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Summary

The figure of a trickster is a fascinating phenomenon that connects classical and modern literature with the ancient folkloric pan-human consciousness. However, up to until now, trickster as an archetype has been viewed as a largely folkloric presence marooned in the narratives from ethnically diverse oral traditions that has little to do, unless reimagined beyond recognition, with literature. In this particular article, I would like to argue that the influence of an archetype as influential and popular as the trickster was in traditional storytelling upon classical 19th century texts is far more enduring and important than commonly thought. Moreover, I maintain that the emergence of this particular archetype in mid-19th century context in novels originating from two seemingly diverse cultures, points towards important subconscious trends or change in the broader historical and cultural context.

Key Words: Comparative, archetype, Dostoyevsky, Melville, trickster, 19th century, mythological.

In folkloric and mythological heritage worldwide, no figure is quite as arresting and controversial as that of a trickster.

Whether analysed from an angle influenced by Jung’s (1968) theory of archetypes or based on folktales coming from a particular region, the character of a “trickster” first of all is extremely difficult to summarise or even define with precision. Michael P. Carroll (1984) had suggested...
previously that the term has been overtly generalised and woefully simplified when applied straightforwardly to mean mainly untrustworthy literary characters, rather regardless of their varying motives. In response to this viewpoint, Carroll proposes to envisage the archetype as being divided into two somewhat more distinct sub-types: a “clever hero” who employs wits and cunning to survive in a precarious situation (a good example being Homer’s Odysseus) or the more disagreeable “selfish buffoon” whose attempts at making personal gain end in comic failure.

For my part, I do not completely agree with Carroll’s definition of the archetype, as it downplays what I believe to be the essential characteristic of this highly unique and cosmopolitan phenomenon. Trying to define the trickster as either an avaricious glutton or a hero using wits rather than strength, robs the archetype of fluidity and diversity that to a large extent contribute to its enigma. Furthermore, if the two aforementioned categories can more or less summarise how the trickster is seen in traditional mythological narratives, they are much too constricting for the broader scope offered by the novel in post-Renaissance world, especially when moving beyond the established tradition of the picaresque narrative exemplified by Lazarillo de Tormes (1554), Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1772), and others. Starting from roughly the 19th century, the trickster archetype, I maintain, no more served as an amusing source of comic relief.

In this article, I argue that the protean nature of the trickster serves a more subtle purpose in that it can be employed to emphasise or reflect a particular historic era, especially when major change or upheaval is imminent. In a broader textual context, once the reader looks beyond the trickster’s immediate adventures, the archetype can be described as a harbinger of what is to come. The trickster appears shortly before an upheaval takes place, and can be alternatively regarded as a sign or symptom that the previous established order is about to end. Not quite serving as a prophetic warning to others, I prefer to describe the trickster as an organic entity who is especially adapted to survive and thrive in a world “turned upside down.” As a natural phenomenon, the archetype is therefore not necessarily “evil” or malicious – it is actually quite a neutral phenomenon associated with a specific stage in society’s existence.

For the purposes of this investigation, Russia and America offer an especially interesting historical parallel. Both can be described as relatively “young” nations in the second half of the nineteenth century; aware of the European cultural and philosophical heritage, yet partaking of it selectively so as to forge a highly distinct, “exceptional” path. Since the times of A. De Tocqueville (1839), it has been argued that the two states mirrored each other’s development patterns, exhibiting notable similarities, and modern scholars such as N. Saul (1991) reinforce this view. Whilst it is often argued that Russia and America occupy opposite angles to each other, I rather stay with the notion developed by D. Foglesong (2007), that one is another’s “dark double.” Subsequently, to uphold this notion, I am going to analyse the emergence of the trickster as he appears in the texts produced during the deceptively peaceful historical periods of “calm before a storm” preceding major societal change – which have occurred both in America and Russia. I am speaking, respectively, of the Civil War (1861-1865) and the Revolution of 1917.

