The imagination of matter. The earth archetype in the early Dostoevsky

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ABSTRACT
From his earliest works, Dostoevsky seems to be dominated by imagery closely related to earth, to the chthonic world. His narrative faculty finds support and expression in a complex of earthly images that, at various moments of his life, will evolve into ideas and positions. In the form of infinite variations, the archetype of the earth is thus a central motif of Dostoevsky’s work. In this essay, I will circumscribe the theme, the archetype of the earth, to the first Dostoevsky and, in particular, to a work chosen as a metonymy, Mr. Prokharchin (1846). His writing, so concrete and historically concerned, is nourished by an ancient, hidden substrate, that is mythological and archetypal, and which dates back to the sources of European literature.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 24 July 2017
Revised 21 August 2017
Accepted 28 September 2017

KEYWORDS
Faith and culture; Dostoevsky; archetypes; Mother Earth; literature and archetypes

1. Introduction

From the very beginning Dostoevsky’s writing shows a deep connection to the chthonic word, that is to say, to earth. His narrative is supported and enriched by complex images revolving around the earth, that later evolve into precise ideas and positions. The archetype of the earth, in all its infinite variations, is central to understanding Dostoevsky’s work (Dostoevsky 1972).

In this essay, I will analyse the archetype of the earth in Dostoevsky’s early works, and in particular, the novella Mr. Prokharchin (1846), which I chose to represent as a metonymy of sorts for this period of his production.

We are so deeply involved in Dostoevsky’s great novels that we pay less attention to his early works. When we do, it is with the dangerous and insidious tendency of reading them from the point of view of his more mature stage.

We could actually regard Dostoevsky’s works as a homogeneous corpus, though we must also consider the existence of an evolving line that is interesting to study diachronically.
Let us consider, for example, the abandoned project to rewrite *The Double* (1846), after returning from prison and confinement in the sixties. This work, which in his notes of the early seventies Dostoevsky defines as ‘my most important type of underground’1, will flow into the *Notes from Underground* (1864). Yet, Mr. Golyadkin of *The Double* and the underground hero are quite opposed: one is completely devoid of self-awareness, the other is enveloped by an exasperated self-consciousness. Their opposition shows just how much Dostoevsky’s creative intention evolved, his interests in the 1960s and what he had failed to focus on 20 years back.

2. The notion of archetype

Why do we need to talk about archetypes? Is it not but an added complication to all the major issues that Dostoevsky’s works already raise?

‘We have to portray reality as it is’, they say, but reality doesn’t exist and has never existed on this earth, because the essence of things is inaccessible to man. Man perceives nature as it is reflected in his ideas, after it has passed through his senses; therefore, we must give more importance to the idea and not be afraid of the ideal. (PSS., 21, 75)

Dostoevsky made it clear that our knowledge of reality must be processed by the mind, emotions and senses. His characters are a combination of emotions and ideas, the source of so many tragic conflicts.

We can grasp the deep complexity regarding man through an often-neglected faculty, the imagination, which works on a subconscious level by creating narratives, like modern versions of myths. Archetypes are dynamic forces, active and immanent forms that manifest themselves in fantasies, dreams, instinctive behaviors, and reveal their presence through symbolic images.

These archetypal models are like a human footprint that has shaped man’s response to reality for centuries; they are primordial shapes in the psyche that structure human behavior and one’s perception of reality. In modern times, the archetype retracts internally, to the subjective dimension, or eventually manifests itself in art.

In literature, especially in the twentieth century, archetypes have been widely used, such as in Northrop Frye’s theory for which an archetype is a recurring image, that may be recognized as a fundamental element in an author’s global experience of reality. Frye explores archetypal symbols and mythical narrative models. But, the Canadian critic is primarily driven by a narratological interest, studying narrative structures; Dostoevsky’s archetypes are not structures, they do not appear in his works simply as images, metaphors and symbols acting in a pre-established and conventional way. They are, as Lonny Harrison astutely observes, aspects of personality, of the Self who carries all of its burden of truth (God, nation, tradition …), rooted in an ancestral depth that may be considered as being one with the earth’s natural force (*stikhya*) (Frye 1957; Harrison 2016).

