



DOSTOEVSKY READS HEGEL IN SIBERIA AND BURSTS INTO TEARS

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Abstract: In 1854, by the time he was stationed as a private in Siberia, Dostoevsky gets in touch with a book by Hegel that excluded Siberia from the historical process. This article outlines some thoughts on Dostoevsky's reactions and examines the European historical culture as well as the spirit of its civilization.

Key-words: Dostoevsky; Hegel; Siberia; History

Resumo: Em 1854, Dostoevsky ocupava o posto de soldado em uma pequena cidade na Sibéria, quando tomou contato com um livro de Hegel, no qual este excluía a Sibéria de todo processo histórico. Este artigo traz uma série de reflexões sobre a reação de Dostoevsky, e examina a cultura histórica, assim como o espírito da civilização européia.

Palavras-chave: Dostoevsky; Hegel; Sibéria; História

In the spring of 1854, after four years of forced labor, Dostoevsky was stationed as a private on the big Asian "North Slope," in Semipalatynsk, which is in the south of Siberia. The town, a bit larger than a village, had a population of approximately five thousand, half of them nomad Kirgiz, most living in yurtas. The inhabitants did not identify with European Russians, referring to them as "people from the motherland" and regarding them with suspicion. Their numbers, however, grew continually: the number of those exiled between 1827 and 1846 increased to 159,000.

The town was surrounded by a plain sand desert, no trees or bushes, only sand and thistles. Dostoevsky lived here, in a large but low house, in which there stood a bed, table, and chest; and on the wall hung a small, framed mirror. Here, he made friends with the local public prosecutor, twenty-one-year-old Aleksandr Yegorovich Wrangel, who





unselfishly supported him for more than ten years after they first met. Dostoevsky outlined his stories for Wrangel, and recited his favorite poems of Pushkin and hummed famous arias for him. They did not talk much about religion—although Dostoevsky was God-fearing, he did not attend church and disliked priests. Still, of Christ he spoke with deepest admiration. He worked steadily on the manuscript of *House of the Dead*, into which Wrangel was permitted to peek from time to time. In return for this favor, the public prosecutor supplied Dostoevsky with books. Soon they began to study, assiduously, day after day. Wrangel does not disclose in his memoir the name of the book that they were studying. He only mentions its author's name: Hegel.

We do not know which book of Hegel's that Wrangel, who subscribed to the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*, ordered for Dostoevsky from Germany. So let us select one: the lectures on the philosophy of history, which Hegel delivered between the autumn of 1822 and the spring of 1831 at the University of Berlin. His lecture series was concurrent with the arrival of ten thousand exiles in Siberia. The lectures were first published in book form in 1837; then in 1840, a new revised edition appeared. It is possible that Wrangel, after some browsing, may have ordered this book, because in it Hegel mentions Siberia. True, it is only a few words—and they explain why Hegel will not be discussing Siberia. He commences his discussion of Asia: "We must first of all eliminate Siberia, the northern slope of Asia. For it lies outside the scope of our enquiry. The whole character of Siberia rules it out as a setting for historical culture and prevents it from attaining a distinct form in the world-historical process."¹

Imagine Dostoevsky's stupefaction when, as he read by tallow light, he came upon this passage. We can imagine his despair when he had to face the fact that, in Europe, no

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet (1899; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 191.





one thought his suffering for an idea important—an idea for which he had been sentenced to death but then exiled. He was suffering in Siberia, a location beyond the pale of history and therefore, from the European perspective, beyond redemption. Dostoevsky felt that he had not simply been exiled to Siberia; he had been relegated to nonentity. From that place, only a miracle—one that Hegel and modern Europe believed wholly impossible—could redeem him. The European spirit acknowledged sonorously the existence of God yet rejected the thought that God could issue, not only universal commands, but individualized unique rulings as well. The European spirit, which placed natural law above all other kinds—and which denied, as Dostoevsky would later put it, the possibility of revolt against two times two—accepted the modern constitutional state, declared its timeless validity, and forgot that no law governs the creation of law.