The two novels selected for this particular investigation are The Confidence-Man (1857), published by H. Melville just as the antebellum epoch was about to end in bloodshed and chaos of the Civil War, and Devils (1871), in which, as some scholars argue, Dostoyevsky foresaw the root causes of the unrest among the educated classes that eventually culminated in Russian Revolution of 1917. My decision to focus on those novels was influenced by the historical context as much as by the subject matter. If the former is a carnival-esque gallery of potential trickster figures interacting within the closed limits of a riverboat microcosm, presented as detached yet interconnected vignettes, the latter text offers a fascinating portrait of a “deceitful” (as per Carroll) trickster.
Yet another factor that has also contributed to the decision to compare Melville and Dostoyevsky alongside each other is the fact that both belong to the realm of 19th century novel largely preoccupied with the Realist genre (which is certainly true for Dostoyevsky, and quite true for Melville, who can be seen as paving the path for the Realist genre, particularly in his later works). Striving for authenticity of description and truthfulness, I find that the 19th century Realist novel is particularly interesting to analyse in relation to how an archetype is adapted to be relevant in a context that goes beyond the mythological aspect. After all, the chief attractiveness of a trickster as a character lies with its sheer adaptability.

**The Messiah and the Serpent**

One chief difference that must be addressed before proceeding onto detailed analysis, is that whilst Dostoyevsky’s novel has the extremely slippery character of Petrusha Verkhovensky manifesting himself as an archetypal trickster, there is no such definite figure playing the particular role in *The Confidence-Man*. One possible interpretation would be to take into view how both texts are arranged: *The Devils* can be regarded as a “morality play” in the shape of the novel, with definite roles for characters, clear progression of the plot with the requisite tragic ending, and a strong backbone of ecclesiastical morale running through (as a great deal of critics, such as L. Saraskina (1990), may argue: a tale of self-imposing Antichrist and the terrible events he brings about). This concept is indeed quite pronounced in 19th century Russian literature as a reflection of folk tales, one such example of which is presented in *Bezhin Meadow*, a short story by I. Turgenev (1852), where a child recounts old beliefs about the coming of the Antichrist to mark the end of the world approaching. It is quite plainly obvious from how those beliefs are portrayed, that the Antichrist exhibits trickster-like tendencies, as well as serving as a sign that the world is about to end:

"Why, don't you know?" interrupted Ilyusha warmly. "Why, brother, where have you been brought up, not to know Trishka? You're a stay-at-home, one-eyed lot in your village, really! Trishka will be a marvellous man, who will come one day, and he will be such a marvellous man that they will never be able to catch him, and never be able to do anything with him; he will be such a marvellous man. The people will try to take him; for example, they will come after him with sticks, they will surround him, but he will blind their eyes so that they fall upon one another. They will put him in prison, for example; he will ask for a little water to drink in a bowl; they will bring him the bowl, and he will plunge into it and vanish from their sight. They will put chains on him, but he will only clap his hands— they will fall off him. So this Trishka will go through villages and towns; and this Trishka will be a wily man; he will lead astray Christ's people . . . and they will be able to do nothing to him. . . . He will be such a marvellous wily man." "Well, then," continued Pavlusha in his deliberate voice, "that's what he's like. And so they expected him in our parts. The old men declared that directly the heavenly portent began, Trishka would come."

Melville, however, takes up what can be called a Bakhtin-esque, carnival approach, where the reader is presented with a range of masques and vignettes of the trickster at work. This could possibly point towards the idea that the trickster has many faces; and various types that Melville shows are all avatars of one single archetype. It is somewhat amusing that a Russian writer should exhibit a more Puritanical approach whilst Melville focuses on the carnival as described by a
Russian philosopher, but what is crucial is that both textual approaches described above define the two possible frameworks for the trickster archetype to manifest himself: either in a morality tale, or as a carnival mask. The “organic” nature and purpose of the archetype that I suggested above, is not noted by authors stylistically. Perhaps this customary representation makes the new treatment of the archetype more digestible to the reader, as well as respectful of the literary canons. Whilst of course the archetype has been adapted to suit the 19th century setting, the link with the folkloric carnivalesque roots of the archetype and how it originally had appeared, has been preserved and honoured.

