

# I. Stavrogin's Bite

Ivan Ossipovitch approached the subject in a roundabout way, almost in a whisper, but kept getting a little muddled. Nikolay looked anything but cordial, not at all as a relation should. He was pale and sat looking down, continually moving his eyebrows as though trying to control acute pain.  
/.../

Nikolay listened with vexation and impatience. All at once there was a gleam of something sly and mocking in his eyes.

"I'll tell you what drives me to it," he said sullenly, and looking around him he bent down to Ivan Ossipovitch's ear. The refined Alyosha Telyatnikov moved three steps farther away towards the window, and the colonel coughed over the *Golos*. Poor Ivan Ossipovitch hurriedly and trustfully inclined his ear; he was exceedingly curious. And then something utterly incredible, though on the other hand all too unmistakable, took place. The old man suddenly felt that, instead of telling him some interesting secret, Nikolay had seized the upper part of his ear between his teeth and was nipping it rather hard. He shuddered, and breath failed him.

"Nicolas, this is beyond a joke!" he moaned mechanically in a voice not his own.<sup>1</sup>

This is the third scene, and as well the third public scandal, in which the main character in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, the young prince Stavrogin, is

<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, New York 2004, p. 51. Transl. Constance Garnett. [Translation modified slightly. -Translator]

presented to the reader. We have heard about his peculiar upbringing, alone with his mother, with a tutor who quite simply was entirely lacking in character. We have heard about the outbreaks of brutal mania during his military service, which led to his having killed one man and rendered another invalid in a duel. But – as is so often the case in Dostoevsky – it is the dramatic scene that reveals who a human being really is. We have heard much about him, and we will continue to hear much about him – this demonic beast – who is as icily distant as he is corporeally tangible. But he is never entirely real until we arrive at the scenes in which he himself makes an appearance. People have been trying to understand his incomprehensible outbursts: they bring in three doctors, a diagnosis is reached. His outrageous behavior is determined to be the expression of a mental disorder, of delirium, of a manic dizziness. He is exculpated, the people around him breathe a sigh of relief.

Not the reader. The reader grasps that this is just the beginning, a disturbing and incisive prologue to a horrible tale of terror.

Who is this Stavrogin, who is described as proud, elegant, silent and somber, strong as an ox, pale, and surprisingly thoughtful? His tutor, the conceited freethinker Stepan Trofimovich, has apparently awoken an “eternal, holy longing” in his initiate even at the tender age of sixteen, a longing for something that, once tasted, “almost never is traded for a more common satisfaction.”<sup>2</sup> Stavrogin is a Lucifer, a fallen angel, who apparently enjoys his state of degeneration and his manic dissipations, but who dreams of a different, absolute food. He is a timid, ice-cold melancholiac who suddenly and capriciously reveals his innermost secret: he is a highly dangerous cannibal, ready to sink his teeth into the first sacrificial victim that comes along.



This scene from *The Possessed* provides a clue to the alarming connection between the two extremes that are the poles of this essay: melancholy\* and eating, gloominess and the search for another type of nourishment beyond the ordinary. This is a dynamic that permeates our Western cultural heritage,

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

\* See “Note on the Translation” for the use of *melancholy*, *melancholic*, and related terms.

but which likely requires a special optics to be detected: eating, and certainly its cannibalistic variant, is surrounded by so many taboos, habits, and rules that we do not see that which is most obvious. Primitive, violent eating has undergone a symbolic transformation, which has pushed aside its pre-history.

As is so often the case, it is the poets, and to a certain extent the philosophers, who lead us deeper into the labyrinth of hunger. They are distanced from the requirements to which the community-engendering meal is connected, either because they are outside the community, or because they have an appetite or hunger that consistently exceeds the boundaries of culture's sacrosanct regulatory scheme. As a matter of custom, they have adopted a melancholic position, unable to forget the Golden Age of Saturn, an era associated with images of an infinitely rich, flowing abundance – a memory, so easily projected onto the future as a utopia, before which the world in its present form easily pales into the background.

Of course, in the case of Stavrogin, Dostoevsky is merely giving us an extreme version of a hunger for a radically different order. We encounter this dynamic in a number of other ways in Dostoevsky's writing, with its violent, individual acts of boundary-transcendence that take one beyond the limits of the law and reason (crime, scandal, humiliation; epilepsy, madness, mysticism). What should be noted is the concern that the melancholiac position traditionally provokes, and that makes it – in the eyes of the powers that be – so *suspicious*.

