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A World in Flux: Pervasive Instability in Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*

The reader who opens the pages of Fedor Dostoevsky's *The Gambler* enters a world of remarkable intensity and depth. Written in less than a month in October 1866, *The Gambler* is perhaps the most densely textured of Dostoevsky's short novels. Faced with crushing financial pressure to deliver a new novel to the publisher Fedor Stellovsky by November 1, Dostoevsky created a haunting portrait of a life rent asunder by two competing passions – love for a woman and obsession with an even more powerful intoxicant, the lure of gambling. Many critics, well aware that these two passions reflect powerful currents in Dostoevsky's own personal life, have mined the novel for links to Dostoevsky's biography. Dostoevsky himself suffered from an obsession with gambling in the mid-1860s, and he had been involved at that time in a torturous affair with a woman, Apollinaria Suslova, whom many see as the model for the fictional Polina.¹ A second set of readers have focused on the psychological content of the novel, with articles dissecting Aleksei's condition as a textbook case of the psychology of the gambler, or exploring his tortured relationships with the people (especially women)

¹ A tendency to identify fictional characters from *The Gambler* with people in Dostoevsky's life often crops up in biographical writings. In his biography of Dostoevsky, J. A. T. Lloyd goes so far as to say in reference to events in 1867: "Just at this time, there seems to be no evidence of demands for money from *the heroine* of *The Gambler* though she had undoubtedly resumed her correspondence with the novelist" (Lloyd 95; emphasis added). A more judicious, yet strongly biographical approach to the events of the novel and their relationship to Dostoevsky's life is found in Edward Wasiolek's introduction to a translation of *The Gambler* by Victor Terras (see xxxvii–xxxix). This volume not only contains a translation of Dostoevsky's novel, it also contains translations of Apollinaria Suslova's diary, a short story by Suslova ("The Stranger and Her Lover"), and selected correspondence dealing with the affair between Dostoevsky and Suslova.

around him.² Other approaches have been taken by Joseph Frank, who has discussed the work as a study in national character (172), and Nina Pelikan Straus, who sees in the novel a reflection of Dostoevsky's struggle to deal with the topical issue of the emancipated woman in the 1860s.

While the above-mentioned studies have focused primarily on the biographical and psychological elements in the novel, they have not devoted close attention to the unique world created by Dostoevsky in his novel. The town of "Roulettenburg" is an imaginary space, or, to use a more Dostoevskian term, it is a "fantastic" world, one that has its own rules of behavior, distinctive denizens, and ontological underpinnings.³ This article will dig down to the very foundations of this world and examine the fundamental principle lying at its core: a pervasive fluidity and mutability that renders the very identity of people and things unstable and ever subject to flux. We can find this principle operating at all levels of the text, from the smallest details of language to broad relationships among the novel's characters. This essay will analyze the operation of this principle and explain its decisive significance in the text.

One of the first places one finds this principle at work is in the very activity that saps the energies of several of its characters – the game of roulette. Unlike certain card games, where the player may increase his or her chances of success by remembering which cards have already been played, the turns of the roulette wheel are entirely unpredictable. One places bets on arbitrary numbers from one to thirty-six (or zero and double zero in some cases); these numbers have no inherent significance in and of themselves: each number has the same odds of turning up on each turn of the wheel, and there is no mathematical reason why the gambler should favor one number over another. This element of arbitrariness also surfaces in some of the other ways that one can win. The gambler may place a bet on the words *rouge* and *noire*, for example. Again, there is nothing inherently unique or distinctive about either of these alternatives. They are simply the signifiers of a binary choice. Red may win on one turn, and black on the next, or either may win several times in a row. Even the colors that the words designate are themselves

² See, for example, the articles by Geha, Rosenthal, and Knapp.

³ In a letter describing an early plan for the novel, Dostoevsky shows his awareness that he is breaking new ground. Referring to an earlier work which had revealed to the public the inner world of a Siberian prison camp, Dostoevsky writes: "If *The House of the Dead* drew the public's attention as a depiction of convicts, whom no one before *The House of the Dead* had described *graphically*, this story will most certainly draw attention as a *graphic* and most detailed depiction of roulette" (see Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Gambler* 341).

arbitrary; they could just as easily be green and white or blue and yellow. Such arbitrariness is even more evident in the other binary pair from which the gambler may choose: the words *manque* and *passe*. *Manque* designates the numbers one through eighteen, while *passe* designates the numbers nineteen through thirty-six. Although there are historical reasons to explain why these words appear on the roulette table, there is nothing essential about them as far as the odds of the game are concerned. One could choose any other two words in the language to designate the two sets of numbers on which one can place a bet.