The carnival, for all its reversal of roles, from high to low and vice versa, is nevertheless quite typological in the range of characters it shows. Typically, both tricksters can be associated with the familiar figure of the Biblical serpent, or generally the Devil (a carnival stock-figure). The portrayal of Verkhovensky exhibits elusive, serpentine characteristics to prove the point:

“No one could say he was unattractive, yet no one liked his face. His face was elongated at the back, and seemed flattened at the sides, so his face appeared pointed.”

“One began to imagine that the tongue in his mouth had a special shape, unusually long and thin, very red, with an extremely pointed tip, flickering constantly and involuntarily.”

The parallel is obvious here. Meanwhile, The Black Guinea of Melville’s novel, “owing to something wrong about his legs, was, in effect, cut down to the statue of the Newfoundland dog.” Mephistophelean echoes aside, the first apparent conclusion to reach is of course that the trickster is innately malicious: as well as animalistic. As Saraskina comments on Dostoyevsky’s characters’ physicality, “There is a strong general impression, that the physical lameness of all those characters is constantly and methodically accompanied by some spiritual flaw.” (translation mine). (“Создается стойкое совокупное впечатление, что физической хромоте всех этих персонажей неизменно и закономерно сопутствует какая-то душевная порча.”) The canons of how the Devil, or the Antichrist, is supposed to appear according to typological conventions of the traditional lore, have been respected by both writers. The trickster is seen both as animalistic and “base” in his motives, and his appearance reflects them faithfully. I believe that as well as addressing the carnival, devilish characteristics of the archetype, this preoccupation with specifically animalistic traits implies that the trickster exists as an organic subject, which, like animals, is natural, and therefore neutral and not subject to human morality laws.

Vulpine, canine or serpentine characteristics, typically associated with the Devil, can also be interpreted as a nod to the folkloric roots of the trickster archetype – as traditional ethnic narratives go (noted by M. Carroll and others), the typical trickster combines anthropomorphic and animalistic tendencies simultaneously. Nevertheless, I claim that with the progress of modernity, such folkloric perception has been somewhat moved aside to make way for a new and rather different element to the archetype of the trickster: deliberate theatricality.

Turning to the texts, one immediately encounters proof to the strong theatrical or playacting element to the archetype of a trickster, which attests to the above argument that both writers, in spite of their best attempts to adhere to the Realist genre, showcase the trickster via a quasi-theatrical layout of the narrative (especially Melville, who presents each vignette as a theatrical tableau with precise directions for each character). Furthermore, Ch.6 of The Confidence-Man provides a fascinating snippet of perfectly Shakespearean dialogue:
“The man in gray glanced at the young clergyman a moment, then quietly whispered to him, “I thought you represented your friend here as a very distrustful sort of person, but he appears endued with a singular credulity. – Tell me, sir, do you really think that a white could look the negro so? For one, I should call it pretty good acting.’

‘Not much better than any other man acts.’

‘How? Does all the world act? Am I, for instance, an actor? Is my reverend friend here, too, a performer?’

‘Yes, don’t you both perform acts? To do is to act; so all doers are actors.’

Echoes of Rosalind’s monologue in the last act of As You Like It (1603) ring in the last line: that every single active being can be called in earnest “an actor.” Theatrical pretence, often crudely connected with insincerity, is of course likely to be attributed to the trickster; does this then mean that anybody could be one? Is the trickster an independent separate natural being – or does it exist in every person’s psyche to emerge at will?