Dostoevsky’s creative imagination is closely linked to the chthonic world. We could say that his poetry embodies a group of images dynamically related to the archetype of the ‘earth’ element. Here, the reader is reminded of the connection between the poetic image and archetype ‘drowned in the depths of the unconscious’ (Bachelard 1961; Meletinsky 1994; Toporov 1995). However, I would like to stress that I do not
intend to discuss the psychological dynamics of Dostoevsky in the present essay. I consider the term ‘archetype’ a powerful source of poetic images and, therefore, of literary forms. From a heuristic point of view, I find Olga Frejdenberg’s approach immensely useful, as she studies how myth and rite give birth to the metaphor. Myth and rite both constitute metaphorical interpretations of reality, and they establish and consolidate themselves through the metaphor, which keeps traces of these almost forgotten archaic meanings, both manifesting and concealing them:

They [genres and literary motives, mcg] develop from the conception of the world of primitive society, poured into a certain morphological system: when the meaning of this conception disappears, its structure continues to function in a system of new meanings. So-called literary forms have a long life before literature itself (Frejdenberg 1997, 109).

It is in this sense that archetypes speak with the language of myths, through which narratives maintain a strong bond with the line of thought of primitive humanity. But, if we are advancing towards a transformation of myths and religious experience into genres and literary forms, are we then facing an inevitable and irreversible turn from religion to rhetoric? Or does the religious-sacred element persist under rhetoric, surviving as treasured, indirectly, and secretly, by poets?

From what has been said so far, it is clear that, within the limits (of space and method) dictated by this brief essay, I cannot consider the sophiological interpretation of the earth motif in Dostoevsky, that, on the other end, it is so useful to read his great late works. This is a productive line of thought practiced by several Russian thinkers, such as Vyacheslav Ivanov, Sergey Bulgakov and Lev Zander (Bogdanova 2016; Ghidini 2000; Zander 1960). Instead, I would like to remain on a more original plane, on the indistinct, vague, and therefore open, plane of the archetype and of the imagination that generates it, recognizing it mysteriously in itself. We will then see that earth, as element, as the elemental force of matter (and I remind the reader that the most unexpected ‘materialist’ is one of the most beloved Dostoyevsky’s heroes, Prince Myshkin), continuously recurs in Dostoevsky’s works and can be a useful Ariadne’s thread in the labyrinth of his creation.

As the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard suggests, every poet, by writing in a state of rêverie, plunges into a primordial dimension that somehow joins him to the cosmos, to all creation. It is this secret relationship that nourishes the imagination. It is in this state that the universal symbols originate, and it is here that the endless symbolization work that animates all poetry is set in motion. Cosmic representations are connected to our most intimate dreams and take the form of images that are often based on the four elements. They generate powerful structures that, in one way or another, are at the core of the activity that shapes the world. Bachelard calls this phenomenon ‘creative imagination of matter’, meaning that human imagination is based on the original elements and that every poetic individuality has one, or more, preferred, particularly ‘responsive’ to his intimate self. In Dostoevsky, the modern Antaeus, the dominant element is the earth. It is his point of consistency, an almost instinctive way of embodying in concrete form his own imagination: ‘It is possible that really exists some chemical that binds the spirit of man to his native land, so that man cannot be torn from it, and even if he is torn away, he will ultimately return?’ (PSS., 5, 52).
The roots of humanity run deep within the earth, and despite modern conceptions man yearns for a lost organic integrity and social unity, where the individual reflects in his daily life within the community the cycle of nature, which renews itself relentlessly, all the while manifesting itself in rituals and customs.

Since every image exists through the mysterious relationship with its opposite, the tortuous and terrible chthonian dimension is rich of vivifying fertility of the humble muddy Mother Earth. From the dark, claustrophobic depths of the ground emerges the hope of a general unity, the ideal of ‘sobornost’, based on the vital belonging to one’s own people.

The elemental force of the earth thus expresses itself in a continuous binary polarity: the living principle of the soil can easily be overturned in the heaviness, in the gravity of the earth, in the mortal inertia of matter, in the claustrophobic and sealed-off underground world.

