

# THE AMBIVALENCE OF STAVROGIN:

## Benjamin's reading of Dostoevsky's character as a precursor of Surrealism

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### Abstract

This paper will address the problem of Stavrogin's ambivalence and Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Dostoevsky's hero in the essay *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*. Stavrogin is characterized by radical ambivalence, embodying the ultimate contradiction between the evil depicted in the crime of violating a child, and the utopic dream of the Golden Age. Benjamin sees Stavrogin as a precursor of surrealism and uses him to justify evil in the revolutionary practice.

The first objective is to analyse Benjamin's essay, to elaborate on how he understands surrealism and why he sees Stavrogin as its predecessor. Further on, I will try to grasp what are the aesthetic and thematic implications of Benjamin's reading and why in his concept of Stavrogin images and language precede the self and meaning. In the end, I propose that Benjamin's Stavrogin opens other paths for understanding both Dostoevsky's writing and *Demons* from the perspective of pre-surrealist literary techniques and poetics.

**Keywords:** *Stavrogin, Dostoevsky, Demons, ambivalence, Walter Benjamin, surrealism*

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“A poet is not an apostle; he drives out devils only by the power of the devil.”<sup>2</sup>

(Kierkegaard, 1983: 61)

Nikolay Stavrogin was regarded as an enigmatic character ever since *Demons* was first published in 1871. Dostoevsky's paradoxical protagonist leaves with a sense of a silent stare from the edge of a representational abyss, provoking ambivalent feelings. Walter Benjamin's remark that “Stavrogin is a Surrealist *avant la lettre*” lucidly illuminates this issue, calling for further consideration (Benjamin, 2005: 214). In his essay *Surrealism: Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*, Benjamin uses Stavrogin to justify evil in the revolutionary practice of Surrealists. He tries to demonstrate the need to dialectically incorporate intoxication with evil in the process of creation. In this paper, I will analyse Benjamin's reading to explore a possible new insight into “one of the most weirdly attractive creatures in world literature.”<sup>3</sup>

Walter Benjamin never wrote an extensive critique, or a text devoted solely to Dostoevsky. Nonetheless, in *Surrealism: Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*, Benjamin argues that Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Dostoevsky are predecessors of Surrealists and devotes a paragraph to

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<sup>2</sup> It is a biblical expression from Mark, 3:15–22.

<sup>3</sup> From Thomas Mann's 1945's preface to “The short novels of Dostoevsky”.

Stavrogin's confession. *Surrealism* was written in 1928 and published in 1929 in *Literarische Welt* as "a poetic, philosophic and political essay" expressing Benjamin's deep fascination with the movement (Löwy, 1996: 18). The first part of the essay reflects on the origins and poetics of surrealism. Later, he deals with surrealism's transformation into "poetic politics" by abandoning idealistic morality, examines conditions, and suggests methods for revolution (Benjamin, 2005: 216). His goal is to intoxicate the urge for a utopian revolution with poetry, to create a new future "in which action will finally become dreaming's sister". (Löwy, 1996: 22).

