

Temporal Predicament: Dostoevsky and Paul de Man

Paul Fung

paul.fung@hsu.edu.hk

Hang Seng University of Hong Kong

Research Article

Keywords: Raskolnikov, Dualism, Self-consciousness, Mystification, Irony

Posted Date: September 8th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10544771/v1>

License:   This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This essay revisits Raskolnikov's dualistic consciousness in *Crime and Punishment* through the theory of irony developed by Paul de Man. While critics have often explained Raskolnikov's divided nature as the alternation between opposing psychological tendencies, this article argues that his self-division originates from a deeper temporal predicament. Drawing on de Man's account of symbol and irony, it proposes that Raskolnikov is situated between two irreconcilable orders of time: the immediacy of empirical reality and the reflective production of mystified self-images. His attraction to Napoleon, his elaboration of the theory of extraordinary individuals, and his repeated attempts to justify the murder all reveal a process of self-mystification in which lived reality is displaced by abstract narratives. Porfiry Petrovich's investigations function as a force of demystification, revealing the difference between Raskolnikov's mystified identity and his empirical existence. His meetings with Sonia and Svidrigailov also reveal Raskolnikov's deeply mystified world and its inability to be reconciled with the actual world. Raskolnikov's unswerving desire for originality generates an ever-proliferating series of fictional selves. The irony of existence is that the more authenticity is sought, the further the individual moves away from it.

Keywords:

Raskolnikov, Dualism, Self-consciousness, Mystification, Irony

Temporal Predicament: Dostoevsky and Paul de Man

Raskolnikov's demonic pride

How should we understand the dualistic nature of Dostoevsky characters, whose competing impulses resist synthesis and stable identity? In his discussion of *Crime and Punishment*, Richard Peace compares Raskolnikov's internal division to a revolving door: 'Symbols of aggression evoke in Raskolnikov feelings of submission; symbols of submission bring out his aggressiveness. The coin of [his] inner realm, bearing on one side the head of Napoleon, on the other the effigy of a louse, spins in a constant game of "heads and tails" with his surroundings' (Peace 2006: 78). We know that the protagonist's name already suggests a dualistic condition (*Raskol* = *split*). Razumikhin observes that there are two personalities in Raskolnikov with which he alternates (Dostoevsky 2017: 190). A recent translation describes dualism in the opening of the novel ('...a young man left the garret he was tenting in S---y Lane, stepped outside, and slowly, *as if in two minds*, set off towards K---n Bridge') (2015: 3, italics mine). These instances show that there are two or more contradictory forces in Raskolnikov. However, how exactly these forces interact with each other is unexplored. For Peace, they are assigned with clear spatial coordinates, similar to the two sides of a flipping coin. The head-and-tail analogy helps understand Raskolnikov in the form of a fixed schema, which might have barred the reader from seeing the true complexity of self-consciousness. Joseph Frank writes that Dostoevsky's hero is marked by the internal split between self-image and truth, namely, between 'what a person wishes to believe about himself, and what he really is' (1995: 311). I argue that these two notions operate on different timelines; it is in the difference between these two timelines that we can glimpse the cause of the hero's dualistic nature. Raskolnikov wishes to think of himself as original, extraordinary, which leads him to project many different versions of an extraordinary self that are mostly illusory and mystified. Absorbed in himself, Raskolnikov spins off a mystified reality from the actual world, paying little attention to practical matters in life. Consequently, the self is divided into a premeditated self (self-image) and an unpremeditated self (truth). Self-division leads to the formation of an ironic consciousness, in which the hero can only yearn for but never return to an authentic existence. Unlike the toss of a coin, which

presupposes symmetrical movement between alternatives, the production of self-images takes the form of rhizomatic growth, unfolding through processes of asymmetrical and disproportionate proliferation.¹

In 1855, about a decade before the completion of *Crime and Punishment*, Baudelaire wrote an essay on the essence of laughter: ‘Laughter comes from the idea of one’s own superiority’ (Baudelaire 1995: 152). The poet proposes that laughter originates in the disparity between a man’s ordinary existence and what he wants to become.² He gives the example of madmen misconstruing themselves: ‘For it is a notorious fact that all madmen in asylums have an excessively overdeveloped idea of their own superiority: I hardly know of any who suffer from madness of humility’ (152). Similarly, people feel amused when they see somebody else accidentally stumbling in the street. The witness is doing fine, but the fallen one is not: ‘it is certain that if you care to explore this situation, you will find a certain unconscious pride at the core of the laughter’s thought’ (152).³

Baudelaire observes two kinds of laughter: significative and absolute. The significative comic arises from contrasts between subjects. This disparity generates interpersonal relations—such as reconciliation, manipulation, possession, or violence—that are shaped

¹ Donald Fanger observes the swiftness of action in *Crime and Punishment* is evidence of Dostoevsky attempting to ‘seize a complicated set of interrelations at a given moment’ (1967: 222). This article examines those interrelations from the perspective of time. Michael Holquist argues that the novel operates on two orders of time. The first six books use the temporality of detective stories which emphasizes logical inference and demystification. Porfiry’s thinking, for instance, is based on logical deduction. The epilogue, on the other hand, adopts the temporality of moral tales which reiterates the narrative of salvation from biblical texts. (1977: 88). Holquist brilliantly characterizes the coexistence of the two orders which do not necessarily violate each other’s boundary. I intend to argue that Raskolnikov’s mystified reality is always in contradiction with his empirical reality. The tension between the two realities permeates the novel from beginning to end. Victor Terras observes polarized traits in all major characters in the novel (1998: 56). While Terras tends to see dualism as the author’s artistic style, I understand it as a symptom of ironic consciousness which is unique to Raskolnikov’s existence. In his comparative study of Dostoevsky and Baudelaire, De Jonge shows that Raskolnikov is the produce of the age of intensity, where men engage themselves with extreme experiences achieve a sense of aliveness and certainty. Both author’s heroes react to moral uncertainty by imposing mythical significance in their lives (1975: 2). This article further examines the production and operation of their mythical tales.