The visions of Ordynov, the detached from reality hero from The Landlady (1847), well illustrates this duplicity: he indulges in fantasies centered on earth, a chimera that evokes all the nostalgia of the purest ideals and at the same time all the cosmic terror of annihilating dissolution: beautiful gardens, wonderful green cities, built, and destroyed (exactly the opposite of the perfect system he speculates about), corpses that rise from the earth in a crescendo that ends with the greatest horror of all: one’s own death and the disintegration in dust ‘without resurrection, for centuries’ (PSS., 1, 280).

In the early Dostoevsky, this second, obscure dimension prevails over the hopeful vision of regeneration and resurrection that we will find in his mature works.

3. The archetype of earth in Mr. Prokharchin

Dostoevsky works on Mr. Prokharchin (1846) with tiredness and little satisfaction. As he writes in his letters to his brother Mikhail, censorship had distorted it until it was reduced to its ‘skeleton only’ (PSS., 281, 126). The dull representation of the inner world of a poor lunatic chinovnik (a minor official in czarist Russia) is immediately perceived as a dangerous signal of free thinking. Consequently, the strokes of censorship and a certain terse style of writing, perhaps due to the harsh criticism in the Belinsky’s reception of The Double, result in a reticent and quite obscure work.

To rent a squalid corner, not even a room, was a typical social phenomenon of the time, but Dostoevsky transforms it in a condition of the soul and this burrow of a room hides and shelters man from life, which is suffocated and compressed by such an environment. Daunted by the threat of losing his job and his meager source of sustenance, Prokharchin descends into madness. He wanders around Petersburg for days until he is involved in a fire, after which he feels sick and dies in a state of delirium, feeling himself burning inside. Hidden in his mattress (and not in his chest, carefully secured by a German lock) the neighbors and his landlady find the incredible sum of 2497 rubles, including some rare coins with Napoleon’s effigy.

Along with air, water and fire, money is the fifth natural force a human being has to reckon with most often. This is one, if not the main, reason why today, one hundred years after Dostoevsky’s death, his novels preserve their relevance (Brodsky 1987, 159).
With such words Brodsky comments on the relevance of money in Dostoevsky’s works, tracing it back to the ‘power of the elements’: this metaphysical money becomes a vector of dark impulses that materialize in the dialectic of power and blood, of guilt (a sort of ‘debt’, after all) and poverty.

Just as Pushkin in his drama The Miserly Knight, Dostoevsky focuses on the inner need of the miser to be safe, to defend his own money, concentrating on a completely introjected life, constantly threatened from the outside.

Money is a chthonian power: his god, Plutus, god of fields and wealth, is easily confused with Pluto, the King of the underworld and the Dead. In Goethe’s Faust, Plutus unchains the treasures and ‘In brazen vessels//A swelling and boiling of golden blood,//Next to the finery of crowns, chains, and rings;//It rises and threatens melting engulfment’ (Goethe 2016, 212). Like a shapeless flow of life sprung from death (the ‘golden blood’), gold is like clay, pliable by those who dominate it, but it also represents a dangerous fire for the crowd.

Pushkin, in turn, in The Miserly Knight, speaks of blood coming from the bowels of the earth, whose memory is preserved by gold, a symbol of all the evil of the human being: ‘tears, blood and sweat’. The Pushkinian baron shows a loving care for his ‘faithful chests’ and fills them with gold handles, that are like heaps of earth piled up, amounting to mountains.

If all the blood, sweat, and tears once shed

For all that’s stored in here, could now pour forth

From the earth’s bowels in one sudden gush,

There’d be a second Flood—and I would suffocate

Inside my faithful vault. But enough. (Pushkin 2000, 46)

That is the inertia of the clayish material of which man is made of, at the center of an underworld that conceals an irresistible urgency for power, an urge that explodes in erotic excitement and in death drive:

When I put the key into the lock, then

I feel what such a one must feel, plunging

His knife into a victim: pleasure

And horror mixed in one. (Pushkin 2000, 46)

Approximately 15 years later, Dostoevsky lives in a different world: the Knight has become a miserable figure, described by a series of chthonian images (a hunchback, a dwarf, a hare being held to the ground) and the six ‘faithful chests’ are reduced to a ‘small chest’ full of rags, its lock – German though it is – being nothing if not a useless precaution. Nothing remains but the life within the den, hidden underground, but the Baron’s titanism in Prokharchin is reduced to ash by the derision of his roommates who stigmatize his Napoleonic arias (and the irony continues in the
precious gold Napoleon coin found in the mattress); we are left with nothing but the extreme introversion of a powerless self.

