zombie plot that will be filled with new content and adapted to fit the new historical and semiotic conditions of Russia in the mid-1870s, in all its post-reform semiotic confusion.

As the duel plot develops, it becomes increasingly distanced from the original slap at Ems and takes on a life of its own. Arkady's desire to fight the duel soon becomes emblematic of his naivety and his ignorance of the true relations between his father, the Prince, and the many other participants in the drama at Ems. He is unaware of the circumstances of Seryozha's insult to Versilov, rendering his perspective increasingly unreliable as the stakes of Versilov's involvement in the plot gradually rise. The rumoured slap opens and closes emplotment possibilities, revealing the extent of Arkady's ignorance. The villain Stebelkov tells him about the "nursing baby" of Lidiya Akhmakov and claims Versilov fathered it, and so Arkady assumes that the slap was a punishment for this impregnation. His sister Liza then points out that it was not Versilov's baby before Vasin tells him that the baby was Prince Seryozha's, thus reopening the question of motive for the slap. Arkady also wonders about his own mother's involvement in the plot. Lidiya's baby's uncertain paternity becomes an extension of Arkady's own illegitimacy and the duel seems to mark the only possibility of effacing that shame. The shame of Arkady's birth comes to substitute for the shame of the slap at Ems.

When Arkady speaks to the Prince about his intention to challenge him, he reveals that the court case has been resolved, and that Versilov has now decided to challenge Prince Seryozha. The deferred duel plot from "The Shot" emerges once more, removing the need for Arkady to fight, and hence denying him the certainty and clarity he so desires. An hour later, though, Versilov rescinds his offer. If the duel plot traditionally simplifies and narrows down emplotment possibilities within a text, here it creates new plots and new outcomes, complicating, rather than simplifying emplotment possibilities. *The Adolescent* is the messiest of Dostoevsky's novels, and like the rest of its plots, such as the document and the blackmail plots, the duel plot careens out of control. Disappearing for a while, it emerges once again later in the novel when Versilov writes a letter to Katerina accusing her of sexually corrupting Arkady, provoking her fiancé to challenge him to a duel before ultimately deciding that he is insane and should be sent to a hospital ward to recover. The slap motif ultimately serves as the source of a vast proliferation of plots and subplots, all of which serve to confuse rather than clarify, and which reveal a world that exists according to multiple contradictory codes and systems.

In conclusion, while slaps and the duel plots they engender seem at first to suggest semiotic and narrative stability in Dostoevsky's novels, a nod to the mutually comprehensible rules of the honour code, in fact they serve as markers of semiotic confusion, of the coexistence of the multiple codes and slippages between them. In *Notes from Underground* Dostoevsky reveals the Romantic models that underlie the honour code plot, but

those models themselves are shown to be unstable, signifying narrative uncertainties and shifting semiotic values. The Underground Man's duel fantasies and desire to be slapped mark his attempt to look for familiar landmarks in a semiotic territory that is changing beyond recognition. *Demons* shows a world where Romantic models are unrecognizable and emptied of content. The slap Shatov gives Stavrogin in *Demons* is emblematic of the gestural poetics of Dostoevsky's late novels. It generates the expectation of narrative and semiotic clarity while in fact complicating emplotment and distancing the reader from any understanding of Shatov or Stavrogin and their motivations. As the story of the slap takes over from the slap itself and the duel plot disintegrates as a result of the substitutions of participants and motives, it becomes a marker not of clarity but of obscurity. The aborted duel becomes nothing more than the refuge of an aristocrat who has lost social identity and meaning in a post-Emancipation age. *The Adolescent* takes this peculiar mode of gestural poetics even further: while the story of a slap serves as the source of rumours, the apparent key to the mystery of Arkady's father, Versilov, and to Arkady's own identity, it turns out to be an empty plot, a narrative dead end. The slap and the duel fantasy it engenders serve as the last chain of identity connecting Arkady to Versilov. Moving beyond the slap and the semiotic limitations of the outdated honour code allows Arkady the freedom to operate within the multiple codes of the changing world he inhabits and grants him the possibility of emancipation from the physical and psychological limits of the honour code and its legacy. Ultimately the shifting meanings and poetics of the slap in Dostoevsky's post-Siberian works work to highlight a broader crisis in semiosis in the post-Emancipation era.