² Baudelaire defines laughter as satanic because it originates in a proud self: ‘Laughter is satanic; it is thus profoundly human. It is the consequence in man of the idea of his own superiority. In addition, since laughter is essentially human, it is, in fact, essentially contradictory’ (153-4).

³ The intersubjective struggle recalls the Underground Man who forces his appearance in his colleague’s promotion party, hoping to demonstrate his originality to his audience who cares little about his existence: ‘I turned coward not from cowardice, but from the most boundless vanity. I was afraid, not of six-foot-tallness, nor of being badly beaten...what I lacked was sufficient moral courage. I was afraid that none of those present [...] would understand [me]’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 48).

by social and worldly concerns. Because these differences remain grounded in shared human desires and common life circumstances, laughter tends to be relatively predictable and controllable. The absolute comic expresses superiority too, but this time no longer that of man over man, but of man over nature.⁴ Paul de Man observes a self-mystifying quality: ‘As a being that stands upright...man comes to believe that he dominates nature, just as he can, at times, dominate others or watch others dominate him. This is, of course, a major mystification’ (1983: 214). De Man argues that absolute comic involves a sense of pride, which takes the subject off the ground and produces a mystified version of the self. The man of pride desires authenticity but never achieves it. As a result, the desire to conquer the world produces self-division, that is, a split between one’s empirical self and the proliferation of mystified selves: ‘[W]hen the concept of “superiority” is still being used when the self is engaged in a relationship not to other subjects, but to what is precisely not a self, then the so-called superiority merely designates the *distance* constitutive of all acts of reflection’ (213).⁵ The subject has always already moved away from itself when he engages himself in reflective activities. Reflection does not bring the subject closer to experience; it alienates it from it.

Raskolnikov belongs to the realm of absolute comic . He seeks not only to outdo others but also to remove obstacles in pursuit of what he perceives as a grand and noble purpose. Critics have noted that Raskolnikov is attracted not by the historical Napoleon but by the myth of Napoleon.⁶ While empirical reality belongs to the present moment, Raskolnikov indulges himself in a mystified reality where he reconstructs the past and projects grandiose prospects into the future. Dostoevsky speaks of Raskolnikov’s insubordination when he abruptly rejects Razumikhin, who offers him a translation job: ‘He arrives, having experienced contrition, and there follows *demonic pride*. Completely

⁴ ‘I mean that in this case laughter is still the expression of an idea of superiority – no longer now of man over man, but man over nature’ (Baudelaire 1995: 157).

⁵ The situation is similar to that of Kirilov in *Demons*, where the hero tries to prove his insubordination to God by committing suicide. Maurice Blanchot describes Kirilov’s ironic condition where his aggrandized self-image does not coincide with his empirical self: ‘He who, through clumsiness, has missed his own death, is like a ghost returning only to continue to fire upon his own disappearance. He can only kill himself over and over’ (Blanchot 1989: 102). The same observation can be used to describe Raskolnikov.

⁶ ‘Raskolnikov is attracted not by the historical Napoleon, but by the myth of Napoleon...Myth has aestheticized Napoleon and surrounded his name with an iridescent halo’ (Quoted, Leatherbarrow 1976: 861-2). This is also De Jonge’s argument: Dostoevsky not so much depicts reality as such but the ways in which his characters perceive it with mystified lenses.

on the defense' (Quoted, Mochulsky 1967: 284). Similar ideas are expressed in another entry: 'In the novel the concept of *exorbitant pride*, of arrogance and contempt for this society is expressed in his image. His idea: to seize power over this society. Despotism is his characteristic trait' (284). The idea refers to the absolute seizure of power over not only human beings but also society as a whole.

The reason Paul de Man, specifically his essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', is used in this article to rethink Dostoevsky is that they are both skeptical of the connection between fiction and reality. For De Man, human experience is often given meaning before it is encountered in its immediate form. He is interested in a nonphenomenal way of seeing that does not involve an interpreting mind (Miller 2001: 191). His work shows the arbitrary relationship between experience and its representation. Symbols and allegories serve opposite functions in literary history. While symbols seek to create unity from discrete experiences, allegories preserve their differences without subsuming them into an organic unity. Irony is akin to allegory in its power to dismember fiction from reality: '[it is to] maintain and assert [its] fictional character by stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world' (218). Effectively, irony has the power to question the basis of ideology, which is described as 'the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism' (De Man 1986: 11). Dostoevsky's writings are highly sensitive to the fragile linkage between fiction and reality. In *The Idiot*, for instance, the invalid Ippolit contemplates the materiality of Christ's dead body after the crucifixion in Holbein's painting. Ippolit compares nature to an unsympathetic guillotine machine that has ruthlessly destroyed the son of God. With such a vivid depiction of death, Ippolit doubts if the idea of resurrection is still possible: 'Can something that has no image come as an image' (2001: 409). If image here suggests a picture that depicts an ideal narrative such as the resurrection, can an image do the opposite, that is, to debunk idealistic understanding of the world by focusing on the material side of existence? Robert Jackson noted that Holbein's painting is a contradiction between moral beauty and sensual beauty: the vivid depiction of death and Christ as the symbol of resurrection and eternal life (1966: 68). Ippolit's ekphrasis proves that Dostoevsky's hero often likes to disengage himself from idealistic narratives. Their consciousness is often skeptical of whether these narratives are applicable to the actual