Surrealism ceases to be just another movement for Benjamin, but a new way of life infused with art. In such life, language and images take precedence over the meaning and the self, he claims. Image is a complicated epistemological and aesthetic concept in Benjamin's work. For this paper, I will use a broad definition of an image "as a potent force able to provide a frame of existential meaning" (Ross, 2015: 13). Benjamin doesn't connect an image with representation but with "a simultaneous, instantaneous cognition (Erkenntnis) or insight (Einsicht)" (Weigel, 2015: 344-45). The essence of a surrealist experience is what he calls *profane illumination*. "Like religious illumination, profane illumination captures the powers of spiritual intoxication to produce a "revelation," a vision or insight which transcends the prosaic state of empirical reality; yet it produces this vision in an immanent manner, while remaining within the bounds of possible experience, and without recourse to otherworldly dogmas." (Wolin, 1994: 132). These visions are also in function of inspiring emancipatory political practice. In his opinion, the idealistic morality of left-wing bourgeois emerges as the main enemy of the revolution. One of the crucial moments in Benjamin's essay, and pivotal for introducing Stavrogin, is his idea that some central features of surrealism should be understood only in contrast with this "sclerotic liberal moral-humanistic ideal of freedom" (Benjamin, 2005: 215). Namely, he introduces *the cult of evil* as a dialectical moment in overcoming naïve optimism. "One finds the cult of evil as a political device, however romantic – a device that can be used to disinfect and isolate against all moralizing dilettantism." (Ibid., 214). Even though it might seem that Benjamin is openly promoting violence, the meander of his thinking will lead us to different currents of ideas. At this moment, he reaches for Stavrogin's confession to illustrate why this 'justification of evil' expresses certain surrealist motives more powerfully than any of Surrealists. In his alchemic<sup>4</sup> manner, he neither analyses the novel nor the chapter in detail but gives a lucid insight into the significance of Dostoevsky's character.

"For Stavrogin is a Surrealist avant la lettre. No one else understood, as he did, how naive philistines are when they say that goodness, for all the manly virtue of those who practice it, is God-inspired, but that evil stems entirely from our spontaneity, and in it we are independent and self-sufficient beings. No one else saw inspiration, as he did, in even the most ignoble actions, and precisely in them. He considered vileness itself as something preformed, both in the course of the

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin on the difference between being a critic and a commentator of the text: "If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquiries into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced." (Benjamin, 2002: 298)

world and also in ourselves, to which we are disposed if not called, as the bourgeois idealist sees virtue. Dostoevsky's God created not only heaven and earth and man and beast, but also baseness, vengeance, cruelty. And here, too, he gave the devil no opportunity to meddle in his handiwork. That is why all these vices have a pristine vitality in his work; they are perhaps not "splendid," but eternally new, "as on the first day," separated by an infinity from the clichés through which sin is perceived by the philistine. "(Ibid: 214).

The most interesting part of this paragraph is the fact that God-inspired evil is confronted with the idealism of bourgeois, the theological dimension of evil transported on the level of political aspirations of Marxism, and the image of Stavrogin is used to reveal this contrast more deeply. Later, Benjamin enriches his reading of Stavrogin, through the letter of Count Lautréamont. Lautréamont tried to make *Maldoror*, poetic novel famous for depicting obese atrocities, seem more acceptable by bringing "...something new into this literature that, after all, sings of despair solely in order to depress the reader and thus make him long all the more intensely for goodness as a remedy. So that in the end one really sings only of goodness; but the method is more philosophical and less naive than that of the old school..." (Ibid: 214). In this way, naïve dilettantism, that turns its gaze away from evil, shall be purified and shall be, paradoxically, inspired to fight against the vice. Only in this manner, the radical concept of freedom surrealist possess might "win the energies of intoxication for the revolution" (Ibid: 215). The conditions for revolution, further, according to Benjamin, lie in the *organisation of pessimism*<sup>5</sup> – the complete mistrust into any optimism in regard to humanistic values and any type of reconciliation. The image of Stavrogin served to illuminate the issue.

But what about *Demons*? Is Benjamin true to it, or he creates an idiosyncratic interpretation that differs from the text? I argue that apart from the assertion that Stavrogin is a predecessor of surrealism, Benjamin gives neither an innovative nor a comprehensive reading. Nevertheless, this insight alone seems promising, if we consider all the rich density of the essay and try to read Stavrogin and Dostoevsky through its lens. In his characteristic manner of thinking-in-images, "that favors simultaneity and constellation over continuity, similitude over representation or sign, and the detail or fractionary (Bruchstück) over the whole", Benjamin gives a reductive and partial consideration of Stavrogin (Weigel, 2015: 345). Also, in highlighting the creative potential of Stavrogin's negativity, Benjamin differs from most thinkers. Both Western<sup>6</sup> and Russian critics<sup>7</sup>, having different perspectives or approaches, usually agree about Stavrogin's negativity, meaninglessness, void, criminality, depravity. On the other hand, some examples are highlighting his high-moral<sup>8</sup> or seeing him even as a negative Russian Faust.<sup>9</sup> However ambivalent these examples are, in the core of the majority of critical approaches to Stavrogin lies the idea of a coherent character, mimetically rendered in protocols of realist

