Frappes and Philosophers

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Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
I’m sure you’ve heard the whole “found manuscript” routine before, and sure, it’s trite as anything. But this time I assure you I have the genuine article. Surely you don’t think I would write something like this. I saw an old notebook that someone forgot at a bus station and found this in it. Anyway, thought I would pass it along to you. Heard you’ve been looking for something vague and heady to publish so that people would take the firm seriously. Purple prose sells, but it won’t win you any book awards.

Took the liberty of researching and compiling a list of some of the references in here. Might be useful as an appendix. Eggheads love appendixes.

Regards,

Garalyn S. Desborn
So, you gotta picture it like this: there I am, right, at this café in Turin, drinkin’ quite possibly the saddest cup of coffee in the ‘ole history o’ man. It’s me last day in Italy an’ I’m lookin’ to

1 We are introduced to the first of three different narrators, a bumbling ignoramus with a thick accent that our author has rendered exactingly, if not wholly accurately, in the prose. Although it is not immediately clear who this man or, more especially, his companions are, we eventually discover that this story relates a conversation between two characters who are clearly supposed to be Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher who famously proclaimed that “God is dead,” and Fyodor Dostoevsky, the Russian novelist who inflicted *Crime and Punishment* upon high school English classes. In this sense, it reminds me vaguely of a play I saw once by Tom Stoppard. I forget the title, which is an absolute travesty. Our first narrator, however, is a development of a different fictional character rather than a fictional version of a historical person. As we eventually learn, he is the Last Man, a thought experiment put forth by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in an attempt to articulate what would become of humanity if it stopped trying to improve itself (“overcome,” in his words). No longer thinking critically or questioning its assumptions, humanity stagnates and becomes mired in a complacency it cannot move beyond. The “Last Man” appears because humanity is so stagnated that it cannot develop further; “last man” really means something more like “last version of man.” Personally, I think that he is the last man because he would be unable to reproduce – he is so revolting and stupid that no one would ever sleep with him. But maybe that is beside the point. Our author makes a point of illustrating the deliberate, conscious ignorance of the Last Man so as to hint at his identity before finally revealing it at the end of the narrative.

2 Those familiar with Nietzsche’s biography (if anyone is!) should recognize this important clue. The historical Nietzsche, after lifelong illness, suffered a mental breakdown on the streets of Tu-
have a little fun. But this girl I was with, a Miss Anne Akron, is, um, well, she gone off shop-
pin’, leavin’ me all by me lonesome with naught in the way o’ company but this tragic brew an’ a book about gardenin’ by some Jorge Borges. Well, that an’ the tweaker at the next table, who’s goin’ on about meth an’ psychosis. Figure ‘e got ‘is fix from the local shrink.

rin in January of 1889. Mention of this location, along with Dostoevsky’s naming of the month, reveals to us that the story will end with Nietzsche’s descent into madness.

Reading the text aloud reveals the first of several rather bad puns. An anachronism is, of course, something that belongs to a different time. The reference, however veiled, is appropriate, as the real Dostoevsky and Nietzsche never met, Dostoevsky having died several years prior to Nietzsche’s breakdown and the events of this story. His presence in this narrative is, thus, an anachronism.

Jorge Borges (I learned) was an author, not a gardener, and is known for being notoriously difficult to read. One of his most famous books, and the one which the Last Man is apparently reading, is The Garden of Forking Paths, a short story collection. The titular story, from what I can tell, is not about gardens or forks at all, but rather about a fictitious novel that describes the different possible outcomes of the choices its characters make. And here I had always thought that Choose Your Own Adventure novels were such an original idea. Supposedly Borges’ (Borges’s?) intention in the novel was to suggest a different understanding of time and reality, in which all of these different outcomes do in fact happen, just not in the reality we experience. The Last Man, in characteristic fashion, does not grasp this outlandish concept that would force him to reexamine his beliefs about the world. In this case, however, I think we can excuse him. Our author’s intention with this reference is to suggest the possibility that, even though Nietzsche and Dostoevsky did not meet in our universe, they may have met in another.
Anyways, I’m tryin’ to read when these two blokes wander over to me table. Says their names is Fred an’ Ted. Fred’s got a beet of zee German akksen, ja, an’ a moustache like you wouldn’t believe. Ted’s Russian, like, the kind that thinks a balanced diet is a shot o’ vodka in each ‘and. ‘E’s got these beady little eyes, and more hair on his chin than ‘e’s got on ‘is ‘ead. I figure Fred’s ‘alf-blind, cuz ‘e didn’t even see me till ‘e ‘ad already sat down cross from me. ‘E makes some quick apology in French or somethin’ an’ asks if zee Englishman vood mind if zey sat with ‘im.

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5 Another bad pun, this time on metempsychosis, an obscure word having roughly the same meaning as reincarnation. Our author employs this archaic term to suggest another possibility: maybe “Fred” and “Ted” (or Friedrich and Fyodor) are not Nietzsche and Dostoevsky at all, but rather literary or literal reincarnations of them, characters who share their ideas and ultimately their fates. I’m not sure why he (I assume?) bothered. The evidence is pretty clear that these characters are, in fact, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche.

6 Fred, obviously, is Friedrich Nietzsche. Ted is Fyodor Dostoevsky, the Russian Fyodor being the same as the English Theodore in the same way that Pyotr is Peter and Ivan is John. I am not enough of a linguist to speculate how Russians get an f and a y from a t and an h. But then, the Cyrillic alphabet is very foreign to me. My first thought on seeing a sample of it was that a dyslexic person had tried to write a capital letter R.