world. It is this skepticism against the attempt to resolve differences and contradictions that I find common in both De Man and Dostoevsky. The classical definition of irony—when someone says A when he actually intends to say the opposite—cannot fully capture irony in the world of Dostoevsky. Irony goes beyond the inversion of meanings; it refers to the situation where the hero's inauthenticity is painfully revealed. A classical irony situation provides a clear conclusion (even though it was inverted in the first place). In Dostoevsky, the hero is not given a definite answer to his being even if their inauthenticity is revealed. They would continue their reflective activities to no end. Their infinite reflection exemplifies true irony, or what de Man aptly called the irony of irony, namely, the 'continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world' (1983: 218).

Reading 'On Crime' and Porfiry's free art

On his way to the exit of his apartment, Raskolnikov has a sickening sensation. He tries to avoid the sight of his landlady, to whom he is heavily indebted. The narrator explains that the sensation is the result of recent irritation and has nothing to do with a timid personality: 'Not that he really was so timid and cowardly; quite the reverse...He wasn't actually afraid of any landlady, whatever she might be plotting against him. But stopping on the stairway to listen to all sorts of rubbish...no, better slip away downstairs like a cat, make his escape unseen' (2017: 3).⁷ With the emphasis that Raskolnikov is not timorous, the narrator dissociates the hero from any assigned trait. Now, the same feeling is mentioned again, but this time on a different plane: 'On this occasion, in fact, his terror of meeting his landlady and creditor *surprised even himself*, once he was out in the street' (3, italics mine). The narration shifts its focus from Raskolnikov's fear to his reflection on it. Fear becomes an object of scrutiny rather than being a physical sensation. A distance arises between the thinking subject and the feeling experienced. Upon arriving on the street, Raskolnikov occupies a disembodied position from which he contemplates the image of a fearless self: 'Yes...a man is capable of anything, and yet he lets it all pass him by, out of pure cowardice...I wonder what people are most afraid of? Taking a fresh

⁷ All the subsequent quotations of the novel are from Slater (2017).

step, saying something new, that's what scares them most...' (3). The sensation of fear is reduced to abstract concepts, which serve as the fuel for the desire for mystification.⁸

De Man emphasized that only connoisseurs in language can spin off a mystified self from their immediate reality. Raskolnikov is a veteran in deploying words: he majors in law, has published an article on crime, and is offered a translation job from his friend. The deployment of language leads to self-division: 'The reflective disjunction not only occurs *by means of* language as a privileged category, but it transfers the self out of the empirical world into a world constituted out of, and in, language [...] Language thus conceived divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition' (De Man 1983: 213). The empirical self is 'immersed in the world', meaning that it is nonreflective and free from self-mystification. The experience of fear as such would constitute the empirical world of Raskolnikov. The phrase 'reflective disjunction' denotes an inviolable gap between reflection and the actual world. Raskolnikov stays within the labyrinth of signs, reflecting on whether he can be original or not, oblivious to his empirical world.⁹

Raskolnikov's elaboration of his article is evidence of his careful deployment of linguistic signs.¹⁰ Although Raskolnikov recognizes that Porfiry is attempting to lure him into further explaining his theory to extract information about the murder, he nevertheless accepts the challenge. What intrigues Porfiry is an underdeveloped point at the end of the article. First, it is about the natural right given to a certain group of extraordinary people committing crimes, examples of which include Mohammed and Julius Caesar. Considering the significant contribution they make to mankind, they have the right to

⁸ Raskolnikov's self-mystification is symptomatic of the dreamer-type which for Donald Fanger originates in the author's feuilletons and evolves into different major characters in later novels. Raskolnikov only differs from previous dreamers in that his Napoleonic dream is rational. Fanger writes: 'Not a substitute for the world but a plan for mastering it' (197).

⁹ Philip Rahv points out that the murder is not motivated by material causes: 'Raskolnikov...is above all a man of reflection, and his crime is...a "theoretical" one, "theoretical"...abstraction [...] is of its very essence...what his crime mainly lacks is *empirical content*, and that is what some critics had in mind...in defining it as a pure experiment in self-cognition' (19).

¹⁰ The piece entitled 'On Crime' was submitted to *Weekly Discourse* six months ago. However, because the journal is merged with *Periodical Discourse*, the article has come out few months later in the latter. The fact that the author is ignorant of the article's publication gives the opportunity for him to recreate its content with Porfiry. While the former mystifies the content, the latter demystifies it.