It is entirely possible that, when Dostoevsky learned that he was cut off from history (and took offense at the notion), he determined that sheer existence has dimensions that cannot be historically denoted and leave no historical trace. When a person who feels, who experiences, the weight of sheer existence is exiled from history, the same weight weighs him down in Semipalatynsk as in Berlin. To know the limits of historical existence requires stepping out of history. But for that step to be possible, miracles (which transcend time and space) must be possible as well. If Hegel allows for regions the size of a continent to be erased from the pale of history, then history is finite, not divine: it is delimited by something beyond history. The necessary shares borders with the impossible, the natural with the supernatural, the legal with the arbitrary, and politics with theology. What is across the frontier can find its way inside. We can exclude only what touches us from within.

It was probably his exile from history that led Dostoevsky to faith in miracles. It was in exile, too, that he learned this cruel structural principle: history reveals its essence





to those whom first it casts out. Hegel delivered his lectures on the history of philosophy over the course of a decade, but this principle, this law, he did not discover. Dostoevsky did not need a decade to think. He experienced in his own flesh the essence of modern history. The essence: that never before the Enlightenment had any culture rejected suffering so profoundly, and yet suffering did not cease as a consequence. The invisible, the concealed, suffering of modern culture becomes obvious, reveals itself, only when the limits of enlightenment become visible—and hence only to those torn or exiled from history.

Not inconceivably, it was when he read Hegel's harsh verdict on Siberia that Dostoevsky wrote: "who can say that he has sounded the depth of these lost hearts, and has read what is hidden from all the world in them? . . . no, it seems crime cannot be interpreted from preconceived conventional points of view, and the philosophy of it is a little more difficult than is supposed."²—These lost souls, Dostoevsky says, "were criminals entirely deprived of all rights of property, fragments cut off from society, with branded faces to bear witness for ever that they were outcasts."³—This memoir, *House of the Dead*, expresses the most defiant possible revolt—the revolt of those cast out and unable to find meaning, not even meaning in the hope of going home. The book is not, however, a manifesto of political revolt, nor even one of moral indignation. What the book defies is existence—existence, at least, as secular historians were then representing it. History of Hegel's sort implied that earthly suffering will eventually pass away, and *House of the Dead* is the bible of revulsion from that philosophy. Dostoevsky's book is held together not by explanatory and predictive dialectics, but by suffering and lamentation. The hope

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead*, trans. Constance Garnett (1861; New York: Macmillan, 1982), 19.

³ Dostoevsky, *House of the Dead*, 13.





radiating from the book, the belief in miracle, increases in direct ratio with the depth of its desperation.

Of course, the verdict against Siberia would not have been unexpected by a reader in Semipalatynsk. The way to the verdict is so thoroughly and logically prepared that the conclusion, when Hegel reaches it, could offer even aesthetic satisfactions, were it better, and more humanely, written. The foundation of Hegel's argument is this sentence: "Whoever looks at the world rationally will find that it in turn assumes a rational aspect, the two exist in a reciprocal relationship."⁴—Or not, Dostoevsky may have replied, looking into the small, framed mirror on a wall of his room. No one looks back from a mirror. Just try looking steadily into your own eyes: your gaze meets a foreign eyeball, looking lifelessly into nothing. The eye looks neither outside nor inside. It is dead, rigid, and seems even, if you watch it long enough, spectral.

The world looking back at itself reasonably—Hegel's metaphor is tempting and sounds as self-evident, the first time you hear it, as a revelation from God. But if you examine its context and presuppositions, you realize that Hegel reasoned compulsively—he was compelled by repressions, superstitious fear, and the most irrational anxieties to hold onto reason as onto a buoy. It was as though he feared being swept away. In order to classify (control) the richness that encircled his life and preceded it, he constructed a history and cast it, like a net or raster, over an infinitude of contingencies. His tool was philosophy, which "approaches history as something to be manipulated, and does not leave it as it is, but forces it to conform to its preconceived notions and constructs a history a priori" (25). The actual role of historical construction, Hegel's fabrication of history, is not to supply an "objective" picture of existence, but to protect the constructor,

⁴ Hegel, Lectures, 29.





the historical engineer, from sinking into the undesignable and unconstructible, the nonsensical and irrational.