7 For how pathologically ignorant he is, the Last Man is very perceptive about physical appearances. Nietzsche, indeed, had an enormous and almost clownish moustache that, for me at least, makes it difficult to take him seriously.

8 Nietzsche was, by this point in his life, very nearsighted as his physical health continued to decline. Perhaps we can explain his facial hair by the fact that he could not see himself in a mirror.
They ordered whatever tasteless concoction I ‘ad an’ introduced themselves proper-like. Fred used to be a professor. ‘Is degree was in classical philandery. These days ‘e travels for ‘is ‘ealth an’ does a lot of writin’. Ted says ‘e’s a writer too, in Russian, but ‘is works are appearin’ in English in a gem of a translation. So I tells them me name, an’ says I’m in Italy on holiday. Fred immediately wants to know if I been seein’ all the sights an’ starts tellin’ me all about ‘is favourite paintin’s an’ the like. I listen so as to be polite. Ted’s more interested in the book. I says ‘e can keep it. Can’t make anything of it.

They get their drinks, an’ all of a sudden it’s like I’m not even there. Fred starts on about das toy evskee, some long-lost plaything o’ ‘is childhood, an’ Ted says somethin about this

9 Nietzsche was a professor of classical philology. Philandery is a fancy word for adultery. Puns on this word are not unique here. In the case of Nietzsche, it is ironic given his ascetic lifestyle.

10 Our author has made another pun, this time on the surname of Constance Garnett, who first translated Dostoevsky’s works into English in the early twentieth century. A garnet is a semi-precious stone. I only know this because the editions of Dostoevsky’s works at the bookstore where I am working (the library is closed and, besides, doesn’t sell coffee) attributes her as the translator prominently on the front cover.

11 This line is key to our understanding of the Last Man. Not only is he incapable of comprehending Borges’s story and its claims about reality, he is also unwilling to continue studying the text in an effort to glean something from it. While we might excuse ignorance if a researcher is rushed and has only limited access to reference materials, this ignorance from laziness is another thing entirely, and something for which Nietzsche (as well as our author) has little but contempt.

12 “Das” is a German article, a toy is a toy, and an evskee is our author’s invention. Read aloud, however, they provide another clue to the real identity of Ted.
bloke rascal Nick of,\textsuperscript{13} though of what I ‘aven’t the faintest. Naturally I’m getting to be a mite bothered with these two. If they gonna sit with me, they ought at least talk with me, right? So when Ted says somethin’ about this Underground man, I tells him that I ride it almost every day so I’m a bit of an Underground man meself.\textsuperscript{14}

Then Fred an’ Ted looks at me real strange-like.

\textsuperscript{13} The Last Man’s phonetic transcription (and misunderstanding) of Raskolnikov, the protagonist of \textit{Crime and Punishment}. Raskolnikov believes that he is superior to ordinary men and that his superiority gives him the right to commit acts unthinkable to the average person. Believing that he could do more good with the wealth of a miserly old woman than she is doing, Raskolnikov murders her and attempts (unsuccessfully) to steal her money. Although the evidence does not incriminate him, Raskolnikov’s guilt eventually drives him to turn himself in. Raskolnikov’s belief in his own superiority and his right to circumvent ordinary morality sound like the characteristics of Nietzsche’s superman, who is not a comic book character but rather a strong-willed individual who challenges the assumptions of society. Nietzsche, however, would not advocate violent action of the sort Raskolnikov takes in the process of overcoming, which he sees as more of an intellectual exercise. Raskolnikov is, perhaps, an overcomer gone horribly wrong.

\textsuperscript{14} The Underground Man is the unnamed narrator of Dostoevsky’s novella \textit{Notes From Underground}, which Nietzsche read and appears to have enjoyed given how highly he speaks of Dostoevsky afterwards in his writings. Like the Last Man, the Underground Man distorts his perception of his reality so as to complement his beliefs about his life. Unlike the Last Man, he contrives these details so as to make his life miserable rather than happy.
I am a tired man… I am a spiteful man. I am a ridiculous man. But I can say with no small satisfaction that there is one more ridiculous than I.

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15 In the longest of the four sections, Dostoevsky narrates the conversation between himself and Nietzsche. Stylistically, our author appears to have attempted to imitate the Garnett translations. The conversation focuses on Nietzsche and Dostoevsky’s different understandings of nihilism. Nihilism, to Dostoevsky, was a political movement gaining disturbing momentum during his lifetime that advocated abolishing the traditional institutions of Russia but which did not propose any new institutions to replace them. Dostoevsky sharply criticizes this sort of anarchism in his novel The Possessed. To Nietzsche, however, nihilism is a broader attitude of disinterest towards life, and he faults Christianity (!) with propagating it by teaching followers to deny themselves the full experience of life in expectation of an otherworldly reward for their sacrifice. Clearly, Nietzsche has a very shallow understanding of Christianity. The introductions to the editions of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche’s works for sale at this bookstore are very informative.

