

## The influence of Hamlet on Dostoevsky's character Stavrogin from *Demons*

Petra Bjelica  
University of Verona<sup>1</sup>

This paper addresses the parallels between Shakespeare's Hamlet and Dostoevsky's Stavrogin considering the representation of their paradoxical subjectivities. The starting point is that Dostoevsky incorporated his understanding of Hamlet in creating the protagonist of *Demons*. I approach the comparison of Hamlet's and Stavrogin's subjectivities in the scope of the tradition of continental philosophy and focus on the characters' quest for meaning, both in terms of themselves and the world. Their characters reveal the dynamic of the same problem – that the unified, coherent self is an illusion and a myth, that modern subjectivity is paradoxical, radically split, and alienated from itself. Even though these heroes belong to different genres, periods, and cultures, this common denominator offers a philosophical line of thought that goes beyond restrictions caused by different poetic, cultural, and historical conditions.

As one of the greatest enigmas of world literature, the protagonist of *Hamlet* migrated beyond literary limits, exceeded the borders of literary theory, philosophy, and theatre practice. Hamlet became a significant sign in Western culture and a pivotal moment in the development of modern subjectivity. In leaning on a critical tradition of interpreting Hamlet's subjectivity against the traditional interpretation of a character<sup>2</sup>, I claim that parallels between his and Stavrogin's subjectivity offer space for understanding Dostoevsky's hero in similar terms. Consistently, constantly and continuously resisting any given methodology and systematization, Hamlet doesn't cease to offer new possibilities and perspectives for interpretation relevant to any given historical moment from Renaissance to the present. I argue Stavrogin to be an enigmatic figure of the similar force and dynamism, «a character resisting all attempts to be decoded or deciphered»<sup>3</sup>.

A brief history of the reception of *Hamlet* in Russia sets the context for questioning the influence of Shakespeare on Dostoevsky. As a «core text of the western canon»<sup>4</sup>, *Hamlet* was pivotal for Russia's cultural self-definition in the 18<sup>th</sup> century which was created in relationship to European culture. Zakharov highlights that Shakespeare has been considered by Russians as their national poet since Pushkin's celebration of Shakespeare in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Hamlet* has

---

<sup>1</sup> «The project leading to this application has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 754345, under region of Veneto Decree nr. 193 of 13/09/2016 and under Università degli Studi di Verona ».

<sup>2</sup> I refer to the following critical studies: Francis Barker's *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection*, Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*, Terry Eagleton's *William Shakespeare*, Hugh Grady's *Shakespeare's Universal Wolfe: Studies in Early Modern Reification*.

<sup>3</sup>PETER ROLLBERG, *Mastermind, Terrorist, Enigma: Dostoevsky's Nikolai Stavrogin*, in «Perspectives on Political Science», 43:3 (2014), pp.143-152.

<sup>4</sup> GABRIELLE RIPPL, «Hamlet's Mobility: The Reception of Shakespeare's Tragedy in US American and Canadian Narrative Fiction», in *Shakespeare and Space: Theatrical Explorations of the Spatial Paradigm*, Edited by INNA HABBERMAN and MICHELLE WITEN, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, 2016, pp. 230.

been appropriated among principal national plays and the hero himself has been one of the main iconic characters that define the core of Russian culture.<sup>5</sup> From the very beginning, the character has been extrapolated from the play. The long and rich history of Hamlet's acculturation in Russia has since gone through contradictory appropriations (from an early political Hamlet or a doubting romantic hero to a self-image for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian intelligentsia), creating a phenomenon, Dostoevsky's contemporary Pavel Annenkov, called *Russian Hamletism*. Thomas Grob claims that «Shakespeare's Hamlet is arguably the most important and enduring representative of these acculturated 'immigrants' to Russian culture»<sup>6</sup>.