eliminate those who obstruct them. On the basis of this proposition, we may say that the killing of the pawnbroker is justified because it removes a mercenary woman who causes harm to society. The theory appeals to utilitarian thinking: the suffering of a small individual is deemed insignificant in the face of a greater contribution made to all mankind. Similarly, great historical figures such as Napoleon have the right to take world-transforming action without the constraint of conventional moral codes. They could have destroyed an entire city without showing any mercy to ordinary lives (Frank 1995: 74). To put himself on a par with Napoleon, Raskolnikov broadens the meaning of the extraordinary to include anyone with the determination to stand apart. These people are creative and capable of violating the law: 'I deduce that all of them, not only the great ones but even those who ever so slightly diverged from the common run of humanity, I mean those who were just slightly capable of saying something new, must by their nature be criminals – to a greater or lesser extent, of course' (230). Whether an act is beneficial to humankind is no longer a relevant criterion for justifying bloodshed. As long as a person possesses the desire to be original – to move 'off the beaten track' – their crime is justified. Raskolnikov and Napoleon now possess the same quality, i.e., the desire for originality. The extraordinary people replace the old with something new and better, whereas the ordinary ones maintain the status quo (261). This elaboration makes no reference to concrete historical events or lived experiences. Instead, it disregards the physical, cultural, and historical differences among individuals, reducing humanity to a schematic division between two groups. However, it is precisely through this abstraction that Raskolnikov is able to establish a common ground between Napoleon and himself.¹¹

Paul de Man discusses the Romantics' yearning to reconcile the disunity between the self and nature. In Wordsworth, De Man observes a 'tendency to transfer into nature attributes of consciousness and to unify it organically with respect to a center that acts...as the identity of the self functions for a consciousness' (200). The observation is also applicable to Raskolnikov, only now that nature is replaced by historical figures. Just as

¹¹ The use of analogy and metaphor in Raskolnikov's formulation is the source of aesthetic ideology of which de Man is highly critical. 'The aesthetic is, by definition, a seductive notion that can displace and conceal values of truth and falsehood likely to be more resilient to desire than values of pleasure and pain' (1988: 64). Raskolnikov's project can be read as aestheticization of politics. On this, see Jay (1992).

nature becomes an empty signifier that feeds the poet's imagination, Napoleon is an empty name that accommodates Raskolnikov's self-mystification. The language used in both contexts is characterized by the tendency to synthesize the self and the world, both past and present. In fact, the self is placed in a complex situation that cannot be fully understood by simply mapping it onto beautiful scenes. To truly understand the self, we must understand that the self and the world operate on different temporal systems.¹² De Man's temporal predicament refers to neither a single perspective of understanding time nor the absence of time. Rather, it refers to the coexistence of different timeframes that are not synthesized into a single, organic, linear framework.

Porfiry is an ironist who questions Raskolnikov's aesthetics with his special investigation method (299).¹³ He is the marker of dissonance: his winking face is sick but cheerful; he looks like a peasant woman, but he can also look old and serious.¹⁴ Porfiry poses questions and remarks to Raskolnikov, which shakes the ground of his Napoleonic theory. Porfiry asks: is it common for people to mix up the category to which they belong (ordinary and extraordinary)? Yes, answer Raskolnikov. It is common for young people who are proud and silly to imagine themselves as extraordinary men. The fact that an ordinary man can also be extraordinary suggests that the theory is not watertight and has many exceptions. Is it possible that extraordinary men are sorry for their victims and seek punishment? Yes, answer Raskolnikov. Suffering and pain are part of the definition of being extraordinary (234).¹⁵ In fact, they are not unfeeling; they are extraordinary precisely because of their ability to endure remorse. Raskolnikov elegantly redefines his

¹² The romantics seek 'refuge against the impact of time in a natural word to which, in truth, it bears no resemblance' (206).

¹³ De Man would advise we should be cautious of Raskolnikov's grandiose idea: 'whenever the aesthetic is invoked as an appeal to clarity and control, whenever, in other words, a symptom is made into a remedy for the disorder that it signals, a great deal of caution is in order' (1986: 64). For de Man's critique of romantic ideology, see Norris (1988: 29-64).

¹⁴ In one of the interrogation meetings, Razumikhin observes clear differences between his friend and the magistrate. One is pensive and discreet, the other is inquisitive and sharp-minded (233). In a later interrogation: 'Do listen to an old man, I'm talking seriously, Rodion Romanovich (at this point the barely thirty-five-year-old Porfiry Petrovich really did seem to age suddenly; even his voice changed, and he became all hunched up), and besides, I'm a candid person... Am I candid or not? What do you think? I believe I really am...' (303). Raskolnikov thinks that Porfiry winks at him, but he is unsure about his judgement (225).

¹⁵ 'Let the man suffering, if he's sorry for his victim. Suffering and pain are always obligatory for people of broad intellect and a deep heart' (234).

ideal criminal as someone capable of tenderness. The amendment makes the theory look increasingly like an artificial narrative rather than the objective truth about humanity. Porfiry presses on: ‘Well...I don’t know how best to put it...it’s very frivolous...a psychological idea...Look here, when you were composing your little article – it’s not possible, is it, that you yourself, heh-heh! That you didn’t regard yourself, the least little bit, as another “extraordinary” individual, someone with “something new” to say – I mean in your own sense. That’s so, isn’t it?’ (235). Porfiry’s question reduces Raskolnikov’s grandiose theory about humankind to the dream of a vain man, hinting at the difference between fiction (self-imagined theory) and reality (one’s meagre existence). Both Porfiry and Raskolnikov are language connoisseurs. While Raskolnikov manipulates signs within his mystified world, Porfiry uses language to unearth the borderline between the mystified and the empirical. If Raskolnikov focuses on one reality, Porfiry many at the same time.