16 Our author, in an effort to quickly establish Dostoevsky as our new narrator, parodies the opening lines to two of his novellas. He combines “I am a sick man … I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man,” which opens Notes from Underground, with “I am a ridiculous man,” which opens Dream of a Ridiculous Man. It is strange that our author connects Dostoevsky with the Underground Man; the connection already made between the Last Man and the Underground Man, who both distort their reality to match their agenda, seems a much stronger one. I suspect that this is simply for comedic effect and, again, to help us to quickly recognize Dostoevsky. But if this is the case, why choose such obscure works? Whoever wrote this, I think, wanted to make my job of annotating difficult…
I know not what truly surprised me more: the ignorance of this Englishman, or my own surprise at his ignorance. In either case, I quickly surmised that his was not the sort of company that I would enjoy keeping, and I was tempted to hurriedly finish my refreshment and excuse myself, though I could think of no engagement that would warrant such an abrupt departure. Friedrich, however, seemed more intrigued than perturbed by our new companion, and showed neither my frustration nor my eagerness to depart. It had been some time since our last meeting, and as it had been only chance that had brought us together that morning, I anticipated an equally long interval before we, in our eccentric wanderings, would again cross paths. For that reason alone, I decided to remain. It is well, I consider now, that I did, for it would be the last time that I would see my friend. How it has all ended! What it has ended in! But more of that later. It would be wrong of me to anticipate the outcome of our meeting and cast its dark shadow over

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17 Once again I am indebted to an introduction. According to this edition of Thus Spoke Zarthahustra, printer check spelling, the Last Man is a parody of English Utilitarianism, which explains his nationality in this story. I’m not sure that I am convinced by that argument, but our author clearly had it in mind.

18 Our author uses an archaic definition of eccentric, meaning having different centers (the opposite of concentric). However, the regular definition, suggesting that Dostoevsky and Nietzsche are somewhat mentally unhinged, might also be appropriate based on what I can glean from their biographies.

19 This is an almost direct quotation from Dostoevsky’s novella of chivalry, White Knights, which I happened upon before a nosy store manager asked me if I wasn’t going to make a purchase. It wasn’t as though I was loitering; I had already bought a cup of coffee, which, I might add, was rather bad.
the whole of our exchange. If nothing else, Friedrich taught me that the greatest feat, in art and in life, is to stay cheerful even when faced with a gloomy and responsible task.20

It was a cold, rainy January day,21 and I can give no explanation for the crowd on the verandah of the café. Rainwater puddled in the depressions in the street, faithfully reflecting the dreary skies above them and the unwelcoming edifices of brick and stone along the road, the image marred only when the ripples from a falling drop spread across the mirrored buildings, distorting the reflections into haunting shapes. But then a hansom would pass, one of its wheels catching for a moment in the rut and sending a splash across the cobble, and the image would be gone. The transience of the perception, the immutability of the perceived: note for a novel.22

“If ignorance is bliss,” I murmured to Friedrich, “We must in the presence of the happiest man alive.”

Friedrich stifled his amusement. “Come now, Fyodor, you cannot expect this gentleman to be familiar with your work before it has been published in a language he can read.”

“What he not speak French?”

20 Curious readers will find this statement has been reproduced almost verbatim from the opening of Nietzsche’s Twilight of the Idols, one of the last books he completed before his mental collapse. Seems like good advice.

21 Dostoevsky confirms the month of Nietzsche’s collapse.

22 I would like to be able to tell the reader to which Dostoevsky novel our author here refers. Unfortunately, the unsympathetic store manager has asked me to leave, and I no longer have access to Dostoevsky’s complete works. It is possible, however, that our author did not intend to make direct reference to a novel that exists in the Dostoevsky canon, as he suggests that Dostoevsky is, in his extended life, continuing to write.
“What do you think? He barely has command of his own language.”

“There is no excuse for a cultured European to speak only one language.”

“I may be wrong, but I do not think that our new friend fits that description. Never mind him, Fyodor. Tell me about this book you are writing.”

Knowing Friedrich was dependent upon French editions of my works, I was unsure how to respond to his request. My last work had not yet been translated from the Russian, and I could not explain to him my artistic project in my newest novel, its sequel, without providing him with some background knowledge.23

“I worry that I may spoil an ending for you, as its prequel has not yet appeared in translation. My next tale begins many years after Mitya’s trial,” I began to explain, more audibly than before. I was interrupted, however, as this description had attracted the attention of our companion, who until then had been content to absentmindedly stare into the distance. “So you write crime novels,” he surmised.

“I suppose, after a fashion,” I explained reluctantly, forgetting for the moment my intentions of outlining Alyosha’s development as the full significance of his father’s murder and his

23 Historically, Dostoevsky’s last finished novel was *The Brothers Karamazov*, which, fortunately, is available as a free ebook. Dostoevsky hints in his own introduction that this novel, widely regarded as his best, was only supposed to set up the characters for another, still greater novel which he never completed in his lifetime. Perhaps he should have spent more time working on *The Brothers Karamazov II* than writing in his journal, which I also saw at the bookstore but, owing to its intimidating size, did not peruse. Our author does not attempt to write Dostoevsky’s unfinished masterpiece for him, but does hint that its purpose is to show the development and perhaps growing cynicism of its naively optimistic protagonist.
conversations with Ivan impressed themselves upon his mind. “However, my interest is in the psychological effect of the crime upon the criminal, not in a hunt for the clues that prove his guilt.”

He looked disappointed. “Well, where’s the story in that?”

I had no answer to this direct, however impertinent, query, and glanced to Friedrich for help. “Some of Fyodor’s novels have very little ‘story’ to them at all, in the sense of a complex plot underpinning the narrative,” he admitted. “His primary focus, and what I find interesting in his works, is his meticulous character development on a psychological level.”