What history itself is, Hegel does not reveal. The opening sentence of his lecture series is suspiciously meaningless: “As to what is meant by history or world history, I need say nothing; the common conception of it is adequate” (25). Comforting himself, he adds: “and we are more or less agreed on what it is” (25). As you work through his philosophy of history, it is above all obvious how unwilling Hegel is to say a word about the characteristics of history, as if he were compelled by superstition not to mention the topic. I imagine that, from the outset, Dostoevsky understood that Hegel’s was a philosophy of the suppressed, covert, and concealed. To envision it, his philosophy of history, Hegel had to shut his eyes.

What would Hegel have seen had he kept his eyes open? A vast canvas of limitless variety. Encircling him, he knew, was “everything that can occupy and interest the human mind, every sensation of the good, the beautiful and the great, comes into play; everywhere we see others pursuing aims which we ourselves affirm and whose fulfilment we desire, and we share their hopes and fears” (31-32). But why should all this color and bustle go unseen? Because, Hegel answers (with suspicious haste), this abundance is mere probability. Hegel relegates his self-revelation to a brief afterword:

In the history of the world, we see before us the concrete image of evil in its most fully developed form. If we consider the mass of individual happenings, history appears as an altar on which individuals and entire nations are immolated; we see all that is noblest and finest destroyed. No real gain appears to have been made, and only this or that ephemeral work lingers on, already bearing the mark of decay on its brow and soon to be supplanted by another as ephemeral as itself. (212)

Amid all the color and abundance of history is “an altar”—a slaughterhouse, let us not mince words—beneath the notice of philosophy. Intelligence, Hegel writes, cannot





pause to observe the injuries that individuals suffer: “for particular ends are submerged in the universal end” (43). Picture Dostoevsky, as he reads, reacting. When writing about world history, we say nothing about its deepest characteristic? In the name of reason, we should disregard the experience of laceration?—of suffering, sacrificial death, anarchy, anything of which mankind is a servant and not master? Hegel wished to feel, foremost, a master, since a master is happier than his slave; but to accomplish this aim, to feel it was achieved, he had to redescribe the world to suit his taste and aspiration. Though attempting to construct his philosophy on reason, the deepest bases of his structure were unreasonable. The frail desire for victory and the happiness that could follow from it are implicit in Hegel’s philosophy. A jeweler’s eye, such as Dostoevsky possessed, could view hidden here the experience of pain and death, disappointment and loss.

Desires, instincts, fears, terrors, repressions, denials: philosophical historiography relates to these as a polished, snowy white, domesticated Roman copy relates to a Greek sculpture. Still, there is a seething underneath—the mire—that can color even marble through the hairline cracks. Hegel writes in *Philosophy of Right* that world history stands beyond justice, virtue, injustice, violence and crime, skills, passions great and trivial, guilt and innocence—beyond everything we call “life.” Why do some nations not belong to world history? Those who do belong possess happiness, glory, and success. In Hegel’s Protestant eyes, happiness, glory, and success are good temptations. Certainly they are more attractive than suffering or death—yet if not directly (which is to say freely) expressed, but only through the detour of repressions, they arrive damaged and deteriorate. If Hegel subordinates happiness to reason, he does so out of apprehension. He clings to happiness tenaciously because he will not deal willingly with unhappiness. He glorifies glory because he is not willing to face the suffering of the defeated. And Hegel





would not be so fixated on success were he not convinced of the transience of all things—of even reason itself.

Those who cling to reason eventually fall victim to unreasonableness, and they fall faster and more spectacularly than those whose chief desire is to live freely. Reason is not the creator or master of freedom—reason has only a share in it. Freedom is determinative; reason is a tool of freedom, not a cause. All that is reasonable or unreasonable exists within the limits of those milieus. On the other hand, freedom, the one divine element in mankind, is beyond reason and unreason. I become free only by finding what surpasses (what transcends) me. I find myself in what I lose myself.

