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A Spider's Web: On the Sealing of Debasement.

The position of Nikolay Bcevolodovitch Stavrogin in The Possessed is obviously central to all the other persons in the novel, and to everything that happens; it might be metaphorically described as that of hub to spokes, a starfish to its rays, a splash to its ripples, a bullseye to its rings, the sun to its planets, or the spider's web to the flies that it traps. It is centrally he that pulls the strings that move the people. It is to him that the others try most significantly to relate themselves. He is the unmoved mover, a gratuitous decider: the choices he makes that move other people are decided by things irrelevant to their lives, and private to him alone; though he may be trivially affected by what they do, there is nothing very thorough about it.

For instantiation. The influence of Nikolay Vseyevolodovitch sets up the original positions of the characters: it is his alimony on which the Lebyadkins live, it is his jilting of Lizaveta in Switzerland that throws her back on Russian society, it is his disgraceful conduct four years earlier which undercuts Varvara Petrovna's social position, it is his ardor that sends Shatov to America. The others try to relate themselves to him: Varvara Petrovna can only

VERY OPTIONAL APPENDIX. On the limits of metaphorical criticism.

An important technique of the critic is what I will call "metaphorical analysis." I refer to all interpretations of literary works in which ~~xxx~~ some one metaphor, simile, anecdote, figure of speech, parable or likeness is found in ~~xxx~~ some sense to prevail-- or just appear. In the foregoing paper I exploit the "spider" image; but all manner of more complicated ideas, verging on the harebrained, sometimes turn up when a metaphorical analysis is made. Even the casual student knows the ascendancy which the method has attained in our day.

There are at least two clearcut cases where we see that the technique is valid and dead to rights. The first is that in which the metaphor is found explicitly in the title or someplace in the text. (In The Possessed ~~xxxx~~ it is most forthright in the title and the quote about Christ, the madman and the swine.) It is also clear that with recurrent images, of whatever kind, there may be an inescapable correspondence to other images ~~xxxxxxx~~ in the text: i.e., with the spiderlike position of Stavrogin. A third case is attractive: although it may not be clear why, it is clear that recurrent situations and moods and experiences and so-on often pervade a whole author,* as Dostoevsky's "underground" and "bug" and "supermoment," and that these may have power in relating various things to each other for the reader, enhancing his enjoyment, sharpening his knowledge about how a certain mood or idea ~~is~~ is conveyed, and playing his mind across a work in new and successive ways for

* Crossbookwise, that is.

secondary enjoyments.

However, I stick at believing that every possible relationship you can see in a work is really there, as is suggested by Beardsley (both in "Metaphor of the Underground" and Aesthetics.) A tree's having a trunk does not make it an interesting elephant-symbol, and the possibility of describing a resemblance is not the justification for describing it. I criticize nothing in particular: I am just made leery by the idea that any metaphorical analysis can be drawn willy-nilly by an imaginative critic with no final reckoning. It is difficult indeed to say what the standards of correctness could possibly be: obviously some such deals are straightforward and solid, like those children's pictures with faces and objects and upside-down animals hidden in the foliage; others could be thought of which are outrageous and silly, like color slides projected on paintings. Beardsley, I think, suggests that all interpretations are in some sense "a part of" the meaning. This is to me incredible; how can the bicycle-symbol in Poe's "Raven" (which I have just invented) be a part of it? The intentional fallacy offered another suggestion for correctness of a theory: that when the author thought of it, it was so, if not, it was just rabbit hunting. But this has been disproved by Beardsley and others, time after time.

All the same holds true for bigger analyses, those which try to make a formula for all Shakespeare, or a map that will lead you through any 19th Century novel, or a definition of comedy or tragedy in terms of mythic structure, successive departures and returns, and the like. Yet there is good gut-level evidence that something like these theories may often be true.

Surely when a critic says, "The typical novel by John Mulch may be characterized by the cycle of insult, chase, acknowledgement and fried eggs,"* he may be saying something interesting and important. Perhaps we can be saved-- if we truly wonder about this point-- by the following observation.

A metaphoric analysis can be enlightening; but to regard it as "the key" is always going too far, since there is content besides the fascinatingly patterned, the patiently symbolic and the merely recurrent.

Metaphorical analysis is also a technique of ministers, bad sociologists, editors, neurotics, psychoanalysts, bunny-thinkers and rhapsodizers generally. In literary criticism this technique flowers most refinedly, and with the least censure from straightforward philosophers. But even if we could show that flights of inanity often result from metaphorical criticism, there is (however unfortunately) clear reason to believe it to be a valid technique when watched carefully.

* Maybe all his novels end with a plate of fried eggs. It's possible.