The interpretation of an idealistic hero incapable of carrying the burden of his responsibility, established in German romanticism, was pivotal to Russian culture in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the political debates about civic responsibilities, Hamlet became a symbol of the inability of the intelligentsia to act and their retreating to the inner world. Turgenev's essay from 1860, *Hamlet and Don Quixote*, defines Hamlet as an intellectual with «a paralyzing self-consciousness»<sup>7</sup>, expressing negation directed towards evil and scepticism in his search of the truth. Connecting him with nihilist Bazarov, Turgenev opens the field for the next generation of literary and political critics. For Belinsky Hamlet is «a man of many words but no action»<sup>8</sup> and for Chernishevsky, «Hamletism became enmeshed with the definition of a crucial group of Russians, dubbed the 'superfluous men'<sup>9</sup> or 'alienated men'». <sup>10</sup> *Demons* is Dostoevsky's polemic with liberalism from the 1840s and nihilism from the 1860s in which he criticised both the Western influence and his literary contemporaries, and I argue that Stavrogin is his answer to Russian Hamletism.

It's hard to extrapolate Dostoevsky's exact interpretation of Hamlet but Iurri Levin offers a comprehensive overview of all the available documentation and comes to the conclusion that he connected Hamlet with despair, issues of suicide, and question about the immortality of the soul.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that Hamlet served as one of many models for Stavrogin and numerous authors<sup>12</sup> have already pointed out this connection. This claim is furthermore supported by textual evidence in preparatory materials for the novel and the novel itself. On one hand, in *The Notebooks for the Possessed*, Dostoevsky attributes to Stavrogin the

---

<sup>5</sup> NIKOLAY V. ZAKHAROV, *Shakespearean canon in the Russian Literature at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries*, in «Znanie. Ponimanie. Umenie», 3 (2015), pp. 375.

<sup>6</sup> THOMAS GROB, «'One Cannot Act Hamlet, One Must Be Hamlet': The Acculturation of Hamlet in Russia», in *Shakespeare and Space: Theatrical Explorations of the Spatial Paradigm*, Edited by INA HABBBERMAN and MICHELLE WITEN, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, 2016, pp.192.

<sup>7</sup> GROB, *One*, cit. (n.6), p. 205.

<sup>8</sup> GROB, *One*, cit. (n.6), p. 203.

<sup>9</sup> Superfluous man is a literary concept referring to a group of well educated, talented and sensitive men from the 1840s and 1850s in Russia, usually aristocrats, who were disconnected with their land and people, without a social role or sense of purpose and belonging. Descendants of a Byronic hero, they were characterised by cynicism, existential boredom, nihilism, despair and self-destruction. Stavrogin can be read in this context, as one of the final stages of a superfluous man.

<sup>10</sup> PETER HOLLAND, «More a Russian than a Dane. The Usefulness of Hamlet in Russia», in *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics*, Edited by SHIRLEY CHEW and ALISTAIR STEAD, Liverpool University Press, 1999, pp. 322-3.

<sup>11</sup> IURRI LEVIN, «Dostoevskii i Shekspir» (1974), tr. Eng. «Dostoevskii and Shakespeare» in *Dostoevskii and Britain*, Edited by WILLIAM J. LEATHERBARROW, Berg Publishers Limited, Oxford, 1995<sup>3</sup>, pp. 39-82.

<sup>12</sup> See Levin's *Dostoevskii and Shakespeare*, Stepanian's *Dostoevsky and Shakespeare Characters and Authors in "Great Time"*, Zakharov's *Shakespearean canon in the Russian Literature at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Rowe's *Hamlet: A Window on Russia*.

Hamletian question. «The Prince is a somber, passionate, demoniac, and dissolute character who knows no moderation: facing the ultimate question he has reached ‘to be or not to be?’»<sup>13</sup>. On the other hand, Stavrogin has been compared to Hamlet (and Prince Hal from Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*) in the novel, even though the comparison is not straightforward and simple, and goes through many layers of Dostoevsky’s irony. Peter Trofimovich directly compares Stavrogin to Hamlet. «A man, proud and early insulted, who had arrived at that ‘jeering’ which you mentioned so aptly—in short, a Prince Harry, to use Stepan Trofimovich’s magnificent comparison at the time, which would be perfectly correct if he did not resemble Hamlet even more, at least in my view».<sup>14</sup> Hence, both textual and historical evidence of the connection between Hamlet and Stavrogin give enough arguments for a comparative reading of these two characters.

My paper is focused on two examples that show how Hamlet and Stavrogin understand themselves and the world around them, analyzing their philosophical signatures that sum up their understanding of meaning, action, and identity.