While the observer may easily comprehend the arbitrary nature of the numbers and words used for the purpose of making bets in roulette, Dostoevsky underscores this essential arbitrariness when he describes his hero's initiation into the game. The narrator, Aleksei Ivanovich, has been charged by Polina to play for her at the gaming tables. As he recounts how he laid down his first few bets, we see that there is no calculation or reasoning at work here: "I began by taking out five friedrichs d'or (fifty gulden) and putting them on even. The wheel went round and thirteen turned up – I had lost. With a sickly feeling I staked another five friedrichs d'or on red, simply in order to settle the matter and go away."⁴ The lack of reasoning becomes even more obvious after he has made a few more bets: "On receiving forty friedrichs d'or I staked twenty upon the twelve middle figures, *not knowing what would come of it*" (393, emphasis added). On this occasion, Aleksei manages to win a tidy sum for Polina. On his next outing, however, he loses her money. When he returns to the tables in the gambling scene that is arguably the most emotionally charged moment in the novel for Aleksei, he again begins by making an absolutely arbitrary choice. This is how he describes the moment:

Exactly before me was the word *Passe* scrawled on the green cloth. *Passe* is the series of numbers from nineteen inclusive to thirty-six. The first series of numbers from one to eighteen inclusive is called *manque*; but what was that to me? *I was not calculating.* (486; emphasis added)

Later in that scene, he has lost almost all his money, but then he places the last two hundred florins he has left, "and staked them on the first twelve numbers – *haphazard, at random, without thinking!*" (487; emphasis added).

⁴ The English text of the novel quoted in this paper is from the translation by Constance Garnett found in the volume *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (393). All further quotations from this edition will be noted with a parenthetical reference giving the page number.

A second way that Dostoevsky underscores the high degree of arbitrariness inherent in the numerical (and verbal) choices facing the gambler ironically utilizes a number that *does* carry some essential meaning, although the meaning is entirely metaphorical. This is the number “zero” that serves as the gambling establishment’s ultimate edge over the player. When the roulette ball lands on zero, then neither red nor black, nor *manque* nor *passe*, nor any of the other thirty-six numbers represents a winning wager. Zero “nullifies” all other bets. The symbolic significance of this becomes clear when the grande dame of the novel, Antonida Vasilevna Tarasevicheva, decides to try her hand at roulette, and commands Aleksei to place her first stake on zero. Symbolically, she is placing all her hopes on a nullity, and although she does manage to win in her initial outing to the casino through her persistent wagering on zero, she eventually loses all that she has with her: her traveling funds are reduced to zero.

The phenomenon of arbitrary signifiers (and the principle of fluid substitution that lies behind the phenomenon) is also evident when one moves to the level of character names in the novel. The figure for whom this is most apparent is the Frenchwoman with a checkered past, Mlle. Blanche de Cominges. As is often the case when one encounters a shady character in Dostoevsky’s work, the “true” story of Mlle. Blanche’s background emerges only gradually, after several possibilities or notions of her past are raised in the form of vague rumors. What is important for this discussion, however, is the issue of her true name. The suspicion that there might be some doubt about this issue is raised in a discreet, indirect way at the outset of the novel. Aleksei mentions that a footman calls one Frenchman “Monsieur le Comte,” and that he also calls Blanche’s mother “Madame la Comtesse.” He then remarks: “well, who knows, they may be Comte and Comtesse” (382). Later, Aleksei even casts doubt on the relationship between Blanche and the woman who appears to be her mother: “it is quite possible that the *marquis* is no relation of hers at all, and that her mother is not her mother” (398).