Certainly, the ability to evoke suspicious feelings and the need to pacify them is a trait commonly associated with the trickster, as well as being capable of altering his appearance (as Turgenev’s child narrator says), race (in the example above) or even essence (as in the case of North American folkloric tricksters who tread a boundary between human and animal nature, being animalistic and anthropomorphic at once). Yet the conversation above suggests that the trickster, in fact, does not act or pretend any more than any other member of society. What is more, an obvious double-entendre implies that any more or less active behaviour suggests taking up a role, and henceforth, becoming an “actor” or trickster acting according to his particular agenda. Moreover, the term “act” hints at the legal or official responsibilities, and one can allude both to the taking up of a particular social role, and to the historical context, as the antebellum America was already fast on its way to becoming more unified and bureaucratised after the Civil War – and the citizens, thrust into new roles and obligations, were essentially faced with the necessity to adapt – just like the trickster. This actual order of things, seemingly progressive yet bound to spark off conflict in the long-term due to the changing roles and potential new debatable issues emerging, is attested to in a speech by W. Seward (1858), hinting at the exact conditions of great activity and seeming peaceful prosperity preceding imminent societal upheaval, that are likely to see the emergence of the trickster:

“…But in other aspect the United States constitute only one nation. Increase of population, which is filling the states out to their very borders, together with a new and extended net-work of railroads and other avenues, and an internal commerce which daily becomes more intimate, is rapidly bringing the states into a higher and more perfect social unity or consolidation. Thus, these antagonistic systems are continually coming into closer contact, and collision results… Shall I tell you what this collision means? It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces…”

Quite like Russia in the middle of 19th century, America exhibited seeming growing progress exemplified in particular by slowly improving opportunities for mobility and transport, and yet containing germs of future conflict simmering under the apparently tranquil surface. F. Stepun
(1991) points towards the fact that as a remarkable psychologist, Dostoyevsky was able to foresee the eventual coming of the Revolution (leaning on the rhetorics of actual prototypes of his protagonists, such as the members of the Nechaev Circle intent on bringing about radical change – just as his trickster Verkhovensky, wants to):

“If to set aside the psychological overtones of Verkhovensky’s ecstatic ramblings, and to focus on the historico-philosophical and sociological characteristics of the impending Bolshevik Revolution that it contains, one cannot but be astounded at Dostoyevsky’s incredible far-sightedness.” (translation mine)

(The deceptively peaceful “calm before the storm” and particularly the excellent opportunities for travel that it offers (especially obvious in Melville’s choice of subject-matter, as he sets the scene on a riverboat) gives the trickster a perfect opportunity to remain constantly on the move, as he seeks to feed and to profit. This movement sides well with adaptability of the archetype, as well as its animalistic, nomadic spirit directed primarily towards survival on an organic level. Such qualities are hardly to be associated with arcane, Luciferian evil. Stepun in particular gives an amusing suggestion that Verkhovensky is a “lesser evil,” unlike other characters, a small trickster moving constantly and frenetically in what is reminiscent of an organic life trying to survive or move up the food chain:

“The dark forces of the “Devils” Dostoyevsky arranges as if into two realms. In the upper realm, Kirillov and Stavrogin reign. In the lower, Verkhovensky and Shigalev rule the roost, alongside their multitudinous minions. The devils of the upper realm are characterised by that they exist, but actually do not act, whilst the devils from the lower realm tirelessly whizz around in the frenzy of non-being…” (translation mine)

(Темные силы "Бесов" располагаются Достоевским как бы по двум палатам. В верхней палате царствуют Кириллов и Ставрогин. В нижней верховодят Верховенский и Шигалев с их многочисленным охвостьем. Для бесов верхней палаты характерно, что они бытийствуют, но, в сущности, не действуют, в то время как бесы нижней палаты неустанно крутиятся в суете небытия…)

Going further, I propose that trickster could be connected with the concept of “bare life” as set out by Giorgio Agamben (1998) or life that has become “organic” after it has been divested of political or social significance, and that nevertheless continues existing on a neutral, natural level. Stepun’s argument about the “non-being” of the small tricksters is relevantly placed in that respect. The trickster is a nobody, who comes from seemingly nowhere (an image which would duly be echoed by the Man in Cream-Colours depicted by Melville). Fluidity of a character, and his ability to move freely throughout society, adapting and interacting with its varied composites with perfect ease, is a general characteristics noted of most Dostoyevskian characters, as argued by M. Bakhtin (1929) [1994]:

International Journal of Russian Studies, No. 7/2 (July 2018)
“The characters themselves crave and desire in vain to become incarnate, and part of life’s plot. The desire for the incarnation of a dreamer, born out on an idea, and belonging to an accidental “family” – is one of Dostoyevsky’s most important themes. However, lacking a true biography, they all the more easily become part of a picaresque plot. Nothing is done to them, yet everything happens to them. The possibility of connections that those characters can make, and of the events that they can take part in, is not determined or limited by their character or the social strata where they in reality would have been part of.” (translation mine)

If looking from this angle, the archetype becomes less enigmatic or distinct than typically envisaged, the most striking thing about the trickster being his ordinariness stemming from his ability to adapt in both authors’ created microcosms. The above passage from The Confidence-Man is interestingly echoed by the words of Dostoyevsky’s trickster par excellence, Verkhovensky:

“When I came here (that is, in the general sense, meaning, to this town) ten days ago, of course I’d decided to play a role. The best thing would have been not to play one, to be myself, isn’t that so? There’s nothing more cunning than to be oneself, because no one ever believes you. To tell the truth, I wanted to act the fool, because that’s an easier part than playing myself; but since acting the fool is still an extreme, and extremes provoke curiosity, I decided to stick with my own self after all.”

The quasi-folkloric understanding of the trickster as M. Carroll’s “selfish buffoon” is precisely the “extreme” of acting the fool that Verkhovensky talks about. If anything, his words suggest the extreme adaptability of trickster to the historical contextual setting, evading typological constraints that traditional moralistic or folkloric narrative wishes to impose on him. What used to be a solid folkloric trope, according to Carroll, would not stand at ease with the realistic world of 19th century novel. And Dostoyevsky’s trickster shows a keen awareness of this possibility, as well as exhibiting a deft strategy to evade it. Bakhtin in particular argues that he is an “accidental hero” (in Russian: представитель случайного племени) without a fixed social place, floating seamlessly among different social groups and networks, but belonging to none in particular.

“Indeed, the polyphonic novel could come into being only during a capitalist era. Moreover, the most appropriate place for it to appear was precisely in Russia, where capitalism had arrived quite catastrophically and encountered an untouched plethora of social strata and groups, that did not weaken their individual confines (unlike in the West) as capitalism steadily advanced. Here the controversial essence of forming social order, that did not fit into the framework of a confident and serenely contemplative monological consciousness, had to manifest itself particularly poignantly, and at the same time, the singularity of the different worlds, pulled out from their ideological balance and clashing, had to be particularly complete and characterful.” (translation mine)

Both Dostoyevsky and Melville’s novels reinforce the point that the rigid archetypal framework of roles associated with the world of folk tales or even picaresque novels does not work as well in the 19th century context, where the world might have become so different, that everyone just might be a trickster – and the archetype has become even more protean in that sense that it does not necessarily adhere to any set or premeditated parameters of behaviour. The trickster has become
organic part and parcel of society, shedding its previous easily recognisable mask. Therefore, Carroll’s complaint that the term is overtly general, is actually quite explicable. The trickster of the post-folkloric literary works may be over-generalised because he can be, in fact, anybody. I would go so far as to propose, funnily enough, that the trickster could just as well be the most “democratic” of all archetypes.

I am somewhat inclined to connect this “democratisation” of the trickster figure with the concept of freedom, which is closely interlinked with the overturned social order and the breaking of previously maintained boundaries that both Melville and Dostoyevsky subconsciously anticipated at the time of writing their novels. Interestingly, the apocalyptic tones painting the trickster as the harbinger of imminent end can be connected with the topic of extreme freedom that comes as the catalyst for societal change: the anarchic, previously unimaginable liberty that creates apocalyptic chaos due to countless opportunities it presents. As Berdyaev (1918), (1923) argues in his analysis of Dostoyevsky’s universe,

“Freedom is irrational, and therefore, it can create good as well as evil. <…> Dostoyevsky had a very singular, specific approach to the topic of evil that can tempt many. And one has to understand fully, how Dostoyevsky posed and answered the question concerning evil. The path of freedom changes into self-will, self-will leads to evil, and evil leads to crime.” (translation mine)

I therefore maintain that rather than being conventionally “evil” in the medieval-moralist sense, the trickster is spawned by the concept of freedom and movement between moral axis. He is therefore not as much an “extreme” figure intent on causing destruction, but a tabula rasa who is open to potentially becoming evil, depending on whatever direction the current social climate chooses to take, and how he attempts to adapt to it. By nature, the trickster is essentially neutral, a “bare life” according to Agamben, with one main distinctive difference that this life can latch on to any discourse, movement or group it chooses, in order to survive.