The first example considers Hamlet’s answer to Polonius to the question of what he is reading. Hamlet replies: «Words, words, words»<sup>15</sup>. This answer implies that words denote a series of divisions between the signified and the signifier without any meaning, in which every next word can question, contradict, parody, misinterpret, defy the previous one; it is a series that can continue endlessly and offer no fixed base neither for meaning nor for identity. And since Hamlet’s answer is plucked in irony, this infinite quest can be understood precisely as a demonstration of Shakespeare’s poetics, a marvellous play with language – «an infinite jest»<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, in Hamlet’s view, the discourse is present as arbitrary and manipulative, implying that meaning cannot be a secure point of reference for decision and action. As Nietzsche famously said about Hamlet comparing him with Dionysiac man, «[...] they have gazed into the true essence of things, they have acquired knowledge and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things; they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint».<sup>17</sup>

In the suicide letter, the first example from *Demons*, Stavrogin expresses the similar problem of indefinite argumentation as Hamlet stating that «One can argue endlessly about everything, but what poured out of me was only negation, with no magnanimity and no force».<sup>18</sup> The rational logic has an Ouroboros structure; it will always end up contradicting itself and eating its own tail. And while Shakespeare plays with this dynamic of ambiguous meaning, Dostoevsky radicalizes Stavrogin’s condition by attributing to him the following insight: «I know it [suicide] will be one more deceit – the last deceit in an endless series of

---

<sup>13</sup>FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, *Zapisnye tetradi F. M. Dostoevskogo* (1935), tr. Eng. *The Notebooks for The Possessed*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1968, pp. 270.

<sup>14</sup>FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, *Bésy* (1871-2), tr. Eng. *Demons*, by RICHARD PEVEAR and LARISSA VOLOKHONSKY, Vintage Books, London, 2006, pp.189.

<sup>15</sup>WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet: Revised Edition*, Edited by ANN THOMPSON and NEIL TAYLOR, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017<sup>3</sup>, pp. 281.

<sup>16</sup>SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*, cit. (n. 15), pp. 452.

<sup>17</sup>FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872), tr. Eng. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* by RONALD SPEIRS, Edited by RAYMOND GEUSS and RONALD SPEIRS, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 40.

<sup>18</sup>DOSTOEVSKY, *Demons*, cit. (n.14), pp. pp. 676.

deceits». <sup>19</sup> In the world of *Demons*, there is no honest and rational way out of this logic. The effects of this knowledge are immorality and indifference towards the boundaries between good and evil, action and inaction. As Wasiolek concludes: «Stavrogin has passed beyond words and passion[...] His lips are sealed by the confidence that no words are worth speaking and no act is worth doing [...] He is wise with wisdom that wisdom is not wise, and strong in his faith that all faith can be shaken». <sup>20</sup>

For both characters, this knowledge, a Nietzschean knowledge that kills action, results in melancholy and inaction, but not in a form of indecisiveness. On the contrary, it is a sign of comprehension of the aporia concerning the impossible decision <sup>21</sup>, comprehension of the impossibility to make a decision that would stop this logic (Hamlet), or the inability to believe and overcome the barren, demonic acedia (Stavrogin).

The second examples refer to this undecidability. Hamlet narrows down the choice between «To be, or not to be». <sup>22</sup> Following the logic from the first example and colliding it with the second one, this crucial question can be treated as a futile rhetorical figure of speech, since the series of *pro* and *contra* arguments can be endlessly continued. Thus, the opposite meanings are just a part of an endless series of differences, and the absolute contradiction between «to be *or* not to be» transforms into a paradoxical «to be *and* not to be». As James Calderwood claims in *To be and not to be: Negation and Metadrama in "Hamlet"*, «“To be *and* not to be” is the basic logical form of Hamlet’s assertions». <sup>23</sup> Hamlet’s understanding of meaning and identity thus belongs to the space of undecidability.