The most extensive discussion of Mlle. Blanche’s past, however, emphasizes how easily she has been able to change her identity, beginning with her name. Mr. Astley tells Aleksei that two years earlier, Mlle. Blanche was at Roulettenburg, but, he adds: “Mlle. Blanche was not called Mlle. de Cominges then” (429). When Astley continues, the reader learns that Blanche first appeared at Roulettenburg in the company of an Italian “with an historical name” – Barbarini. One day, the Italian disappeared, leaving his companion to fend for herself. As Astley puts it:

“Mlle. Selma (she suddenly ceased to be Barberini, and became Mlle. Selma) was in the utmost despair” (430). Soon, however, she becomes the companion of a Polish count, until the day that he too disappears. Yet this is not the last revelation of Mlle. Blanche’s penchant for changing her name. When she decides to marry Aleksei’s former employer, the General, Aleksei discovers that she turns out “not to be called ‘De Cominges,’ and her mamma not to be *la veuve* ‘Cominges,’ but ‘Du Placet.’ Why they had both been ‘De Cominges’ till then, I don’t know” (509). In the case of Mlle. Blanche, we see that one’s name can be easily and freely changed. The name itself does not serve to denote anything essential.

This predilection for changing one’s name and rank affects others in Roulettenburg. At one point we learn that the Frenchman called De Grioux “has not been De Grioux very long either.” As Astley tells Aleksei, he knows a man who met the Frenchman “passing under another name” (429). Nor is it only the *French* who like to assume alternate names. From the very beginning of his narrative, Aleksei refers to the woman he obsesses over as “Polina,” but when Antonida Vasilevna arrives, she calls Polina “Praskovia.” This is her authentic Russian name, which she has neglected for the more West European version, Polina. What is more, there is a constant tendency toward elevation of one’s rank in Roulettenburg. The General, who is very proud of his rank, was only promoted to that rank (from Colonel) upon his retirement from the service (468). The Marquis “De Grioux” only became a marquis “very recently,” according to Astley (429). And Antonida Vasilevna is hailed by the proprietors of the hotel she occupies in Roulettenburg with a series of ever-rising designations: initially called “*une comtesse, grande dame*” (435), she is finally listed in the hotel register as “*Madame la générale princesse de Tarasevich*” (442). In a society impressed with rank, and with surface show, it is easy (and advantageous) to change one’s label, thereby elevating one’s status at the same time.⁵

To return to the woman whose external identity is most mutable, Mlle. Blanche, we should note that her first name itself is a color word – “white” – and that this should perhaps serve as a subtle warning about her fickle nature. As a color word, “white” makes us think of “red” and “black,” those arbitrary colors of roulette, and when we do, we realize

⁵ Of course, the very name “Roulettenburg” hints at a certain instability or fluidity of identity. As R. L. Jackson has noted: “The mixed French and German components of the name suggest the illegitimate and rootless character of the place. This is the land of Babel, a place without a national language or culture” (211).

that white is the color of the ball which determines the outcome of all the wagers placed at the table, and therefore is followed avidly by all the desperate players in the game. It is no coincidence then, that, Aleksei will ultimately follow Blanche to Paris, and will squander all of his winnings to meet her whims. Addicted to roulette, Aleksei is fated to follow the color white wherever it may lead. For the gambler Aleksei, the game of roulette has taken the place of everyday life, and this is one of the several substitutions that leave him a broken man.

The ease with which one can change one's identity in Roulettenburg is merely a symptom of a larger and more serious problem in the world of this novel. Not only names, but individual *people* can be switched around or replaced. We have already noted how the function of Mlle. Blanche's financial supporter can be filled by one man after another: Barberini is replaced by a Polish count, and Blanche thinks nothing of trying to replace the count with a German baron. Later, she replaces the General with Aleksei, and then shifts back again to marry the General.

Yet Blanche's substitutions pale in gravity before the series of substitutions that involves the lives of the novel's central trio of characters – Aleksei, Polina, and the Frenchman De Grioux. As we shall see, the principle of fluidity of substitution that we found operating in the game of roulette manifests itself in the complex interrelationship among these three characters, and it is Aleksei's tolerance for (and even embrace of) easy exchange that leads to the novel's unhappy outcome.

We see the prominence of the principle of free substitution at work in the theme of "slavery" that Aleksei writes about in the first part of the novel. According to his view of his relationship with Polina, Polina regards him as a nothing more than a "slave." He repeats this idea several times during the first part of the narrative:

I believe she had hitherto looked on me as that empress of ancient times looked on the slave before whom she did not mind undressing, because she did not regard him as a human being. Yes, often she did not regard me as a human being! (389).