Yet Melville’s novel has not done away altogether with the “extreme” aspect of the archetype. The “man in cream-colours” [p1] who opens the parade of vignettes observed on board of the steamboat is exactly the curiosity and the extreme that Dostoyevsky’s trickster is so reluctant to become. His motives are never known, yet he makes for an arresting presence and as an antithesis to the “everyman” trickster discussed previously, “it was plain that he was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger.” The “cream colours” of his garb symbolically reinforce the fact that he comes as a blank, belonging nowhere in particular, and especially unusual in the specific setting where he appears.

This, of course, is more correspondent to the conventional perception of the trickster as an eccentric and unusual figure. The man in cream-colours is regarded as “some strange kind of simpleton, harmless enough, would he keep to himself, but not wholly unobnoxious as an intruder.” His appearance echoes Verkhovensky’s words in that acting an eccentric fool sets one apart from the world – which may not be wholly desirable for a genuine trickster seeking to adapt and thrive in a particular concrete place. The distinctive “guise” may prove to be a hindrance if one wishes to be the “actor” in the true sense of the word. Therefore, although he elicits interest both from fellow-travellers and the reader, the mute stranger, in fact, is a red herring.
Messianic Overtones

Returning to the topic of changing times, and the trickster being a harbinger of upheavals to come if not the true Antichrist, the Biblical reference at the beginning of Melville’s novel is obvious:

“a placard near the captain’s office, offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East – quite an original genius in his vocation, as would appear, though wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given; but what purported to be a careful description of his person followed.”

The reference to the prophecy concerning the false Messiah is plainly obvious, sending us back to the vision of Antichrist the impostor (in Russian: самозванец) as explored by both Turgenev’s short story and by Saraskina (1990) in her critical analysis, The Demons: a warning in the shape of a novel (in Russian: Бесы: роман-предупреждение). Just as the false Messiah is expected to make an appearance before the Apocalypse ensues, Melville outlines the notion of a free-roaming “impostor” whose exact dangerousness is not divulged, in the world standing on the brink of major change. Yet the man in cream-colours, although he is associated with the placard, is not intended to be the impostor. His unusualness is what precludes him from being one, setting him rather as a semi-Biblical prophet figure warning us of the trickster in our midst. From what we have already seen, the trickster’s amorphous nature is what makes him difficult to capture or define; and henceforth, although the “impostor” and “genius” clearly allude to the trickster archetype, he could be anyone on the boat, and his motives could range from comical to harrowing.

As a later conversation in Ch. 6 shows, the motives of a trickster in the 19th century world are likely to be more esoteric than the traditional folkloric character’s quest for personal gratification:

“For I put it to you, is it reasonable to suppose that a man with brains, sufficient to act such a part as you say, would take all that trouble, and run all that hazard, for the mere sake of those few paltry coppers, which, I hear, was all that he got for his pains, if pains they were?’

‘That puts the case irrefutably,’ said the young clergyman, with a challenging glance towards the one-legged man.

‘You two green-horns! Money, you think, is the sole motive to pains and hazard, deception and devilry, in this world. How much money did the devil make by gulling Eve?’”

Whilst playing further on the false Messiah image and attributing “devilish” qualities to the trickster figure, Melville makes clear that for him, the trickster archetype has been advanced to go beyond the greedy buffoon of the folkloric imagination, pursuing goals that may not necessarily be material or even logical. Yet, it is implied (and the novel’s entire plot, if there is such a thing in this particular case, centres around this assumption) that the trickster’s goals are likely to be of a highly noxious nature.