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin takes this concept from Pierre Naville's essay *La révolution et les intellectuels*. "It goes without saying that he is not referring to a contemplative and fatalistic feeling, but to an active, practical and 'organized' pessimism that is totally dedicated to preventing, by all means possible, the advent of the worst." (Löwy, 1996: 20)

<sup>6</sup> See Dostoevsky's *The Devils: A Critical Companion* for the selection of the most important bibliography of *Demons*.

<sup>7</sup> See Gogina for a critical preview of Russian scholarship on Stavrogin, p. 89-118.

<sup>8</sup> See Saraskina, p. 310-13.

<sup>9</sup> See Ivanov, *Dostojevskij i roman tragedija. Ekskurs: Osnovnoj mif v romane Besy*.

fiction. The furthest step is to see him as a character on the limit of interpretation, as a non-character based on misinterpretation (Leatherbarrow, 2000: 15). Russian authors<sup>10</sup> are usually more concerned with the ontological rootlessness of Stavrogin's being in the scope of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Most of them have in common treating Stavrogin as a philosophical or religious concept, neglecting his fictionality and aesthetic principles to which he is bound. From the physical description to metaphysical levels, Stavrogin contains paradoxical elements that inspire ambivalent sensations. But what if this ambivalence lacks proper context. What if his attractiveness lies somewhere beyond or before language?

Benjamin's comparison to surrealism could provide with a new feature: treating Stavrogin from a perspective beyond the representation of the self and beyond meaning. Not as a character from a realist novel (not even as an idea-character in Bakhtin's sense), but as a surrealist image in the way Benjamin understands it. This paper suggests it might open a new perspective on Dostoevsky's poetic and characterology, and particularly on creating Stavrogin, a hero that in its radical paradoxicality stands out from any other Dostoevsky made. Dostoevsky's famous note to himself that *Stavrogin is everything* reveals a haunting image he tried to convey through language. His way of creating Stavrogin resembles a surrealist collage.<sup>11</sup> Stavrogin is compiled of a long list of literary heroes or historical figures appearing like allusions or subtexts – from Shakespeare's Prince Harry and Hamlet, Byron, Pushkin's Onegin and Boris Godunov, Lermontov's Pechorin, Rousseau, Grigorij (Grishka) Otrep'ev<sup>12</sup>, a vampiric hero from Ann Radcliff's gothic novels, Dickens's Steerforth, Bakunin, Nikolay Speshnyov<sup>13</sup>. Those two arguments, Stavrogin being compared to an image and a collage of quotations, may be extracted on the level of aesthetics.

On the level of represented ideas, on the other hand, *Surrealism* shares with *Demons* some similar problems. We find the following problematised in both: role of European/Europeanised intelligentsia, revolution and role of pessimism/nihilism, need for a spiritual kernel, or re-enchantment of the world, and the utopian dream of paradise lost. "Stavrogin has attained the consciousness of his own existential situation, a sharp, ruthless self-knowledge, constituting a source of constant torment, for it is connected with the desire for changes which, rooted elsewhere that in the depths of the soul, cannot be fulfilled." (Gessen, as quoted in Mazurek, 2010: 46). Dostoevsky pictures vivisection of a need in Stavrogin inflicted at a very early age by Stepan Trofimovich, an urge for "sacred anguish which the chosen soul, having once tasted and known it, will never exchange for any cheap satisfaction." (*Demons*, 2006: 41). Evil is Stavrogin's tool to come to the point of spiritual intoxication. "Every extremely shameful, immeasurably humiliating, mean, and above all, ridiculous position I have

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<sup>10</sup> See especially Russian religious thinkers of the twentieth century: N. Berdjajev, S. Bulgakov, S.I. Gessen, V. Ivanov, N.O. Losskij.