Although this answer did not seem to satisfy our companion, I thought it a fair assessment, and added in my turn, “No character’s actions are believable if we do not know the workings of his mind. Take a Myshkin for example. We cannot understand why he would choose to marry the woman he pities rather than the woman he loves if we do not understand his overwhelming compassion.”

“Some of us cannot understand it even then,” Friedrich grumbled. “Myshkin is an idiot. His choice is a greater crime than any Raskolnikov commits, and it is the reader, not the criminal, who suffers the punishment for this fell deed.”

“A critic in our midst, to join the philistine,” I returned.

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24 How many people have asked this?

25 Prince Myshkin is the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s earlier novel *The Idiot*. Based on the plot summaries that I could find, Nietzsche gives a pretty good description of the action (or, to be more precise, the utter lack thereof).
“Phyllis who?” asked our befuddled companion, blinking in excitement.²⁶

“Your protagonist,” Friedrich continued with no regard to the interruption, “acted as he felt compelled by the system of morality in which he is ensnared. Myshkin’s compulsion to compassion forces him to deny himself happiness in life with some vague intention of being helpful to others. Of course, judging by the grim fates of everyone around him, he falls rather short of this goal, does he not?”

“He must,” I returned, “in a world that does not abide by his morals.”

“He must,” Friedrich shot back with a smirk, “if he abides by morals that he does not understand. They are not even his own morals, but morals he has inherited from Christianity. If your Myshkin thought critically about the morality that guides him, he would realize that his compassion helps no one. The objects of his pity are none the better for his sympathies. After all, Nastasya still dies at the hands of Rogozhin, and his vain, ill-conceived effort to ‘save’ her is disastrous to himself and Aglaia.”

“I would think you would at least admire Myshkin for holding himself to a morality different from that of those around him.”

Friedrich sipped tentatively at his refreshment, bits of foam clinging to his moustache.

“Yes, Fyodor, but Myshkin has looked back to the morality of the past for his model, to the morality of denial and pity that has stagnated the progress of civilization for centuries. One does not overcome modernity by regressing to medievalism. Always one must be looking forward!”

²⁶ The Last Man blinks in Thus Spoke Zarathustra as well, as his method of ignoring anything that would force him to re-examine his understanding of the world, that complicates the “happiness” that he has created.
“Yes, but to what future? When you have finished your ‘Transvaluation of All Values,’ what then? Are we to live in a world of the selfish, whose only concern is to satisfy their whims?”

“Not whims, Fyodor. Being an overcomer is not about changing or questioning the world we see and how we interact with it as a matter of choice or of mere fancy. To overcome a system of constructs that is stagnating human progress is every bit as necessary as the more pedestrian activities of eating and breathing that keep us alive. For, if we do not seek to overcome these constructs, humanity will die. Perhaps not in the sense that our bodies will perish, but our drive to create, our eagerness to find beauty in art and in the world around us, all that makes us more than ignorant and clumsy herd animals all that makes us, in a word, human, will be extinguished. Whims play no role. Instead, we are to live in a world of the self-actuated, whose only concern is to understand themselves, their motivations, their perceptions, and their reality.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“You disagree with the merits of my project?” Friedrich asked in genuine concern, a pouting frown barely distinguishable behind the moustache that largely obscured his face.

“No, but I am skeptical about its practicality. The educated and the wealthy can spend their days thinking these great thoughts of yours, but what about the average person?”

“You cannot criticize me for writing books that are inaccessible to the common reader. If the peasants and the workers have not the time or the energy after their labors to think critically about their motivations and their surroundings, then neither do they have time or energy enough to peruse one of your ponderous tomes.”

“True.”
“Besides, the average person is not my audience. My audience is yet to come: future readers, removed in space and time from the modern world that I criticize.\textsuperscript{27} It takes, perhaps, an overcomer to understand me. Could the blithely ignorant, consciously close-minded, quintessentially modern man possibly see around him the failings of contemporary culture and of the society in which he participates? Could he see the world as I see it?”

“Why not ask him?” I inclined my head in the direction of our now-sleeping companion, who had begun to salivate most uncouthly from his half-opened mouth.

“Perhaps there are alive today some like yourself who could understand me... some who have understood Zarathustra... For now, though, it seems that I write for the very few.”

“As your sales would indicate,” I jested.

“I am the philosopher, Fyodor; you, the pragmatist, in life and in art.”

“I thought I was the psychologist.”

“The two, perhaps, are not mutually exclusive. But what I mean really is that in your work you always concern yourself with the political ramifications of an idea. Consider your nihilists Stavrogin and Verhovensky.”

\textsuperscript{27} Nietzsche believed that his contemporaries would not be capable of understanding or appreciating his criticisms of culture because they were active participants in the institutions that he thought were, essentially, brainwashing them into submission and obedience. But now, over a century later, in a culture that encourages critical thinking (perhaps over-encourages it?), we can probably safely say that we have “overcome” the culture and society that Nietzsche criticizes. With the benefit of our hindsight, we can clearly see the adverse effects of the modernity to which he objects, and we can see the validity of some of his arguments. \textit{We are Nietzsche’s “future readers.”}
“What’s a Nile east?” asked our companion, rousing momentarily from sleep, “and are there Nile wests?”

I ignored his interjection as he returned to his slumber. “What of them?”