Of course, the humiliation and slavery in which she held me might have made it possible for me (it often does) to question her coarsely and bluntly. Seeing that in her eyes I was a slave and utterly insignificant, there was nothing for her to be offended at in my coarse curiosity. (396)

Significantly, Polina herself rejects the notion that she views him merely as a slave. At one point, after he has mentioned the slavery idea to her again, saying "I repeat, I am your slave, and one does not mind what one says to a slave" (407), she utters a sharp rebuke: "And I cannot endure

that 'slave' theory of yours" (407). It is quite likely, indeed, that Aleksei misinterprets and misunderstands the true nature of her feelings toward him. She may have a deeper regard for him than he is able to comprehend.⁶

Nonetheless, Polina becomes exasperated with his offensive insinuations, and finally, she gives him a frivolous command: she instructs him to approach a certain Baroness Burmerhelm, doff his hat, and say something to her in French. (We should note here that Polina's instruction itself involves a kind of substitution: Aleksei has pledged to jump off the Schlangenberg if she so commands, or even to kill someone if she orders it. Polina shuns such melodrama. As she puts it: "Instead of these murders and tragedies I only want to laugh" [412].) When Aleksei does approach the Baroness, what he says to her in French is highly significant: "Madame la baronne...j'ai l'honneur d'être votre esclave" (414). Here he reveals his deep inclination toward substitution: considering himself to be *Polina's* slave, he puts the *Baroness* in Polina's place, and declares his readiness to be *her* slave. As it turns out, this initial substitution triggers a series of other substitutions: feeling himself offended by Aleksei, the Baron demands satisfaction not from Aleksei directly, but from Aleksei's employer, the General. Aleksei, in turn, claims to be offended now by the Baron, but his subsequent behavior – threatening to challenge the Baron to a duel, etc. – is calculated to annoy the General and his retinue, not the Baron.

Yet all of these incidents of substitution may be viewed as indicators of a much more disturbing type of substitution. Although Aleksei claims to have intense feelings toward Polina (see 389 and especially 409), his recollection of the moment when he first began to love her is extraordinarily revealing. About four months earlier, he writes, he saw Polina talking "hotly" with De Grioux in the drawing room, and she

⁶ One indication of this is his comment about the relationship: "It is true that it had begun rather strangely. Some time before, long ago, in fact, two months before, I began to notice that she wanted to make me her friend, her *confidant*, and indeed was in a way testing me. But somehow this did not come off then; instead of that there remained the strange relations that existed between us; that is how it was that I began to speak to her like that" (478). As several critics have observed, Aleksei Ivanovich (who bears tangible affinities with the narrator of *Notes from the Underground*) is too egocentric and hypersensitive to understand what Polina seeks in him, and as he indicates here, it was he who introduced the strange tone to their interactions ("that is how it was that *I* began to speak to her like that"; emphasis added). It is his own continual prickliness and demanding abrasiveness that stimulates Polina to respond in a similar vein. As Frank puts it: "he exhibits a rankling acrimony to which she responds in kind" (174). For further elucidation of Polina's reaction to Aleksei's behavior see R. L. Jackson's comments (218).

looked at him “in such a way...that afterwards, when I went up to my room to go to bed, I imagined that she must have just given him a slap in the face. She stood facing him and looked at him. It was from that evening that I loved her” (413; ellipsis in original). What makes this episode remarkable is the connection that Aleksei seems to be making (perhaps unconsciously) between his fantasy that Polina had just slapped De Grioux, and his sudden love for her. His narration of the event suggests that what he is ultimately seeking is to be in De Grioux’s position, to be the recipient of the gaze of a woman who had just slapped him. This, of course, may remind the reader of the underground man’s desire to be in the position of the man who had just been thrown out of a tavern window in Part II of *Notes from the Underground*. It implies that a certain degree of masochism may lie at the core of his feelings for Polina.⁷

What is more, this scene suggests that Aleksei’s passion for Polina may have in part been sparked by his perception of her relationship to another man, the marquis De Grioux. Given that Aleksei speaks of De Grioux with intense feelings throughout his narrative, and that he shows a morbid curiosity about the true state of De Grioux’s relationship with Polina, what we may be dealing with here is a variant of a dynamic described by René Girard in “*To Double Business Bound*”: on some level, Aleksei’s desire for Polina may be enhanced by the value he sees conferred upon her by *De Grioux’s* interest in her.⁸ If this is the case, then we are confronted an especially complicated example of the substitution and replacement pattern. Aleksei desires Polina in part because *De Grioux* seems to. We shall soon see if this hypothesis has merit.