Raskolnikov makes a tremendous effort to look clever and calm in front of the police.¹⁶ For example, just before the first meeting with Porfiry, he makes fun of Razumikhin for falling in love with Dunya, bursts into laughter, and tries to create a casual and spontaneous atmosphere.¹⁷ It is difficult to appear natural: ‘I’ll have to sing Lazarus [a hard-luck story] with this one too...And do it naturally. The most natural thing would be not to show anything at all. Strictly nothing at all. No, *strictly* would be unnatural again’ (218). Raskolnikov is not only anxious to look spontaneous but also eager to execute his self-will so that he can have full control over his expressions. Raskolnikov’s will to power is Porfiry’s wit and De Man’s mystification. The magistrate concludes, ‘Wit, in my opinion, is a splendid thing; it’s like an ornament of nature, and one of life’s consolations, and what tricks it can play!’ (303).¹⁸ However, what betrays Raskolnikov’s ornamentation is his natural tendency. He would act in complete contrast to his earlier behavior, implying that his outwards confidence may mask something underneath. This is the

¹⁶ Raskolnikov believes that criminals will lose their reason – ‘a sort of collapse of his will and reason’ - while committing a crime, hence leaving traces of evidence unfavourable to them. He muses on the clouding of the criminal’s judgement (65).

¹⁷ ‘The extraordinary ferocity with which Razumikhin greeted this apparently sincere laughter made the whole scene appear unaffectedly good-humoured and – most importantly – natural’ (220).

¹⁸ Porfiry quotes Raskolnikov’s own expression, ‘striding over all obstacles’, to summarize his self-mystification project (303).

moment when the investigator can glimpse the truth of the case: 'Let's suppose he tells a lie, this person I mean, this special case, this unknown quantity; and he'll tell an excellent lie, most cleverly; you'd think that would be his triumph, and he could start enjoying the fruits of his cleverness; but then – crash! Right at the most interesting moment, the most fateful moment, he falls down in a faint! he's given us the idea! He told brilliant lies, but he didn't allow for his temperament. (303). Raskolnikov puts too much effort into appearing natural. He has demonstrated the strength of his will, but only at the cost of its naturalness: 'You see where all that cunning gets you! Or again, he'll get carried away by his playful cleverness and start making a fool of whoever's suspecting him, he'll turn pale seemingly on purpose, seemingly as a prank, only his pallor is *all too natural*, it looks too much like the real thing, and once again he's given us the idea!' (303). Whenever Raskolnikov tries too hard, his intentions reveal themselves, and their very visibility signals something forced rather than genuine. Raskolnikov murders the pawnbroker but ignores the stolen money, confesses directly to Zametov, returns to the crime scene and rings the pawnbroker's doorbell, shares his Napoleonic theory openly with Porfiry—all these actions are evidence of Raskolnikov putting too much effort into showing his intentions. 'Temperament is a mirror, yes, a mirror, and a most transparent one! Look into it and admire yourself, that's what!' (303).

The assertive Raskolnikov in Porfiry's interrogations recalls Baudelaire's classical comedian. A man presents himself as self-assertive, assuming that he is superior to nature and never falls. His assumption forms the basis of a mystified self. When he slips and falls with pain, he gains the knowledge that man is by no means superior to nature. He realizes that his imagined relationship with nature is reified and purely fictional. The fall is painful, but it is a necessary step in the progression of self-knowledge. If we try to apply this scenario to the interrogations, we can observe that Raskolnikov is the self-assertive man, whereas Porfiry is a clown figure who set up his falls. Without Porfiry, mystification would not appear as mystification to Raskolnikov. De Man writes, 'The ironic, twofold self that the writer or philosopher constitutes by his language seems able to come into being only at the expense of his empirical self, failing (or rising) from a stage of mystified adjustment into the knowledge of his mystification' (1983: 214). The unresolved question is what becomes of Raskolnikov after his fall. De Man's figure of the

stumbling clown offers a schematic account of irony: a moment of self-certainty is suddenly interrupted by the recognition of one's own blindness. However, what happens if the clown rises, recovers his confidence, and falls again? What if the cycle of self-assertion and collapse repeats indefinitely? What if the clown persists in his self-assertion even while knowing that another fall awaits him? These are questions that De Man leaves unanswered, but they find rich and sustained exploration in Dostoevsky's novel.

Self-confession of a mystified sinner

We have examined Raskolnikov's self-mystification and Porfiry's demystifying responses. Their roles are relatively clearly defined throughout the interrogations. However, the complexity of self-consciousness goes beyond such a distinction. In fact, Raskolnikov is always aware of the fictitiousness of his thoughts. He often falls into an infinite spiral of reflective activity where he will transgress despite knowing that his transgression will fail. The hero is placed in an awkward temporal predicament. De Man writes, '[the act of irony] reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality' (222). The conflict within the ironic consciousness is a futile battle in seeking reconciliation. Ironic consciousness consists of self-mystification and demystification. These two tendencies work on different temporal dimensions. Self-mystification tends to affirm a self-imagined past that is static and symbolical. However, demystification works with the future, which implies temporal flow and the transience of things. Self-mystification would like to ignore the force of demystification, but irony would not allow this to happen. The former 'can only restate and repeat it on an increasing conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world' (222). As a result, mystification 'dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral' (222). The idea of escaping from an endless, even maddening, labyrinth characterizes the repetitive reflective activities of consciousness.¹⁹ I further examine this situation by examining Raskolnikov's two confessions to Sonia. He has promised her that he will tell her who the murderer is.

¹⁹ On the potential of madness in irony, see Mileur's essay on De Man (1986: 333).

During the confession, Raskolnikov intends to seek forgiveness. However, he does not want to express submissiveness to her. Throughout the confession, Raskolnikov was anxious to maintain his proud version of self. However, he also knows that his transgressive self is incompatible with social reality.