On the surface of things, however, the adapted trickster’s goals are made to seem honourable and well-intentioned, to the point of almost being universally humanistic. Melville’s novel asserts the term of “confidence” that the trickster uses to perjure according to his plans. Meanwhile,
Verkhovensky, precisely like the Black Guinea and the whole host of characters following his appearance, openly demands confidence and trust as his due:

“You should know, maman, that Peter Stepanovich is a universal peacemaker; that’s his role, his disease, his hobby, and I particularly recommend him to you on this count. I can guess what sort of tale he composed for you here. Compose he does, when he tells a story; he keeps an entire record office in his head. Observe that as a realist he’s incapable of telling lies; truth is more important to him than the success of his tale… except, of course, for those particular circumstances when success is more important than truth.”

The above passage exhibits marked and open hypocrisy of Verkhovensky’s character. There is a marked similarity in it to a passage in Melville’s “treaty on trust,” which uncannily manages to present the trickster’s motives as apparently originating from best intentions, and therefore, honourable. As a perjurer of truth and pretender, the trickster uses a carnival-esque trick of turning the exact state of affairs upside down, assuming “human” nature whilst likening those who oppose him to “animalistic” tendencies:

“The depression of our stock was solely owing to the growling, the hypocritical growling, of the bears.’

‘How hypocritical?’

‘Why, the most monstrous of all hypocrites are these bears: hypocrites by inversion; hypocrites in the simulation of things dark instead of bright; souls that thrive, less upon depression, than fiction of the depression; professors of the wicked art of manufacturing depressions; spurious Jeremiahs; sham Heraclituses, who, the lugubrious day done, return, like sham Lazaruses among the beggars, to make merry over the gains got by their pretended sore heads – scoundrelly bears!’”

The immediate explanation seems that the trickster consciously perverts the course of events, trying to gain trust by claiming that (unlike him) others are hypocritical. However, I argue that it is not as much a conscious perjuring of truth, as a curious inversion of reality, where the trickster genuinely believes himself to be in the right, denouncing those who oppose him. This is explained by the possibility that the trickster’s vision of reality is essentially different, and Bakhtin-esque in being inverted. Verkhovensky may truly consider himself to be a “peacemaker”; the complaint concerning “professors of the wicked art of manufacturing depression” in Melville’s novel might be quite authentic. Bearing in mind what was said about the trickster emerging as a harbinger of changing times, it can then be interpreted that the trickster does not as much seek to “cheat” as he is acting according to the coming new order of the things,[2] where the previously impossible would be possible. Melville may not have foreseen the corruption of the Gilded Age, nor Dostoyevsky the post-Revolution era where atrocities would be explained by acting in the interests “of the people and truth.” However, my hypothesis is that the trickster is acting not perversely, but quite truthfully to the new social order that is to come. In this manner, reverting to the hero/buffoon dilemma explored earlier, the trickster comes quite close to the heroic status, in that he acts truthfully and correctly – only according to the codex of rules that has not yet been formally accepted. Melville, as being familiar with the concepts of Manifest Destiny and America’s exceptional status, could be freer with playing with this concept than Dostoyevsky, bound by Tsarist censorship and henceforth
obliged to be more cautious, presenting his views under a guise of a “morality tale.” What also helps is the fact that as a “neutral” unit, the trickster is spiritually hollow and thus has no marked spiritual preferences or beliefs; he is mobile, but aimless, as Berdyaev (1918) implies in *Spirits of the Russian Revolution* (*Духи русской революции*):

“He is all shaking with demonic possession, drawing everyone into a frenzied whirlwind. He is everywhere, in the midst of things, he is behind everybody and for everybody. He is a demon, who possesses everyone and takes everyone over. And yet himself he is possessed. Peter Verkhovensky first and foremost is an absolutely hollow personality, he has no substance at all.” (my translation)

(“Он весь трясется от бесовской одержимости, вовлекая всех в иступленное вихревое кружение. Всюду он в центре, он за всеми и за всех. Он — бес, вселяющийся во всех и овладевающий всеми. Но и сам он бесноватый. Петр Верховенский прежде всего человек совершенно опустошенный, в нем нет никакого содержания.”)