Taking all of these points about Aleksei’s first moment of infatuation with Polina into consideration, the reader may be justified in harboring some suspicion about the depth or authenticity of Aleksei’s professions of love for Polina. Indeed, these suspicions are painfully confirmed at the very moment when Aleksei seems to be facing the fulfilment of his most fervent wishes. Soon after Antonida Vasilevna had successfully

⁷ Of course, Aleksei’s willingness to abase himself is accompanied by the urge to reverse roles and attain power. Thus, his masochistic feelings are closely bound up with sadistic impulses, and at one point he admits: “Yes, she was hateful to me. There were moments...when I would have given my life to strangle her! I swear if it had been possible on the spot to plunge a sharp knife in her bosom, I believe I would have snatched it up with relish” (388–89). For a discussion of these impulses within Aleksei, see Knapp 104–6.

⁸ Although Girard does not discuss *The Gambler*, he has identified other places in Dostoevsky’s work where mimetic (or triangular) desire is evident. See, for example, his commentary on “The Eternal Husband” in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 45–48.

completed her first round of gambling, Aleksei reflected on his situation and that of Polina. Of the latter he wrote: "I wanted her to come to me and say: 'I love you,' and if not that...well, what was there to care about?...all I wanted was to be near her, in the halo of her glory, in her radiance, always, for ever, for all my life. I knew nothing more! And could I leave her?" (457).

These last words are worth remembering when we turn to the scene in which Aleksei's dream seems to come true. After Antonida Vasilevna has resumed her gambling and lost everything, Aleksei returns to his room to find Polina sitting there, all alone in the dark. When he asks what she is doing there, she gives him a remarkable answer: "If I come, I come *altogether*. That's my way. You'll see that directly" (483). Later in the scene, he realizes that Polina loves him, and had chosen to come to see him, not Mr. Astley. (Indeed, she is indignant when he suggests that she seek out Mr. Astley to obtain money. When she cries out, "What, do you mean to say *you yourself* want me to turn from you to that Englishman!", using the intimate form of "you" as she does so, Polina rejects the kind of substitution that Aleksei seems to find so appealing.) So, here Polina is, in desperate need of Aleksei's support and love, and what does he do? After a brief interchange in which Polina declares her anger about De Grioux's treatment of her and her desire to have money to throw in his face, Aleksei suddenly leaves the room, without telling her where he is going or what he intends to do. He heads to the casino and embarks on a gambling spree which results in substantial winnings. Despite his claim that all he wanted was to be near Polina and to bask in the halo of her radiance ("And could I leave her?"), he has abandoned her in her moment of deepest need in order to try his luck at roulette!

This, perhaps, is the saddest and most damaging example of substitution in Dostoevsky's novel. Aleksei has chosen to replace the emotional experience of deep intimacy with a woman who loves him and whom he claims to love with the excitement of a game of chance. In essence, he replaces one type of passion with a second type. Instead of choosing the potential for shared love with another person, he has chosen a much more solitary and narcissistic type of passion: the game of roulette. Aleksei's description of his feelings during the game have a markedly erotic character ("Perhaps passing through so many sensations my soul was not satisfied but only irritated by them and craved still more sensation – and stronger and stronger ones – till utterly exhausted" [490]). It is clear that for him, gambling is a form of auto-eroticism that he ulti-

mately finds more seductive than the demands of involvement with another.⁹

Unfortunately for Aleksei and Polina alike, Aleksei's conduct seems to infect Polina with the virus of free substitution as well. When Aleksei returns to his room, flush with his winnings, he seems preoccupied with his new wealth and his potential role as Polina's benefactor. Polina is quick to notice this change in attitude, and when Aleksei suddenly offers her the equivalent of fifty thousand francs, she makes a bitter, self-deprecating remark that implicitly links Aleksei's new stance with that of De Grioux: "De Grioux's mistress is not worth fifty thousand francs" (492). Aleksei immediately picks up on this potential identification and substitution, and he asks: "Am I a De Grioux?" (492). Still, Polina does not quite want to acknowledge a complete, one-to-one substitution. She answers: "I love you *no more* than De Grioux" (492; emphasis added). This statement implies a similarity between the two men, but not a complete identity, as Aleksei's preceding comment had done. She continues in this vein, drawing Aleksei ever closer to De Grioux's position: "Do want to [buy me]? For fifty thousand francs, like De Grioux?" (492). Yet she resists the identification, and seeks signs that Aleksei truly loves her as she is, and not simply someone whom he can buy. In a maelstrom of doubts and desires, she draws Aleksei to her, and they become lovers.