Raskolnikov wonders what God has done for Sonia in return for all her suffering and why she did not fall into depravity (287). He makes Sonia read out the rising Lazarus in the gospel. The act of reading forces Sonia to confront her own suffering, and the emotions she has long kept suppressed. Sonia gains a sense of triumph when reading out the account of Jesus' miracle. It is at this moment when Raskolnikov feels energized: 'Yes, this was it!... This was what he had expected' (290). Raskolnikov finds comfort for his crime by hearing a story that suggests the possibility of rebirth. Raskolnikov believes that both he and Sonia have done something morally depraved for no benefit and are therefore the same.²⁰ He ignores the fact that she is ready to accept God's forgiveness while he is not. It seems that he is talking to Sonia, but he is actually talking to himself: 'You have crossed the barrier too...you managed to cross it. You've laid hands on yourself, you've destroyed a life...*your own life*...[Y]ou won't be able to stand it, and if you remain alone you'll go mad, like me' (291). Raskolnikov homogenizes Sonia's experience as a prostitute; the confessor has turned into a confessant. His self-mystification mode is activated again: 'Smash what needs to be smashed, once and for all, that's what! And take the suffering on ourselves! What? You don't understand? You'll understand later on...Freedom and power, but the main thing is power!' (292).²¹

In their second meeting, Raskolnikov justifies his murderous act for multiple reasons. He begins with the classical motive: 'I wanted to make myself into a Napoleon, and that was why I killed her' (367).²² He then sinks into reflection about himself thinking about

²⁰ Sonia works as a prostitute to support her family. She has '*insatiable* compassion'; 'no one drop of corruption had yet found its way to her heart' (281, 286). With her father's death and her mother falling into madness, she continues her work without losing faith. For Raskolnikov, she has 'destroyed and betrayed [herself] *to no purpose*' (285).

²¹ Similarly, Raskolnikov feels energized after visiting Sonia's impoverished family. 'His pride and self-confidence grew with every minute that passed...he suddenly felt that he, too, "was allowed to live, that life still went on, that his own life hadn't died with the old woman"' (169).

²² He returns to a similar thread of argument later in the confession: 'the man who is firm and strong in mind and spirit is master over them! The man who dares much, is right in their eyes. The one who cares least about anything, he'll make their laws; and the one who dares most, is the most right for them!' (369).

whether the act was grandiose enough and, if not, whether he would still want to do it. He dismisses this thread of thought and develops a new one, this time appealing to familial bonding. He steals from the pawnbroker because he does not want to disappoint her mother, who has high expectations of him. The explanation sounds like it comes from a textbook. It could be that Raskolnikov has run over the same lines many times in his mind, as if he is searching for an excusable ground for Sonia (368). The entire confession is filled with abrupt changes in reasoning: ‘That’s not it! Or rather...Suppose (yes! This really is better!), suppose that I’m vain, and jealous and evil, and nasty, and vindictive, well...and even inclined to madness (Let’s have it all at once! People have been talking about madness before this, I’ve noticed it!)’ (369). He is constantly aware of other voices, including those of Sonia, his family, and the public. Raskolnikov is anxious to work out a decent reason for his murderous act. He says he wants to ‘have that courage’ and that’s why he kills; he killed solely for himself; his goal is to determine whether he is a louse or a human being, whether he is capable of overstepping the boundary or not. Towards the end, he changes again, saying that it was the devil in him that killed the women (371).

Raskolnikov’s repeated attempts to identify a definite cause have been proven futile. He is caught in endless attempts to justify an experience with mystified knowledge. The deed is one thing, whereas the doer is a concept imposed on it on the basis of mystification.²³ I killed *because* I wanted to achieve a certain goal or *because* I was being wicked, evil, possessed, etc. It is far from the truth that Raskolnikov has a definite reason why he kills in the first place. Details show that there is an unpremeditated side of the murder. Porfiry calls it a ‘fantastic, murky business, a modern affair, a sing of out times, of the darkness of the human heart’ (403). Raskolnikov accidentally overhears a conversation about Lizaveta’s wickedness, which in turn gives him an alibi to execute his plan (60). During the murder, he strikes his axe on the pawnbroker’s head ‘almost mechanically’ (70).

Raskolnikov’s ‘reasons’ for murder tell us very little about the condition of the actual self

²³ In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche describes the ‘madness’ of the pale criminal who rushes to equate his mischief with a definite criminal identity: ‘He now saw himself always as doer of a single deed. Madness I call this: the exception now became for him the essence’. (2005: 34). In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he expresses the same idea more directly: ‘But no such substratum exists; there is no “being” behind doing, acting, becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction imposed on the doing – the doing itself is everything’ (1996: 29). For a comparison between Raskolnikov and the pale criminal, see Ranasinghe (2022).

when the murder is carried out. His Napoleonic theory is less of a pre-murder motivation than a post-murder justification. In fact, the problem with Raskolnikov lies precisely in the assumption that his justification can restore a connection between his mystified and empirical realities. Even Raskolnikov himself knows this problem very well: ‘Do you really think that I couldn’t even see the simple fact that if I’d start asking and questioning myself about whether I had the right to assume power – that in itself meant that I didn’t have that right?’ (370). Raskolnikov reimagines his past by projecting it onto abstract narratives, but they only distance him further from confronting his lived, empirical reality.