The status of freedom can be variously described, but it cannot be called reasonable. In the process of subordinating world history, God, and absolute spirit (or their common denominator) to reason, Hegel turned his back to freedom. Reasonable freedom is not freedom. The reasonable is limited by reason. Freedom is unlimited (or else it is not free).

The name of God without the heart of God: when reason displaced salvation as the basis for explaining world history, divinity was placed under human supervision—placed quietly under the authority of politics. One symptom was Hegel’s search for explanations of the Whole: for everything, including the inexplicable. In obedience to the modern law of secularization, Hegel at every opportunity explained the infinite (which is uncontainable by the human mind and transcends politics) from the perspective of politics. What could not be explained with reference to politics, he suppressed. When writing about the Germanic tribes, for example, Hegel explained: although they lived in communities, theirs was not a political condition, and therefore “they lived outside the historical process.”⁵

⁵ Hegel, Lectures, 172.





In the second half of the eighteenth century, as each cultural and theological question was redefined as political, freedom itself was damaged. More precisely (since the infinite cannot be harmed), attention was drawn away from freedom. Of course, the faith in political solutions had covertly religious, even theological, inflections (as Juan Donoso Cortés, in the mid-nineteenth century, observed: there is no political question behind which there are no theological issues hiding). However, since the theological issues (those that interrogate divine freedom) were pressed into the background by questions regarding discipline and supervision, faith in transcendence became less compelling.

While the word “God” appears at least as frequently as “reason” does in Hegel’s work (and in Western writing today), God is in this context an image behind which to cram much that is anything but divine. Hegel’s philosophy of history—the main principle we may extract from it—is that history is made up by people in accordance with their own propensities and standards of reason (standards deemed, of course, unreasonable by their political opponents, who have standards of their own). Writing history in this way requires the exclusion of perspectives categorized as irrational, inexplicable, out of control. Politics, beginning in Hegel’s time, has been about pan-human inclusiveness but also, simultaneously, about exclusion, division, and pan-human suppression. As Carl Schmitt said, the middle class wants a God, but He must be aloof; it wants a ruler with no authority to rule; it demands freedom and equality but gives power to the wealthy and educated (as if wealth and education made exploitation of the poor and uneducated righteous); it abolishes aristocracy based on family but supports the rule of a commercial aristocracy; it mandates the sovereignty of neither king nor people. What, we could ask as Schmitt asked, does the bourgeoisie really want?⁶

⁶ See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (1922; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).





It is possible to speak of freedom only where limitlessness and transcendence, rather than transience and contingency, are at center stage. The God of reason is not the God of freedom but of politics, conquest, and colonization. The religion of the Modern God is secularization. History, from Hegel's perspective, is the story of secularization, and Siberia had no part to play in it. Hegel had so few words to say about Siberia, however, only because he had already treated Africa (likewise irrelevant). Reason's missionary, Hegel had exiled Africa with such enjoyment, and such poetical inspiration, that his creativity was exhausted by the time he had done. But what he says about Africa is valid for Siberia as well. In each case, the problem is both shyness and terror: he shies away from the incomprehensible, withdraws in terror of darkness.

Shy and terrified, but suddenly passionate too: in rejecting Africa and Siberia, Hegel exploits and denies emotions that he has evidently himself felt. The monster he rejects so vehemently is his ego, his own heart of darkness. The enthusiasm with which he details the unlimited cruelty supposedly taking place in Africa—incessantly describing more and more cases, offering anecdotes, horrific stories, without remarking in them any beauty, delight, or wonder—attests that Hegel was not afraid of Africa (from the safety of Berlin), but was at war with his own instincts. The fallible philosopher, at the distance of a light-year from the experience of freedom, contrives—as self-therapy—a philosophy of history, an explanation of existence itself. And yet, it is possible that, from the bottom of his heart, he only yearned to say, like Rimbaud or Genet: I am black.