Through his willingness to have a sexual encounter with her even though it is clear that she is in emotional turmoil, Aleksei seems to confirm Polina's most anxious concerns, and when she awakens the next morning, she is ready to enter fully into the arena of substitution that she had resisted the previous evening. She asks for the money she had rejected earlier, and she throws it into Aleksei's face.¹⁰ The identification between De Grioux and Aleksei that Aleksei himself had suggested is now complete, as Aleksei himself acknowledges: "I was punished for De Grioux and was made responsible, though I was not much to blame" (495). For Polina, the encounter with the pattern of fluid substitution has

⁹ For a discussion of the relationship between the anxiety of gambling and sexual excitement, see, *inter alia*, Geha 290. In a comment that echoes the principle of mutability and substitution developed in the present article, Geha also sees a deep series of substitutions going on in Aleksei's gambling activity: "At one level, then, gambling is a wish to defy and defeat the father, to steal the mother away and indulge in the dangerous sexualized play of roulette" (299).

¹⁰ Nina Pelikan Straus sees Polina's gesture as a the rejection of a different kind of substitution. In her reading, Polina is rejecting the implied identification of women with money, a view that symbolizes "'the feminine' as a purchasable commodity" (48).

proved a shattering experience, and she leaves Aleksei, trying to find refuge and peace elsewhere.¹¹

Aleksei, on the other hand, is doomed to remain locked in a world in which the unique and the individual is devalued, and where everything is subject to ready exchange and substitution. Having lost Polina, he does not pursue her, but replaces her presence with Blanche.¹² Having surrendered his winnings to Blanche, he returns to roulette. In his distorted world-view, everything is susceptible to immediate transformation. Indeed, as he puts it: "one turn of the wheel and all will be changed" (510). Even life and death seem to be subject to this heady elixir of fluid substitution, at least on a metaphoric level: "What am I now? Zero. What may I be tomorrow? Tomorrow I may rise from the dead and begin to live again!" (510).

It is here that we see the ultimate significance of Dostoevsky's use of the theme of substitution in *The Gambler*. In the world of Roulettenburg, as in the game of roulette itself, nothing seems to be fixed or permanent; everything is subject to change. As Jackson puts it: "The very act of gambling becomes a conscious or unconscious affirmation of the meaninglessness of the universe, the emptiness of all human choice" (210). Designations appear arbitrary, and fortunes rise and fall in a seemingly haphazard way. For some lost souls, such as Aleksei, this freedom from essence, from fixed values, may be both intoxicating and devastating. Clearly, he relishes the sensation of being caught up in the "whirlwind," of losing sight of "all order and measure" (473).¹³ The cost of this intoxication, however, is immense. In a revealing moment, Aleksei acknowledges the impact of his state of mind on his moral orientation: "I notice one thing: that of late it has become horribly repugnant to me to test my thoughts and actions by any moral standard whatever" (393). As a result, Aleksei manages to do damage not only to himself, but to those who love him as well. By the end of the novel, Aleksei has been reduced to an especially grim state in Dostoevsky's fictional world: he is essentially "dead," although physically he still clings to life. Thus *The*

¹¹ She ultimately ends up in the company of Mr. Astley's sister, effectively taking her out of the cycle of substituting one male for another.

¹² Aleksei's abrupt abandonment of pursuit of Polina deserves comment. His behavior seems to bear out Girard's prediction about what happens when the rival (in this case De Grioux) disappears: "The rival is needed because his desire alone can confer on the girl whatever value she has in the eyes of the subject. If the rival disappears, this value will also disappear" (66).

¹³ As Alex de Jonge has observed, the compulsive gambler "plays in a kind of eternal present. He loses all sense of past or future" (154).

Gambler not only provides a revealing portrait of the psychology of the gambler. Through its treatment of the power of arbitrary signifiers and the effects of free substitution on human relationships, Dostoevsky's *The Gambler* offers a unique perspective on that "terrible" freedom which so many readers have found to be one of Dostoevsky's enduring themes.

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