“Well, you would agree that they are nihilists?”

“Yes.”

“How would you summarize their brand of nihilism?”

“They are revolutionaries. Dissatisfied with the institutions and government of Russia, they seek to overthrow them, but their schemes do not include any plans for what new institutions they will erect to replace what they will tear down.”

“So, they are anarchists, abhorrent of tradition.”

“Yes, in few words.”

“This is a strictly political nihilism, and is but a symptom of a larger disease. A Stavrogin or a Verhovensky refuses to acknowledge the value of the sociopolitical constructs against which he rebels, or indeed of any such constructs. If he did, he would recognize the necessity of these institutions to the stability of the modern culture state – incidentally, something else for which he has no regard – and would be just as interested in establishing a new set of traditions, ones that will validate his revolution, as he is in dismantling the current traditions that repress him.”

“You call this understanding of nihilism limited, but I assure you that my aim in the novel is to represent a very real class of agitator in modern Russia.”

“I have every confidence that your portrayal is accurate. But there is another brand of nihilist in Europe, no less real than the anarchists you describe. A nihilist in the truest sense has
found everything around him in life, including perhaps even his life itself, to be utterly pointless.”

“That is pessimism.”

“No, it is a step beyond pessimism.” The modern pessimist derides only the follies, as he sees them, of the modern world. It takes a nihilist to make the greater claim that the world itself, at any period in its history or its future, is without value. It is the nihilist who denies the worth not only of the human society around him, but also of the reality in which he exists, of its existence, and of his own existence within it.”

“Show me such a man, Friedrich, if he is real!” I scoffed. “Who would deny the existence of our reality, and who would further deny its value?”

“But what is our reality? We, of course, do not experience it, only our perceptions and assumptions about it, neither of which are particularly reliable. The healthy human mind accepts that we experience the world through our senses, and remains alert lest they lead it astray. The unhealthy mind of the nihilist claims that simply because it cannot know reality outside of its own experience, no objective reality can exist. Or, at the very least, if there is such a reality, its existence is irrelevant because any experience of it must be subjective. Because we cannot perceive our world as it is, so they say, because Truth cannot be known, that Truth is utterly worthless.”

“But who would believe that there is no Truth, or that Truth only has importance insofar as we can experience it?”

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28 Pessimism was a school of thought developed by Schopenhauer, whose ideas initially interested Nietzsche but which he eventually rejected, believing, as he suggests here, that it was conducive to the development of nihilism.
“Just as dangerous are those who believe that Truth must exist, but that it must exist outside of our world. These are the most common of the breeds of nihilists, and perhaps the most revolting. They despise their lives and the world around them because they believe that they impede their experience of a reality more true than our own.”

“Who are these nihilists?”

“Look to the Cathedral, for that is their lair. It is the brood of the sick, domestic animal that is modern man, of the swinish modern German, where he wallows in his complacence and self-abnegation. Luther sought to build a church, but the best he could manage was a sty. Western Christianity demands that its followers renounce the world, indeed their very lives, in hopes of achieving something outside of our reality. It teaches that our lives in this world, this living, breathing world, are but a prelude to an eternal life in a different, spiritual realm and that it is the spiritual world, not the material world of our daily experience, that is real. Were we to look for a

29 I suppose it was inevitable that Nietzsche would eventually begin to spout some of his simplistic and wholly unfounded criticisms of Christianity. His conclusions are as weak as the method he uses to reach them. In Nietzsche’s writing you will find plenty of bombastic language, but never a simple logical proof of what he is saying. Similarly, he never criticizes a realistic version of Christianity; instead, he sets up a caricature, a “straw man” version of religion that collapses before even his feeble arguments. Nietzsche contends that a belief in heavenly reward for a life obedient to God’s plan for us is nihilistic, because we ignore the value of the life we are currently living. This is simply not the case. After all, we are called to live in this world, even if we are not of it. Further, our actions in life are important; if we, thinking only of the temptations of this world, give in to a life of sin, death and Hell will be our recompense. We must have faith in this world in order to attain our reward.
nihilist in your work, Fyodor, we should find that Myshkin is a better example than any of Stavrogin and Verhovensky’s anarchist conspirators.”

I meant to protest, but Friedrich interrupted me. “Myshkin consistently, pathologically, makes choices contrary to his best interests and his full enjoyment in this life in this reality. He gives away most of his fortune and he spurns the woman who loves him. Why? Because Myshkin is a caricature of Christian morality, a morality that denies fulfillment in this life in expectation of otherworldly reward.”

“Myshkin is not, strictly speaking, typically Christian,” I managed feebly at last. 30

“Regardless, his morality is, as are the mores of many other Europeans less theistic than he. Belief in God is dead. 31 At new altars of art and science, the prophets of modernity have exploded two thousand years of theology. 32 Yet as we reject the belief systems of Christianity, we

30 Myshkin is, however, a Christ-like figure in that he demonstrates boundless love and compassion for those around him, even as they take advantage of his empathy. Is Dostoevsky, however obliquely, denying Christ?

31 A reworking of Nietzsche’s famous assertion in Thus Spoke Zarathustra; the reason that our author weakens the assertion by saying only that belief has died, rather than God himself, is unclear to me. At any rate, happily, Nietzsche’s claim is no less true in this story or in our contemporary world than it was when he wrote those words over a century ago. Both God, and our belief in him, are alive and well.