NOTES

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1 The most comprehensive analysis of Dostoevsky's representation of duels and the honour code, including the role of the slap, can be found in Irina Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence, Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Culture and*

Literature. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 192–261. On the cultural history of Russian duelling more generally, see Iurii M. Lotman, "Duel'," in *Besedy o russkoi kul'ture: Byt i traditsii russkogo dvorianstva* (XVIII–nachalo XIX veka (St Petersburg, 1994), 164–79. On the duel in Russian literature, see Christina Scholle, *Das Duell in den russischen Literatur: Wandlungen und Verfall eines Ritus* (Munich: Peter Lang, 1977).

2 Notable slaps in Dostoevsky's oeuvre include Vanya's slap of Valkovsky in *The Insulted and the Injured*, the Underground Man's fantasies of slapping Zverkov in the second part of *Notes from Underground*, Ganya's slap of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot,* Shatov's slap of Stavrogin in the face in *Demons*, the unavenged slap Versilov receives in a German spa town in *The Adolescent*, and finally, in *Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima's slap of his servant right before his conversion moment and his pulling out of the duel he was supposed to fight the next day, and Fyodor Karamazov's failure to respond to a slap from an opponent, which horrifies his second wife.

3 By this I mean that Dostoevsky's heroes inhabit a world where sign systems are in flux and are continually being interrogated. A rich strain of recent scholarship has begun to deal with how Dostoevsky's realism responds to the transformation of monetary signs and economic values in mid-nineteenth century Russia: see Jillian Porter, "The Double, The Rouble, The Real: Counterfeit Money in Dostoevskii's *Dvoinik*," *Slavic and East European Journal* 58, no. 3 (2014): 378–93; Vadim Shneyder, "Myshkin's Millions: Merchants, Capitalists, and the Economic Imaginary in *The Idiot*," *Russian Review* 77, no. 2 (2018): 241–58.

4 F.M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochienii v tridtsati tomakh*, ed. G.M. Fridlender et al. (Leningrad: "Nauka," 1972–90), vol. 5, 149. Subsequent volume and page number references to this edition will be indicated in the text in parentheses: (vol.:page). Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 81–2. Translation adapted. From here on I will indicate the translation parenthetically in the body of the text, following the volume and page number for the *PSS* and set off by a semicolon.

5 As Reyfman points out, "the honour code presumes that one is concentrating on the act's symbolic meaning and thus discourages the aggressor from focusing on the face he is about to slap," *Ritualized Violence*, 230.

6 Ibid., 228–61, especially 228–31.

7 Ibid., 232–9, 253–5.

8 Ibid., 260–1.

9 This is not the first slap in Dostoevsky's works (there is one in *The Village of Stepanichikovo* and another in *The Insulted and the Injured*) but this is the first instance of the slap as an *idée fixe* that dominates a character's thoughts or a subplot.