Stavrogin is also caught up in undecidability, because as Kirillov observes: «If Stavrogin believes, he doesn’t believe he believes. If he doesn’t believe, he doesn’t believe he believes» <sup>24</sup>. He is characterized by permanent paradox, embodying the ultimate tension and contradiction between the lowest human possibility, depicted in the ultimate crime of violating a child, and the grandest vision of the dream of the Golden Age in the Greek archipelago. Through Stavrogin, a parody of a holy sinner, Dostoevsky confronts us with the fact that the highest good and the vilest evil are inextricably connected. Belonging to a different ideological context than Hamlet, in Dostoevsky’s hero we can trace a similar insight, but the novel implies different consequences. In *Demons*, this logic cannot be resolved, but only abandoned in the

---

<sup>19</sup> DOSTOEVSKY, *Demons*, cit. (n.14), pp. 676.

<sup>20</sup> EDWARD WASIOLEK, *Introduction*, in «The Notebooks of The Possessed», The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1968, pp. 14.

<sup>21</sup> I am treating this impossible decision in the manner of Derrida’s thought. «It is from the moment one surrenders to the necessity of divisibility and the undecidable that the question of decision can be posed: and the question of knowing what deciding, affirming – which is to say, also deciding – mean. A decision that would be taken otherwise than on the border of this undecidable would not be a decision. Thus [...] the great decisions that must be taken and must be affirmed are taken and affirmed in this relation to the undecidable itself; at the very moment at which they are no longer possible, they become possible. These are the only decisions possible – impossible ones. Think here of Kierkegaard: the only decision possible is the impossible decision. It is when it is not possible to know what must be done, when knowledge is not and cannot be determining that a decision is possible as such. Otherwise the decision is an application, one knows what has to be done, it’s clear, there is no more decision possible; what one has here is an effect, an application, a programming.» See GEOFFREY BENNINGTON, *A Moment of Madness: Derrida’s Kierkegaard*, in «Oxford Literary Review», 33:1 (2011), pp. 103-127.

<sup>22</sup> SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*, cit. (n. 15), pp. 314.

<sup>23</sup> See ANDREW CUTROFELLO, *All for nothing: Hamlet’s negativity*, The MIT Press, 2014, pp. 10.

<sup>24</sup> DOSTOEVSKY, *Demons*, cit. (n.14), pp. 616.

name of love and Christianity. In the world of *Demons*, without the possible outcome of Christianity, Shakespeare's *infinite jest* resonates with more hopeless tones.

The basic argument of the paper is thus the next hypothesis: Hamlet's and Stavrogin's identities are a paradoxical form of lacunas – a dynamized space structurally including both the positive assertion of something (to be) and its opposite (not to be). This dynamic of lacuna can be formulated in a phrase *everything and nothing*, meaning that their identity is emptied and hollow, they are nobody, but, at the same time, they function as supplements in whom the other (characters, readers, critics) can inscribe and stabilize (any) meaning – they can be everything. Understanding Hamlet's and Stavrogin's discursive identities as a lacuna denotes any interpretative method that aims to reduce the meaning to one privileged truth. Characters' quest for identity is one of the main themes of both the play and the novel. Both Hamlet and Stavrogin go through phases of exploration of different identity possibilities under the mask of madness, only to understand them as impossibilities, and are obsessed with creating, controlling, and obtaining their autonomous selves only to constantly experience themselves as alienated. The urge to resolve the mystery of these characters becomes further pointless in the scope of a rationalistic logic because their identities are constructed as a paradox. Hamlet's and Stavrogin's identities are dynamic, polycentric; they can only be rendered through language and re-interpreted through acts of writing and reading.

Hamlet and Stavrogin are charismatic and seductive enigmas, existing on the limits of interpretation. Their identities are in the form of a Mobius strip, flowing from everything to nothing, and backwards; from performing numerous contradictory roles to having no identity, from a lacuna that is an empty space, to a subject created in the interpretation of others. Both identities are created between freedom and a decision about what to be. This shows the quality of undecidability between two opposites that mutually cancel one another but exist simultaneously. Both depict that a decision that will define one's identity cannot be a rational one. It must be a product of madness, a leap of faith, or an act of love. It involves a leap beyond logic, maybe even beyond *logos*.

While these ways of interpreting *Hamlet* are nothing new, I aimed to connect this specific branch in criticism with Dostoevsky's interpretation of Hamlet, connecting it with the aspects that we can trace in Stavrogin. By doing this, space is opened for new considerations of reading Stavrogin and *Demons* in dialogue with the vast criticism of Shakespeare's play and the character of Hamlet.