32 Even in the midst of his blatant rebellion against God, Nietzsche makes some very incisive criticisms of his culture, which remain just as true today. Rather than placing its trust in God, our culture places its trust in its new god science, and blindly dismisses biblical truth on the basis of some shoddy research and inconclusive data resulting from studies which, it bears noting, are
cling ever more desperately to the morality it has bestowed upon Western culture, a sole lifeline to our past. We are losing our hope in the otherworldly, but instead of joyously looking to our own daily reality for meaning and purpose, the nihilists of today persist in glumly asserting that the world around us is void.”

Friedrich’s line of argument concerned me. Perhaps he was right. It could be that one who lives always for his eternal life risks forgetting to live to the fullest the life that he already has. But I was naturally resistant to his claims. Though his experiences, and his criticisms, were of Western Christianity, and not my own Orthodox traditions, I felt compelled to make some defense. Our snoring companion, certainly, would not. “But what, Friedrich, would you say of those who retain their faith in God? Surely one would be overgeneralizing if he asserted that all Christians are by necessity nihilists, even if Christianity as a worldview is conducive to nihilism?”

“It is not only conducive to nihilism, it engenders it. At its most basic level, Christianity fixates on the otherworldly. I will grant that a practicing Christian is not a hypocrite, for he at least still believes in the worldview on which his morality is founded, but that morality, and perhaps more especially the worldview that it has inherited from the deceiving oaf Socrates, is still inherently nihilistic.”

“Are they, though? You reduce Christianity to an expectation of otherworldly reward for life-denying behavior. Perhaps that is how you see it. Perhaps that is how you have experienced

invariably funded by non-Christian organizations that are clearly conspiring against God’s will.

And modern art and culture? Surely such wanton depravity and promiscuity was unknown at the most licentious bacchanals.
it. But I see it as a constant search for Truth, and as a calling to help others in their own searches. You would fault the Christian who denies himself the full experience of his life, or the lives of others, because he acts with pity towards those less fortunate.”

“Yes. His charity will not help those others to overcome their dependence.”

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33 Thus begins Dostoevsky’s efforts to respond to Nietzsche’s criticisms. As if they merited a response! While Dostoevsky does manage to articulate a model of Christianity that is acceptable to Nietzsche, it is heretical, and so far from orthodoxy that we may as well see him in league with Nietzsche. Without a strong tradition, Christianity must collapse into the “anything goes” relativism of postmodernism, as seems to happen here. Dostoevsky’s first error is to assert that Christianity is a *search* for truth. We need not search for a truth that we have already found: that our God is alive and, through his physical suffering, has offered us a path to redemption! Instead, Christianity is about *spreading* that truth, to the benighted souls who have not heard this good news or who refuse to accept it. While Dostoevsky hints at this when he says that we are “called” to “help others in their own searches,” his implication that this assistance might lead the recipients of our aid to a conclusion other than orthodoxy is problematic. If our help leads someone to deny God, have we really helped him or her?

34 Financial charity, without God’s message, is simply a handout that fosters reliance upon the generosity of others. It is not until we help recipients of our charity to see God’s truth that they can begin to drag themselves out of the spiritual rut that is also negatively impacting their lives financially. Dostoevsky seems to realize this. However, it is not enough for a patron to “happen to believe in God;” if our charity does not stem from our faith, we are performing those deeds for the wrong reasons: self-glorification and hedonistic pride. This is evil masquerading as good.
“But what of the man who happens to believe in God and who, rather than doling out alms, helps others to realize their own worth in this world?”

“A more productive aid, to be sure.”

“You would fault the Christian who ignores his own world because he is obsessed with finding and accessing the spiritual realm that his reality somehow bars from his vision, or the Christian who can only understand the beauty and the goodness of the world around him as a reflection of something that exists outside of it.”

“I most certainly would.”

“But what about someone who, while acknowledging the authorship of some divinity, can appreciate his reality intrinsically? If someone can only see beauty in, say, a sunset because he believes that God created it, then I agree he fails to appreciate its intrinsic value. But if someone, even while believing, thinks that the same sunset is beautiful irrespective of whether God created it or not, does he still fail to appreciate it? If I see a sculpture, do I esteem it more or less highly after I know the name the artist? Or further, knowing that it is a work of art, do I consider it somehow inferior to a naturally-occurring object of the same size and shape? Or do I appreciate the art only because of the skill and dedication of its creator? Of course not! When I look at that sculpture, what matters to me is not the identity of the artist, or the medium, or the artifice that produced it. What matters is how it makes me feel and what it helps me to understand.

35 It is strange that Dostoevsky, who claims to be a Christian (!) would make this assertion, as all that is good and beautiful in the world is a reflection of God. The ugliness and badness in the world, in contrast, is a reflection of the broken nature of humanity. A common rallying cry of Christian environmentalists is that, if we love the Creator, we must love creation. True, but the converse holds as well: how can we love creation without loving the Creator?
stand about myself and about the world around me. Should God and his work be any different, if we suppose that he is first and foremost an artist?”

“Perhaps not,” Friedrich replied, not at all reluctantly.

“We can help others to earn for themselves meaningful and fulfilling lives in this world. We can see the hand of divinity in our reality without diminishing it. So must our search for Truth look beyond our own experience? We can teach others to achieve their own potential – perhaps that is service? We see beauty all around us, in the timeless and the ephemeral, the monumental and the delicate – perhaps that is sacred? And we can love.”