10 See Reyfman on the Underground Man's contradictory and self-serving excuses for why he cannot challenge the officer, *Ritualized Violence*, 216–21.
11 Tzvetan Todorov makes the argument that Romantic models are parodied and reframed within situations taken from the literature of the 1860s. This dissonance of form and content can also be seen in the playing out of the duel fantasies within the context of the Underground Man's pecuniary difficulties and the arrival at the brothel. Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 81–2.
12 Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence*, 225–7.
13 In *The Idiot*, Kolya makes the following comment about Ganya's attempt to slap Varya, "Some madman, or fool, or villain in a state of madness, gives a slap in the face, and the man is dishonored for the rest of his life and can only wash it off with blood, or if the other one begs forgiveness on his knees. I think it's absurd and despotism. Lermontov's play *The Masquerade* is based on it and – stupidly so, in my view" (8:100–1). English translation mine. Wacław Lednicki enumerates a number of other Romantic and post-Romantic texts with which the Underground Man engages in Part II of *Notes*: Gogol's *Notes of a Madman,* Turgenev's *Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850), and "The Bully." To these, Reyfman adds Lermontov's *Princess Ligovskaia* and Tolstoy's "A Billiard-Marker's Notes" (1855). Waclaw Lednicki, *Russia, Poland and the West: Essays in Literary and Cultural History* (Port Washington, NY: Kennicat Press, 1966), 180–248; Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence*, 215–16.
14 Joseph Frank argues that *Notes from Underground* "is a diptych depicting two episodes of a symbolic history of the Russian intelligentsia." See Joseph Frank, *The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 316.
15 On the structure of "The Shot" and its place within *The Tales of Belkin*, see Paul Debrezceny, *The Other Pushkin: A Study of Alexander Pushkin's Prose Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 103.
16 M.Iu. Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, 2nd ed., 4 vols, ed. V.A. Manuilov et al. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1980), vol. 3, 76–84.
17 Ian Helfant, *The High Stakes of Identity: Gambling in the Life and Literature of Nineteenth Century Russia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 73.
18 Lermontov, vol. 3, 80–1. English translation mine.
19 Helfant, *High Stakes*, 79.
20 Elizabeth Cheresh Allen argues that Arbenin is not a Romantic hero, but is rather a Romantic ideologue, a character whose self-image is Romanticized. Her analysis of the way in which Arbenin incorporates Romantic ideals and attributes invites parallels with the Underground Man. Elizabeth Cheresh Allen, "Unmasking Lermontov's *Masquerade:* Romanticism as Ideology," *Slavic and East European Journal* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 75–97.

21 In his chapter in the present volume, Alexey Vdovin shows how Dostoevsky uses Sechenov's mode of argumentation and thought experiments in similar ways, as forms to be parodied and filled with new content.
22 There is a huge bibliography on the role of the narrator-chronicler in creating the narrative instabilities of *Demons*. See, for instance, Slobodanka B. Vladiv, *Narrative Principles in Dostoevskij's Besy: A Structural Analysis* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1979), and Adam Weiner, *By Authors Possessed: The Demonic Novel in Russia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998). For a recent account that provides a rehabilitation of a sort for a narrator frequently seen merely as a victim of the novel's deeper account of possession, see David Stromberg, "The Enigmatic G-v: A Defense of the Narrator-Chronicler in Dostoevsky's *Demons*," *Russian Review* 71, no. 3 (July 2012): 460–81.
23 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, translated by Robert Maguire (London and New York: Penguin Classics, new edition, 2008), 225. From now on, page numbers from this translation will be placed in parentheses following the *PSS* page numbers.
24 As Ilya Kliger points out in his chapter in the present volume, Stavrogin's choice not to respond also underlines the extent of his power.
25 The community at first attempts to decode these gestures by medicalizing and pathologizing them. When Stavrogin is diagnosed with brain fever, his previously inexplicable acts are then fitted into a madness plot that normalizes them and exculpates Stavrogin, but also serves to destabilize and redefine semiotic values within the novel.
26 Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence*, 240.
27 Anne Lounsbery, "Dostoevskii's Geography: Centers, Peripheries and Networks in *Demons*," *Slavic Review* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 211–29.
28 On the symbolic and cultural reverberations of the Emancipation, see Irina Paperno, "The Liberation of the Serfs as a Cultural Symbol," *Russian Review* 50, no. 4 (October 1991): 417–36.
29 Jacques Catteau, *Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation*, trans. Audrey Littlewood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 292.
30 *The Adolescent*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Knopf, 2003), 20. All quoted material from *The Adolescent* in the chapter is from this translation and, from now on, pages from it will be included following a semicolon in the parenthetical citations.
31 For a fuller examination of Arkady's relation to his father's narrative legacy, see Kate Holland, *The Novel in the Age of Disintegration: Dostoevsky and the Problem of Genre in the 1870s* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 101–30, as well as Chloë Kitzinger's chapter in the present volume.