Behind his vehement rejection of Africa and Siberia, Hegel hid a secret desire to kill God. Hegel was a victim of the delusion that he was capable of explaining, thus doing away with, the inexplicable. He had to curtail himself, refuse in himself the ancient (and divine) yearning for the unknown, the unlimited and immeasurable. Leaf through his pages about Africa: you will see, on the one hand, the blacks destined to execution,





annihilation, and on the other hand, a white man, crippled of soul, continually afraid. He is afraid of the solid gleaming gold; of the children; of the night; of the dead; afraid of those black heroes who, if insulted, kill themselves; afraid of the women, capable of killing like Kleist's Penthesilea, who warred with African elephants; afraid of the hangmen who sit beside African kings; afraid of unpredictable beings who, born to die just like himself, choose radically different ways of suffering their lives. He is afraid of those whose courage is unlimited and are able passionately to waste their lives. Also—given his surprisingly irritated and impatient tone—he is apparently afraid of his own fear as well. He is afraid of everything he cannot manage intellectually. Above all, though, Hegel is afraid of God—God's out-of-control, man-shaking freedom. It is no wonder that, on completing the process of elimination, he heaves this sigh of relief: "We shall therefore leave Africa at this point, and it need not be mentioned again. For it is an unhistorical continent."⁷

It is 1864. The hero of *Notes from Underground* is speaking his mind: "In short, anything can be said about world history, anything that might occur to the most disordered imagination. There's only one thing that can't possibly be said about it—that it's rational. You'll choke on the word."⁸—There is no doubt of whom Dostoevsky was thinking when he wrote that line. Since the universal certainty was lost that all our suffering will one day be explained, humanity has lived in dread and in horror. From that time until now, humanity in general—Hegel is but a particular case—has constructed history as a form of comfort, an embodiment of hope in the education and continuous progress of mankind. An obstinate faith in reason helps us bear our disquiet over God's absence. Once someone—Dostoevsky, Nietzsche—observes the vulnerability of faith in history, exposing history as a construction, a mechanism of self-defensive blinding, it all

⁷ Hegel, *Lectures*, 190.

⁸ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. and ed. Michal R. Katz (1863; New York: Norton, 1989), 21.





falls apart: there goes reason, the trust in science. What remains to fill the place of God when God is exiled?

It was a divine joke that in Siberia—a nowhere land of exile cast, supposedly, beyond God’s care—Dostoevsky became sure of God’s existence and the transcendent importance of transcendence. On Christmas Eve, 1849, two days after the comedy surrounding his execution, he set out from St. Petersburg, his path leading away not merely from the festively decorated capital but from Europe (on which he turned his back) as well. When crossing the Urals, it was as if he left both the space and time (historical time) of Europe. “The crossing of the Urals was a sad moment,” he remembered in a letter written four years later:

The horses and covered sleighs got stuck in the snow drifts. There was a blizzard. It was night, and we got out and stood around waiting for the men to pull the sleigh free. There was snow all around us; the storm was raging. This was the boundary of Europe—ahead of us was Siberia and our mysterious destiny there, and behind was all our past. I felt sad and broke into tears⁹.

Still, this letter continues in a way that implies Dostoevsky’s “mysterious fate” in Asia offered an advantage that in Europe—at home—he might never have attained. His suffering and despair became immeasurable and led him to the experience of the limitless—God. Forsaking all that he could have experienced in Europe, he writes:

I shall not tell you what has happened to my soul, my beliefs, my intelligence, and my heart in these four years. It would be too long to tell. But the constant communion with my inner self, in which I took refuge from bitter reality, bore fruit. I now have many needs and hopes such as I had never

⁹ Dostoevsky to Mikhail M. Dostoevsky, Omsk, February 22, 1854, Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoevsky, ed. Joseph Frank and David I. Goldstein, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 58.





thought of before. But I suppose that this sounds mysterious, so let's drop it.¹⁰

And a few lines later: "I am satisfied with my life." The year is 1854, the middle of his exile—the letter written, perhaps, after an irritating day's study of Hegel with Wrangel.