The best known example in the literature is likely Caesar's fear of lean, pale men – a group to which the conspirator Cassius, in particular, belongs – something that Shakespeare, via Plutarch, made use of in his drama *Julius Caesar*.

Let me have men about me that are fat,  
Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep a-nights.  
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;  
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.  
1:2, r. 189–192

Cassius is a melancholiac with a touch of the proclivity to act suddenly that is characteristic of the choleric. He is dangerous because he does not look content and satisfied; he stands outside the shared repast. He has “famished eyes,” a hungry look, which apparently seeks an entirely different food. In the ensuing exchange we learn that he “reads too much, he is wary ...,” which suggests that a different, spiritual digestive apparatus has replaced the material one. Not only does he read a lot of books, but, it would seem, he also reads, situations and people; he has the ability to “see right through people’s works.”

Melancholy here clearly has a different relationship to political power, because it is hungry for a different, higher order; uncertain as to which.

Such men as he be never at heart’s ease  
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,  
And therefore are they very dangerous.

The political aspect concerns the border position occupied by the melancholiac, a position which itself is a prerequisite for the reflection and creativity with which this temperament has been associated since ancient times. This situation may lead to the overthrow of a regime, but more often it leads to the creation of another, inner world. Melancholy, at least in the form it has taken in our literature after the Renaissance, is an affect that ambivalently binds the I to itself, and renders externally oriented action – as in the case of Hamlet – impossible.

The transformation of melancholy into a mood that is bittersweet is expressed in several places in Shakespeare, for example: “this desert inaccessible / Under the shade of melancholy boughs” in the pastoral *As You Like It*.<sup>3</sup> In this piece, we can see how music, which had traditionally been a cure for melancholy – Caesar fears Cassius partly because he “does not listen to music” – becomes one with this affect. Indeed, it acquires the power to produce gloominess. When Amiens has sung the first verse of the ballad “Under the Greenwood Tree” for the cavalier Jaques, Jaques wants to hear more and more:

3 Act II, Scene vii, ll. 110–111.

Jaques: More, more, I prithee more.

Ami: It will make you melancholy, Monsieur Jaques.

Jaques: I thank it. More, I prithee more. I can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs. More, I prithee more.

II:5, r. 9–13

Jaques is not interested in preventing or overcoming his melancholy. He reflects his enjoyment of it. In Shakespeare's powerful image, he is like a weasel, rapaciously sucking in melancholy as if sucking in the contents of an egg. Melancholy is self-affecting, a food that feeds on itself. But this requires the notes and symbols that can fix and generate the fundamental tone, or mood.

The melancholiac is traditionally thought of as artistically creative. But because his world is impoverished and his language poor, this peculiar creative transformation must gain strength from the tone, feel, and rhythm that in part are beyond language. The melancholiac is a predator with a boundless appetite for the most sublime food. He is not only a bestial cannibal, like Stavrogin, but also a refined weasel, like Jaques, with a keen sense for the fine arts.

We shall examine the enigmatic relation of melancholy to an early kind of cannibalism, which psychoanalysis, in particular, stressed. It goes without saying that the *disturbed* relation to food, which, according to this theory, characterizes the melancholiac, cannot be applied to all intellectual or artistic innovation. It suffices here simply to refer to earthly Goethe, who, in his discussions with Eckermann – examining a cast of the ancient sculptor Myron's cow with a suckling calf – was able to claim that it shows us “the nourishing principle, which holds the world up and pervades the entirety of nature.”<sup>4</sup> For Goethe, or for Rabelais, food is a cosmic principle; the soil of fertility on which all creation is based.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps, food also plays that same role for the melancholic, though in a more figurative sense— he who questions the normal order of things, who creates

4 Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, Berlin 1955, p. 640.

5 In the case of Rabelais, this has been convincingly demonstrated by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. See *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington 1984.

an other, unknown food, with a variety of meanings. We will trace the desire for this other food through the ages, and scrutinize its relationship to both primitive sacrificial rites as well as contemporary anthropology, philosophy, and linguistic theory.

How does the melancholiac read and write? Is there a deeper tie between reading and eating, between hunger and writing? Is melancholy a key to the understanding of modernity? Is it possible to transfer the idea of a different kind of food to other art forms, such as painting and sculpture, and, further, to culture at large?

Melancholy has a long history with a rich symbolism. We must familiarize ourselves with this history.