In his considerations on the poetry of space, Gaston Bachelard observes that living in the corner rejects life, narrows it and hides it. ‘The corner is then a denial of the Universe’ (Bachelard 1948, 130). Similarly, the corner of Prokharchin is ‘the darkest … hermetically sealed by a screen and thus separate from the whole world of God’ (PSS., 1, 240). It is therefore the most squalid of shelters, ‘empty as a basement’, where it is possible to hide oneself, like an insect or a mouse, ‘until the mother humid earth will take me away’ (PSS., 1, 262). The ‘impenetrable solitude’, the introversion is brought to the extreme, to the maceration, to the torture of his own body, reaching the levels of autophagy in the Notes from underground: ‘And I secretly, inwardly gnawing, gnawing at myself for it, tearing and consuming myself till at last the bitterness turned into a sort of shameful accursed sweetness, and at last into positive real enjoyment!’ (PSS., 5, 102). Life in this underground, in this sealed reclusion, incapacitates man to communicate (Prokharchin has a strange and disarticulate way of speaking, pronouncing every single word after the other in a stream of ‘the most peculiar confusion’). This life is not so different from death and hell: in his hallucinations, Prokharchin is put to bed, just as Pulcinella is placed in the organ grinder’s case, after selling his soul to the devil (PSS., 1, 151–152).

4. Conclusions

From the very beginning, Dostoevsky has presented himself as the poet of earth and soil, writing of underground lives tormented by the anxiety of suffocating, marked by the anguish of those who visit the darkest depths of the world. He is the prophet of a hidden and enclosed level of interiority, which is buried alive in itself while desperately trying to go beyond its narrow limits. As Bachtin argues, thresholds, curtains, windows, and stairs mark with topographical precision the inner boundaries recounted by Dostoevsky. His characters live bound to their hidden interiority and are paralysed while vainly reaching for a much-desired chimerical extroversion. The earth is both guardian and prison of this interiority. As we have discussed, like all true archetypes, Dostoevsky’s images always appear in a bipolar dialectics. In particular, the images of the earth range from the muddy sepulchral underground to the pochva, the fertile soil.

Particularly in his first works, the images of the earth are a ‘source of ambivalence’ (Bachelard 1948, 10). Later, in the novels of maturity, the earthbound imagery is a complex canvas of meanings, rooted in the archaic conception of the world. Long before its Christian reformulation, the depths of the earth are a grave, but bursting with an overspreading potential for life and creation.

However, as in Dostoevsky, every image and every idea exists only if in close relation to its opposite, the disturbing chthonian dimension germinates in the profound and vivifying fecundity of the humble Mother Earth. The hope of universal communion, based on the reconnection to one’s people, according to Dostoevsky, is originated from the dark recesses of the pochva, from the ‘chemical’ bond of the man with his native soil.
If in Mr. Procharčin the seed into the ground (which is an allegory for the hero, whose name is Semyon, recalling *semya*, seed) produces no fruit but the bony legs of his violated corpse, if the successful sowing and the ‘blessed and fertile *pochva*’ (PSS., 1, 255) are nothing but the hero’s madness, inoculated by the vicious superficiality of his neighbors, in *The Brothers Karamazov* the seed that does not die and yields fruit will be the pledge of the resurrection and of the real overcoming of death.

As occurs in primitive thinking, here there is no clear boundary between life and death. Earth is thus perceived in its oppressive link to the dull underworld, but also in the fertility of its vegetative force. Here the Divine manifests and unfolds itself into nature.

**Notes**

1. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridcati tomakh* [Completed Works in 30 volumes], (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–1990), vol. 21, p. 264. From now on in the text: PSS., with numbers of volumes and pages.

2. The giant Antaeus, son of Gaia, the personification of the earth, was invincible as long as he remained in contact with his mother, the earth. Dostoevsky mentions him in a note about nationalism and the native soil (*pochva*) (Dostoevsky 1971, 186).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

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