Despite his failure to become a Napoleon, Raskolnikov can at least become a creature longing for grandiose goals. He treasures personal authenticity over the common good. He calls himself an aesthetic louse who craves originality: ‘Yes, I really am a louse...if only because, firstly, I’m now arguing about being a louse; and secondly, because I’ve been pestering all-loving Providence for a whole month...And thirdly, because I had resolved to observe absolute justice...out of all lice I picked out the most useless one...I myself am even nastier and fouler than the louse I killed; and I *sensed in advanced* that I’d tell myself that, but only *after* I’d killed her!’ (244). First, he is a louse only because he is arguing that this is the case. This shows that Raskolnikov is highly aware of the significative power of language and its fictitious quality. Second, he kills because of his carnal desires, but he disguises them with grandiose purposes. Third, he kills the pawnbroker because she is vulnerable. What is horrifying is that Raskolnikov knows that he will go through these three reasons after killing the pawnbroker. This reasoning does not arise from empirical reality but rather from the rigorous use of linguistic signs. What makes Raskolnikov susceptible to madness is not the murder of the pawnbroker as his compulsion to create fictional realities in understanding his empirical experience.

Svidrigailov’s parables of time

I would like to conclude by looking at Raskolnikov’s reaction to incomplete or dissonant images. In his first encounter of the police due to his unpaid rent, he experiences a sudden surge of emptiness: ‘he was aware of a dark sense of endless anguished loneliness and estrangement suddenly invading his soul [...] And worst of all was the fact that this was

more a sensation than an awareness of an idea; it was a direct feeling, the most agonizing feeling he had ever experienced in his life' (93). The narrator clearly stated that the terrible sensation is something that Raskolnikov cannot intellectualize. The passage emphasizes the very being of such a sensation, offering no place for grand imagination. In one of his dreams, Raskolnikov experiences a re-enactment of the murder. He returns to the pawnbroker's flat while following a stranger. The atmosphere is marked with silence, while an 'enormous, round, coppery-red moon' gazes at the windows (245). '[The moon] must be asking a riddle now' (245). Raskolnikov cannot stop himself from intellectualizing the surroundings. He discovers the pawnbroker who is sitting on a chair and laughing inaudibly. He pulls out the axe and strikes her again. However, she does not budge, as if she is made of wood. He tries to flee but is blocked by a sea of crowds, who are whispering and staring at him (246). The dream emphasizes images and sensation rather than their interpretation given by the dreamer himself. There is an attempt to interpret it (the moon must be asking a riddle), but there is nothing that comes out of it. The pawnbroker's silent laughter, the inability to kill, whispers in the crowd and the stranger who leads him to the flat—all these enigmatic elements—cannot be easily assimilated into Raskolnikov's mystification scheme.

It is not accidental that this dream comes right after Raskolnikov's intense reflective activities, which mystify his crime. The dream foregrounds the mundane physicality of existence, which is immune to intellectualization. When the dream ends, Raskolnikov discovers that Svidrigailov has been sitting next to him. The libertine recounts different stories about his relationship with women, to which Raskolnikov dismisses as immoral. He then retells his recent encounters with his deceased wife: 'The first time I saw her was on the actual day of the funeral, an hour after we'd left the cemetery. That was the day before I left to come here. The second time was the day before yesterday, on the way here, at daybreak, at Malaya Vishera station; and the third time was two hours ago, in the flat where I'm staying, in my room' (253). Marfa Petrovna's appearances are imbricated with different notions of time. She makes her appearance in the most nondescript manner, whereas Svidrigailov expects something more eventful: 'She? Just imagine, she talks of the most trivial stuff. You wouldn't believe it – it always makes me cross' (254). The husband is disappointed by her banal, demystified appearance and random remarks. 'She

came into the room, saying “Arkady Ivanovich, with all that going on, you’ve forgotten to wind the dining-room clock” (254). It is their habit to wind the clock in the past seven years. However, the wife’s funeral has interrupted the routine. The wife’s request to rewind the clock is ironic: she seeks to return to an earlier period of family life, but her death makes such a return impossible. In her second appearance, Marfa offers fortune-telling reading to the tired Svidrigailov, to which he declines. The next day, she reappears in a beautiful dress. A ghost is usually understood as existing outside ordinary temporal experiences rather than inhabiting the present. With her ironical references to the present, her appearance demystifies the concept of ghosts.

Svidrigailov then proposes a definition of eternity that emphasizes the materiality of existence: ‘We always imagine eternity as an idea that can’t be grasped, as something enormous, simply enormous. However, why does it have to be enormous? Just suppose, instead of all that, it’s nothing but a single little room, something like a village bathhouse, all grimy with soot, with spiders in all the corners – and that’s eternity for you!’ (256).

The passage describes a complex image that encapsulates Raskolnikov’s temporal predicament. Eternity, in the romantic tradition, is understood as a ‘simultaneous full and perfect possession of interminable life’ (Poulet, 6). Romantics like to imagine a full possession of time so that they will not be disappointed by the transience of human experience.²⁴ However, Svidrigailov’s eternity debunks this mystifying understanding.

With its bathhouse and spiders inhabiting the corners, eternity is presented as an extension of creaturely existence rather than a transcendent realm. It leaves little space for idealist speculation and remains grounded in a naturalistic understanding of life.

People such as Raskolnikov might want to perceive eternity as something grandiose and mystified, but eternity is nothing more than the eternal return of the same. Raskolnikov’s hysterical reply (‘And you really, really can’t imagine anything more just and comfortable than that?’) is symptomatic of his defense mechanism in shielding off any images that allude to a divided conception of self. The man interested in bathhouses and spiders is also the one who is indulged in debauchery and other sensual pleasures.