“Perhaps,” Friedrich said, “that is God.”

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36 Nietzsche seems to be having his conversion experience. Apparently Dostoevsky’s prattle is more convincing to him than it is to me. However, there is some biblical basis for the conclusion Nietzsche reaches, as we know that “God is love.” And, despite his unorthodox arguments, Dostoevsky’s conclusions about service and the sacredness of creation are valid. Rather than ending here, however, our author gives us two more sections in the narrative, which reduce Nietzsche’s conversion from a profoundly meaningful spiritual experience to a grotesque farce.
There is no truth; all is subjective. A double quandary: if there is no truth, then an assertion of the subjectivity of experience is necessarily a subjective observation; if there is truth, then not all is subjective, as a truth must exist objectively. A double failing: modern man either ignores the contradiction and embraces what he believes to be the fundamental uncertainty of the world, or acknowledges the contradiction and maintains the assertion anyway. Life, he maintains, is meaningless and miserable. He is simultaneously depressed by the insignificance of his existence, as he sees it, and elated by the belief that he, in despising the world and his place in it, has a sound understanding of reality. Thus is summarized the whole of modern philosophy.

Suppose that truth does not exist. What then? If there were there no objective reality, if our world was purely a construction of our minds, if all of our perceived actions and experiences were merely our imagined interactions with the dream world we have constructed – would that

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37 Our narrator now is Nietzsche himself, and the text is an approximation of his thoughts in the moments following the end of section II. The text is arranged to mimic the aphorisms that Nietzsche wrote in. However, just as his certainty in his convictions is breaking down as he begins to accept God’s truth, however distorted by Dostoevsky, Nietzsche’s thoughts here have far more questions in them than do his tracts, in which he pridefully writes so as to suggest that he has all of the answers. Overall, this is the weakest section of the narrative, showing little real development of character or of their opinions and understandings, and I will remark little on it here. Besides, the battery on my device is running low and I do not have a charger, so I only have time to remark on the most crucial elements of the remaining few pages.
world, or for that matter our life in it, be of any value? If there is no “real” world, only the “ap-
parent” world of our senses, do we still esteem the world?

Would not the only reasonable response, the only sane response, to this subjectivity be –
nihilism?

2

If truth did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. A tempting exercise. Were we to
invent our truth, we could devise a convenient set of explanations, of causalities and contingen-
cies, which fit comfortably with our understanding of the world around us. We could tell our-
selves anything that we needed to tell ourselves in order to be happy, and any detail frustrating
our efforts to lull ourselves into an ignorant bliss we could simply disregard, denying its reality.
For all we know, any complications to our simplistic understanding might only be in our imagi-
nations.

But suppose that truth does exist. We could no longer deny the facts of our existence
without compromising the integrity of our perception of reality, without lying to ourselves about
the nature of the world. Creating a reality that makes us happy is no longer an innocent attempt
to construct the best possible explanation for what we observe, it is a malicious attempt to draw
our attention away from Truth while directing our eyes to a sanitized, simplistic charade that has
no more resemblance to Truth than does the most inventive of fictions. This is irresponsibility.
This is denial. This is, of course, nihilism.

But does that matter? If our experience of objective reality must be subjective, is the
truth any more important than our perceptions? Why not choose the perception that makes us
happy over the Truth that makes us think critically? What has the greater truth claim, the appar-
ent worlds that we observe and with which we interact or the real world that lies somewhere behind it, which we can never see and our interactions with which we can never know or understand?

The nihilist denies the value of his world. But of which do we speak – the real world or the apparent? Which world is truly his?

3

Nihilism in its purest form – a denial not only of the value of the real world as something unknowable, but of the apparent as well as a poor approximation of the real. A ridiculous and unfair approach to our perceptions. After all, how can we know that our perceptions poorly approximate Truth? To insist that one’s perceptions are false is just as absurd as it is to insist that one’s perceptions are true. But to deny one and not the other – is that still necessarily nihilism? If we value the real world while holding the apparent in lower esteem? Are both important? Are both equally important? Is one more important than the other?

The real world, it would seem, is more important than the apparent; it is the world that exists objectively and the world which forms the basis for all of our subjective experiences. But this is not the world with which we interact. The apparent is an intermediary for all of our interactions with the real. Close your eyes, plug your ears, and wear thick gloves, and then tell me that your senses do not help you to understand and appreciate Truth, even as they skew your perception of it.

Yet – if we esteem the real world for its objective reality, do we not implicitly devalue the apparent world for its subjectivity? And do we not then fail to see the value of the world we experience? Do we not, in our pursuit of truth, ourselves become nihilists?
Can a horse be tragic?38

A plan to avoid this path to nihilism – perhaps we must regard the real and apparent worlds as equal in value. But how? Are they the same world? The apparent world derives from the real, and mirrors it to the best ability of our senses. But different people perceive the world differently. We notice different details, we imagine different chains of causality that we assign to them – can we speak of only one apparent world? Or do we each have our own apparent world? If that is the case, then the real and apparent worlds cannot be the same – the real world is refracted through the prism of our senses, and we each experience a different spectrum.

The real and apparent are different. How do we esteem them both? What do we find to value in each? Which apparent world is it that we must value? Our own? Perhaps, but what of everyone else’s perceived reality? Must we value them all? Are we only obligated to value our own perspective? May we value some and not others? Must we consider all constructions of reality to be of equal worth? Do I need to appreciate the perspectives of the ignorant and the complacent? Do I not myself become close-minded when I, in view of their closemindedness, discount their opinions?