But what could this "mystery" be? Dostoevsky devoted one full book to the experience. His title *House of the Dead* is strange, since he writes only of the living in it, and no one he writes of was facing execution. The many faces observed give an impression of, not the dead but the cursed. The cursed: not only those transferred to Siberia from Europe (by political verdict), or those exiled from history (by Hegel), but also those driven from salvation to hell. This hell is not so different from Dante's *Inferno* (so Osip Mandelstam, also in Siberia, comforted himself a century later). Dostoevsky wrote the very bible of hell with this book—a bible that, a generation or so earlier, William Blake, in concluding *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, had announced he would himself deliver to an unwilling world. But why? Blake's response (in Jerusalem): "Man must & will have Some Religion: if he has not the Religion of Jesus, he will have the Religion of Satan & will erect the Synagogue of Satan, calling the Prince of this World, God, and destroying all who do not worship Satan under the Name of God."

What we get in Dostoevsky's book is hell—only hell. But hell could not be described in so vivid and comprehensive a way were he not sure that purgatory and even paradise existed too. Not a word is devoted to them, but his characterization of hell as immeasurable shows that Dostoevsky was in search of the unlimited. As a psychologist, he was doubtless a genius; yet his description of Siberian hell is not especially stirring—not because he was not a good observer, but because he was gazing past inadequacy, limitation, imperfection, at the divine. He rarely uses the word "God" in this book, but

¹⁰ Dostoevsky to Mikhail M. Dostoevsky, *Selected Letters*, 61.





having tumbled out of history into hell, where divine absence is unmistakable, he at last met the conditions for finding God.

There is redemption from hell but not, in Dostoevsky's view, redemption without hell. As he told Vsevolod Solovyov (brother of the philosopher, Vladimir), "it was a great happiness" for him in Siberia, where in "penal slavery" he began to live well and happily, and to understand Christ. (He concluded by wishing Siberia on Solovyov as well.) Another acquaintance, A. P. Milyukov, said that Dostoevsky was grateful to fate for enabling him, through his exile, to study the Russian people thoroughly and better understand himself. Raskolnikov too considers Siberia redemptive: his life there "is the story of a gradual renewal of a man, of his gradual regeneration, of his slow progress from one world to another, of how he learned to know a hitherto undreamed-of reality"—so *Crime and Punishment* concludes.

Hegel had no desire for experience of an unknown world, and it is this lack that distinguishes him most from Dostoevsky. Hegel may have used the word "God" more often than Dostoevsky did, but Hegel would permit none but the present, familiar world to unfold, progress, and develop. There is no abyss to cross; for Hegel, transitions are always smooth, austere. Hence his devotion to dialectical method, a comfy rational means by which to settle down with the extant and given. Kierkegaard would refer to dialectics as a "chimera, which in Hegel is supposed to explain everything, and which is also the only thing he never has tried to explain."¹¹—Hegel shed no light on dialectics because it was his tool for, precisely, suppression—passing over in silence. As a principle of universal explanation, dialectics was also a means of deposing God.

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (1843; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 42.





Hegel had no acquaintance with hell. Fate spoiled him (unlike Dostoevsky) and, besides, as a matter of principle, Hegel resisted the notion. Secularization in the service of rationality deprives the individual of transcendence altogether—not only God but the devil, and hell as much as paradise.

Dostoevsky never doubted that Siberia was itself hell, with with all its attendant terrors; in spite of which, he thanked fate for his exile. He suffered, but his suffering was redemptive; it detached him from history and its gray reason. He fell to rise higher, like those convicts in Siberia whom he described as hoping, enigmatically, for “a sort of desperateness.”¹²

Later, in his novels, Dostoevsky would describe Europe, contemporary civilization, all that appeared suitable and normative, as hellish. Siberia was hell itself because it carried the germs of sanctity—the horror surfaced, open and immeasurable. Europe seemed a horror to Dostoevsky because of its hellish suppression: the suppression of indifference to sanctity, suffering, death and redemption that modern culture imposed upon itself. Hell was discernible in the quotidian and gray, the usual and average. Dostoevsky was a demonic psychologist, or an angelic one. “We’ve all become estranged from life,” he has his man underground say. “We’re all cripples, every one of us, more or less. We’ve become so estranged that at times we feel some kind of revulsion for genuine ‘real life’, and therefore we can’t bear to be reminded of it.”¹³ The Siberian hell, depicted in full color, contrasts with the gray hell of Europe—a hell that, in the twentieth century, would reappear in Kafka’s writing and in Beckett’s, in Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Stalker*: a mechanized, and thus impersonal, annihilation of self.