Svidrigailov sees no problem in pursuing bodily wants: ‘Debauchery!...Why should I

²⁴ ‘All this past life of his, all his past thoughts, and past preoccupations, and past ideas, and past impressions, and this whole view, and he himself, and all of it, all of it – he seemed to see it all...’ (103).

give up women, when I'm so fond of them... That sort of debauchery at least makes some sense, it's rooted in our nature and not subject to fanciful whims' (416). We may say that there is not a tinge of irony that can be extracted from this remark as the man himself is fully sincere about his indulgence in his sensual, empirical reality.²⁵ On the other hand, those 'fanciful whims' are precisely the bases of Raskolnikov's Napoleonic theory and his demonic pride which are only sustainable at the level of mystified language deployment.

Through the analyses of Raskolnikov's interactions with Porfiry, Sonia and Svidrigailov, I have argued that self-division goes beyond the alternation between two opposite personalities. Rather, it is the result of the attempt to differentiate oneself from his empirical reality, which leads to the production of a mystified self that is constituted by signs. The process resembles the growth of a rhizome rather than the uniform division of a cell. Raskolnikov's self-division can be understood from the perspective of time. He is being caught between incompatible temporal orders: the immediacy of lived experience and the endless reflective production of self-images. Each attempt to understand himself generates another narrative, another mystification, another distance from the empirical reality he seeks to coincide. Raskolnikov's split identity is not a predetermined structure, as summarized in Richard Peace's analogy at the beginning of this article. Rather, he continually constructs, revises and mystifies it. For de Man, the subject can know his inauthenticity but can never overcome it. The consequence of misrecognition is eternal entrapment within the linguistic maze.

Towards the end, Raskolnikov drifts to the police station. He knows very well that criminals are supposed to have their lives transformed after their sentences, but he is not ready to accept the change just yet: 'I wonder – will my spirit really be so broken over the next fifteen or twenty years... and call myself a robber every time I open my mouth? Yes, that's it, exactly! That's what they're exiling me for now...' (461). His reflective activities did not die down because of his decision to confess to the police. He is just as conscious of what is expected of him as a criminal and how he feels disgusted by all that.

²⁵ Svidrigailov is only unironic when analysed with Raskolnikov. The encounter with a series of haunting images of female in his dreams can be read as an irony of his power and independence.

Raskolnikov cannot stay satisfied with an ordinary life: ‘Mere existence wasn’t enough for him – he would always need something more. Perhaps it had only ever been the intensity of his desires that had led him to feel that he was a man to whom more was allowed than to others’ (480). The narrator has clearly noted that ‘the intensity of his desires’ makes him think that he is transgressive. The result of such intense longing is the formation of an infinite number of mystified selves.

In the epilogue, Raskolnikov appears to have given up some of his pride and begun to accept Sonia’s unconditional love. He sees that the new testament under his pillow is on the threshold of opening it, yet the novel concludes before the action is taken. The reading of the gospel suggests the possibility of spiritual renewal and the restoration of a repentant, forgiving, and more importantly, an undivided self. However, the novel does not depict such a transformation. Dostoevsky preserves the tension of self-division rather than resolving it, thus preserving the critical power of irony, namely, the power of delinking the seemingly natural relationship of language and the world, fiction and reality. Redemption remains a future possibility—something hoped for rather than attained—while irony and temporal differences continue to define the present condition of the self.

References

- Baudelaire, Charles. 1995. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 1989 *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln, Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press.
- De Jonge, Alex. 1975. *Dostoevsky and The Age of Intensity*. London: Seeker & Warburg.
- De Man, Paul. 1986. *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- De Man, Paul. 1983. The Rhetoric of Temporality, In *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd edition. 187-228. London: Methuen.
- De Man, Paul. 1996. *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2001. *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Vintage.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2004. *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Peveara and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Random House.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2004. *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Vintage.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2015. *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Oliver Ready. London: Penguin Books.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2017. *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Nicolas Pasternak Slater. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fanger, Donald. 1967. *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens and Gogol*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2000. *Essential Works of Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1. London: Penguin.
- Frank, Joseph. 1995. *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Holquist, Michael. 1977. *Dostoevsky and the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jackson, Robert Louis. 1966. *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form : A Study of His Philosophy of Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Jay, Martin. 1992 'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics? *Cultural Critique* 21: 41–61.
- Leatherbarrow, W. J.. 1976. The Aesthetic Louse: Ethics and Aesthetics in Dostoevsky's *Prestupleniye i Nakazaniye*. *The Modern Language Review* 71: 857–66.
- Mileur, Jean-Pierre. 1986. Allegory and Irony: 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' Re-Examined. *Comparative Literature* 38: 329–36.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 2001. Paul de Man as Allergen. In *Material Events*, ed. Andrzej Warminski, 183-204. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Mochulsky, Konstantin. 1967. *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*, trans. M. A. Minihan. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1996. *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2005. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, trans. Graham Parkes. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norris, Christopher. 1988. *Paul de Man : Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology*. New York: Routledge.
- Poulet, Georges. 1954. Timelessness and Romanticism. *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 15: 3–22.
- Rahv, Philip. 1962. Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*. In *Dostoevsky: a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Rene Wellek, 16-38. Prentice-Hall.
- Ranasinghe, Prashan. 2022. The Pale Criminal, the Guilty Conscience, and the Constitution of Crime: Nietzsche Reading 'Raskolnikov'. *Law & Literature*. 34: 291-312. DOI: 10.1080/1535685X.2021.1976475.
- Terras, Victor. 1998. *Reading Dostoevsky*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.