<sup>11</sup> "The literary reader, on the other hand, alert above else to the fictionality of Stavrogin, will recognize that he is a highly 'artificial' character, ectoplasm summoned up from the European literary tradition and trailing clouds of literary allusion." (Leatherbarrow, 2000: 14).

<sup>12</sup> A historical figure, impostor and the false tsar Dimitrij (1605-6) who claimed to be Ivan's son until recognized as a defrocked monk. Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* is based on these events.

<sup>13</sup> Russian aristocrat, Dostoevsky's acquaintance, held to be one of the prototypes for Stavrogin.

happened to get into in my life has always aroused in me, along with boundless wrath, an unbelievable pleasure...If I was stealing something, I would feel, while committing the theft, *intoxication from the awareness of the depth of my meanness*. It was not meanness that I loved (here my *reason is completely sound*), but I liked the *intoxication from the tormenting awareness* of my baseness.” (my italics, Ibid., 693). Benjamin recognized it and its extremely modern, surrealist level. Nonetheless, in the scope of the whole novel, Dostoevsky goes further in showing that this need itself becomes deplete and incapable of producing any inspiration. “I’m capable now as ever before of wishing to do a good deed, and I take pleasure in that; along with it, I wish for evil and also feel pleasure in it. But both the one and the other are too shallow, and never are very much” (Ibid., 675). Not enough to inspire any action, trapped in a spiritual torpor of acedia. As a character, if bound to the logic of Dostoevsky’s text and poetic, Stavrogin doesn’t completely fit into Benjamin’s reading of justifying evil in the name of creation. Nevertheless, I argue that Benjamin illuminates in Stavrogin symptoms of his radical ambivalence that is slowly breaking and cracking the layers of realism. Benjamin’s reading of Stavrogin warns about the need to critically disinfect our perspective.

The document of Stavrogin’s confession, coming from “the need of a mortally wounded heart” as Tikhon observes (Ibid., 706), depicts both Stavrogin’s seduction of a girl that leads to her suicide by hanging and his dream of Europe’s Golden Age. I would like to highlight two ambivalent aspects that cast a nuance of evil where it isn’t usually considered. Firstly, in the scene of Stavrogin’s seduction of Matryosha, the narrator clearly and repeatedly indicates something that even astonishes the hero: “her crooked smile”, “kissing me terribly” and “admiration unpleasant in such a tiny child”. (Ibid., 696). Also, Claude Lorraine’s painting that Stavrogin dreams, *Acis and Galatea*, contains a violent element that denies its idyllic paradise. Namely, two lovers are in the front in the picture, but in the back, is the giant Polyphemus that later kills Acis out of jealousy. Both images deepen the ambivalent chasm and complicate further meaning. But both depict deep layers of ambivalence that deny the idealistic vision of innocence and harmony. To both images, Stavrogin is the witness that doesn’t allow the ambivalence, eternally new, to be disregarded. His sharp, ruthless knowledge and self-knowledge is a product of this.

Benjamin’s Stavrogin can represent the symbol of the “human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds” from the end of his essay that warns about the need for wakefulness. (Benjamin, 2005: 218). Image of Stavrogin, if read like this, also corresponds to the novel’s epitaph about the devils that got out from a man into the Gerasene swine that consequently jumped into the water, leaving that man healed by Jesus’s side. Similarly, as Benjamin is describing the surrealists, Dostoevsky is driving out the devil only by the power of the devil, as suggested by Kierkegaard.

To conclude, in this paper I tried to propose that Benjamin’s Stavrogin is a creation that opens other paths for understanding both Dostoevsky’s writing and *Demons* from the perspective of pre-surrealist literary techniques and poetics, in which images and language precede meaning and the self. Fully examining and testing this claim would demand another, much longer consideration of the issue.

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