¹² Dostoevsky, House of the Dead, 132.

¹³ Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground, 88.





Luis Buñuel once said, not completely in jest, that universality of faith ended in his time because the church had so gravely exaggerated hell that no one could take it seriously. Now, looking back on the twentieth century, we can perhaps acquit the church of this charge. It was not that the church exaggerated. Reality surpassed the old conception of hell, then painted it gray. Grayness is more dreadful than tongues of fire, lakes of pitch, and pitchforks, because it signifies both proximity and the impossibility of escape. There is no means to conquer grayness. A gray hell exceeds, unremarkably, every imagination and renders anything that can be dreamt of possible.

Anything—including its own annihilation. European civilization has never felt so superior as it now does, in our new millennium; and that feeling makes some of us uneasy. For the existence of European civilization has never been so threatened. The third millennium has an air of threat, examination, apocalypse (apocalypse without apocatastasis). And this was to be the sign that God had averted His eyes from us. We can all feel it: the individual has never been so complacent—like an irresponsible child left alone, able at last to do anything. But a child does not know what to do with freedom when night comes; he starts to fear, and then panic.

Twilight, the silence of infinite space, filled Pascal with a famous dread. The uncentered world made Nietzsche tremble; and Heidegger, perhaps the last true believer, put all his faith in one God but with such desperation that the fragility of his hope is obvious. We, on the other hand, are desensitized to the philosophers' fears, trembling, and despair. What was once unimaginable has become reality. Our civilization seems to forget its roots in matters beyond control and sovereignty. Yet through our secular (and above all, technical) success, we feel that as a civilization we are justified. Hegel's arrogations made Dostoevsky weep, and we are faced with worse. What lies ahead?





Our feeling of success derives, so Nietzsche claimed, from *deicide*—a process (secularization) that took place not spectacularly but imperceptibly. The ambition that killed God—our search for comprehensive solutions—could, initially, have met with even His favor. This ambition became hubris when we looked for solutions where no solution was to be found: when transcendence was reframed as a practical problem.

Modern civilization puts all its faith in practical solutions, in technology; and it brackets tacitly any danger to its optimism. Horror is an operational defect, a reminder of all we must not admire. When writing about his African hangmen, Hegel accused them of lacking civilization. Dostoevsky, again with reference to hangmen, observed the refinement they appear to accompany (“Haven’t you noticed that the most refined bloodsheddors are almost always the most civilized gentlemen”)¹⁴. “The characteristics of the torturer exist in embryo in almost every man of to-day,” Dostoevsky wrote, remembering Siberia, then added: “the executioners have a very good time of it though. They have plenty of money, they are very well-fed and have vodka to drink.”¹⁵—These words seem prophetic of the twentieth century, during which Walter Benjamin wrote: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”¹⁶

European civilization, which even in our day claims awkwardly to be Christian, adores technology in a way comparable to its former ardor for God. By the logic of Hegelian suppression, the ardor for technology makes its means its end and consumes its devotees in the process. Technology has left the world so out of control that, ironically, it

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 17.

¹⁵ Dostoevsky, *House of the Dead*, 239, 241.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1950; New York: Schocken, 1969), 256.





now fulfills the Creator's hope. The world at last has attained divine attributes—though unfortunately, chief among these is not freedom, but a solitude tantamount to absence.

As for hell, Buñuel was right, it is less colorful than portrayed. Hell is realistically more natural, sober, self-evident—like Hegel's world, to which Dostoevsky returned from Siberia . Free from magic, manipulable by technology, palpable, and in the end limited neither by impossibility nor divinity but only by the possible, the reasonable, and the ultimately boring, there was nowhere else by 1859 to which even Dostoevsky might return.