38 A parody of an aphorism in *Twilight of the Idols*, “Can a donkey be tragic?” Here, however, it has the additional function of foreshadowing Nietzsche’s mental collapse in section IV. If we see him as the villain of the piece, though, as I believe we must, we must question whether the insanity of the “bad guy” at the end of a story is really a tragic ending.
If all perspectives are of worth, then we cannot see value in the apparent world insofar as it resembles the real world. Some people envision a reality that, if consensus means anything, is distantly removed indeed from objective truth. The modern German, happily, comprises only a small fraction of the population of the world. But this semblance to reality is nothing intrinsic – we still fail to value our perceptions for what they are if we value them only insofar as they help us to understand objective reality.

6

If a perspective is of worth irrespective of whether it approximates the real, must we train our senses to better – or, to put it another way, more objectively – observe the real world? Should we actively pursue a fuller appreciation and fuller understanding of Truth? One would think so; if we make no effort to discern the real behind the apparent world, our dismissal of the real is tantamount to nihilism. If we do not seek it, can we truly say that we care about its existence?

What, then, is the value and purpose of art, especially of creative art? A fictive work is, in the most simplistic sense, a lie, either a misrepresentation of events or a depiction of persons and places that never existed in the real world. Can art help us to understand the real, or does its inventive nature instead obscure it further by creating another perspective, another apparent world, in the words on a page or the brushstrokes on a canvas? But suppose the purpose of art is not to represent the real world, but rather to illumine it – suppose that in even the most fanciful of novels and paintings there is a glimmer of truth. Not Truth as an objective version of the reality which we experience subjectively, but truth as an insight into ourselves and our world. By
seeing how people interact in the fictive world of a story, do we not come to a better understanding of how we interact with each other in the real world?

But is art only instructive? Do we appreciate art only as a guide for how we can process and understand our interactions and our natures? Or do we seek beauty in art when we cannot find it in the world of our experience? Is this not the role of music, to raise our spirits and enrapture us with melody? Ah, but is this not Wagnerism? Is this not also nihilism?

Must not our lives become themselves works of art? And how much more my own life, for as we know, no artist is ever appreciated in his own time?

39 Wagner was, of course, a German opera writer best-known for his Ring cycle, in which the old Norse gods are toppled to make way for Christianity. My favorite opera of his, however, is Parsifal, his reworking of a grail quest narrative.

40 In a few moments, Nietzsche’s life will become a performance of an existing work of art rather than a new and original work: he will re-enact a scene from Crime and Punishment in which Mikolka (“me cold cuts”) whips a horse. First, however, Nietzsche restates his conviction that, while not understood in his own time, he will be understood in the future by those who have overcome modernity. I, for one, resistant to modern culture, have understood him well enough: I have understood his shortcomings, his hypocritical insistence that he searches for truth while ignoring the truth that stares him in the face, and the justness of his fate when he slips into insanity rather than admit the folly of his lifelong rebellion.
I don’t know ‘ow long they kept on like that. Think I dozed off at least twice. I didn’t know what they were talkin about an’ I didn’t really care, so I figured it would be a good time to catch a few winks before the trip ‘ome.

Oh, but this last bit is rich. Fred gets a twinkle in his eye, or maybe it was just the sun on ‘is glasses. Anyways, he leaps out of his chair, crashes through the tables, spillin’ stuff everywhere an’ makin’ a proper mess of things, jumps the railin’ round the edge of the café, crosses the street, an’ throws ‘imself round the neck of some pathetic old nag standin’ with a cart at the side of the road. Of course everyone in the café was lookin’ at ‘im. An’ ‘e starts on, like, this prepared speech about art an’ life, all while ‘angin on to the ‘orse! The owner of this sad creature tries to say something, but Fred starts screaming something about “me cold cuts” an’ wav-in’ ‘is arms, presumably at the man’s sandwich. But when ‘e lets go of the ‘orse, ‘is legs forgets that they ‘as to ‘old ‘im up, an’ ‘e collapses right in a puddle of what I sure ‘ope was water.

So now everyone in the café is in stiches, laughin’ an’ pointin’ at the scene Fred was makin’. Well, everyone but Ted. ‘E just squints ‘is beady little eyes an’ is real quiet, like ‘e’s seen it all somewhere before. ‘E mutters something I didn’ ‘ear ‘bout that rascal Nick, an’

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41 The Last Man once again narrates, awakening from the sleep into which he has slipped rather than listen to the important, however challenging, discussion that Dostoevsky and Nietzsche have been having. The scene, however fantastic, is a fairly accurate recreation of the historical event in Turin generally taken to be the definite beginning of Nietzsche’s mental collapse.

42 Mikolka. This one is a stretch.

43 Significantly, Nietzsche’s actions in this scene recall Raskolnikov’s dream in Crime and Punishment, which Dostoevsky comments upon. Whereas Raskolnikov is driven to madness and confession by his guilt at killing, Nietzsche is instead driven to madness and eventual death by
then, without even wishin me good day, ‘e ups an’ leaves. So I, the last man, gets stuck with the tab for all three of us.

his rebellion against God. A fitting end for a blasphemer. And, as my battery is down to 2% and I have no ability to conduct further research, a fitting end for this appendix as well. I trust, however, that it has been enjoyable and enlightening to the reader – G.