There can therefore be two different interpretations of the archetype which are more relevant to today’s world; the trickster as a separate product possibly generated by the collective subconscious in anticipation of a radically new era to come (as A. Horvath (1998) claims briefly, he emerges particularly during the times of political upheaval), or else as a regular character actively seeking to adapt and thrive in the world that is changing. It is also understandable why the trickster appears before the upheaval takes place rather than during the upheaval or immediately after: in the aftermath, before the established boundaries holding the social order together are overturned, his figure is more obvious – meanwhile, as the radical new order brings along the new morality and ways of doing things, the trickster becomes an accepted part of it, and thus ceases being an incongruous element. The trickster’s conflict with the past established order was due to the fact, as I already noted, that he acts as a futuristic representative of the mores about to take over.

**An Archetype for All**

As it has been previously hinted, anyone could become a trickster and he is the most democratic, accessible archetype for every person to emulate (in Chapter 4, Melville offers an image of the yielding clay that can be moulded and adapted [p22]). This can be assured firstly by the changing nature of the particular historical era, and secondly, by the argument explored by Jung (1968) and Freud (1930) [2010] that the trickster archetype is part of the collective subconscious, ready to be manifested or revealed at any moment. Amusingly, one can argue that the trickster is in fact the most “democratic” of any given archetypes, in that anybody can potentially become one. As both the post-Civil war and post-1917 Revolution eras were to commence, this preoccupation with equality and releasing of the hidden human potential had gained poignant special relevance in the trickster figure.[3] Adaptability is a trait that may be associated with hard times: it is not such a trait that is always used only for noblest of purposes, and yet those who exhibit it cannot truly be denounced (characters such as Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1936) or Ilf and Petrov’s (1928) highly entertaining trickster, Ostap Bender, coming to mind). Moreover, adaptability is a notion that allows the character to develop and hone abilities that did not manifest before: extreme intelligence, ingenuity, ability to thrive in the harshest conditions. The trickster, if seen through this lens, acts as a sign of a psychological evolution of the individual. The negative effects that this could
have upon society pose a problem; however, it must not be forgotten that the trickster is a natural, neutral entity, and thus is not exactly containable within the boundaries of what is conventionally right or wrong.

Far from being a figure from a traditional cautionary folkloric tales, the trickster is seen as paving way for the new and possibly more democratic order, unveiling the previously hidden abilities and characteristics that could not be exhibited freely in the previous and more rigid society. The trickster, in its modern perception, is essentially a humanist. However, as the social mores gain rigid form and the order is re-established, the fluid and adaptable trickster is forced yet again to be consigned to the status of a comic or ominous quasi-folkloric presence. As time progresses, and historical events are viewed from the perspective of the ages passed, he is more likely than not to be demonised as a manipulator and tempter, or, even more fittingly, as an exploitative user forming the “new aristocracy,” just as Saraskina proposes we should perceive Verkhovensky:

“The act of political crime, committed by the group and its leader, has thrown light upon the genetic code of the future - if it follows the path proposed by Petrusha (Verkhovensky). Yet Petrusha himself, this hideous hybrid of politics and crime, relies in his calculations not just on such triviality as communal responsibility for crimes committed as a group. And although the corruption of an entire generation by common crime and sinfulness truly corresponded to his plan, yet it was not the most important factor. “There will be just us left, us who have previously prepared ourselves to attain power: the smart ones we will make part of ourselves, and the stupid ones we will ride upon.” (translation mine)

The two case studies analysed in this article, although hailing from diverse literary traditions, have exhibited sufficient similarities to support this hypothesis. I would like to conclude with words from The Confidence-Man, which attest to the hidden unifying and democratic powers of the trickster that in the modern tradition should be aware of, as we look at the classical texts again, and make one wonder if we do not have a bit of the archetype speaking to our inner soul from time to time:

“And yet self-knowledge is thought by some not so easy. Who knows, my dear sir, but for a time you may have taken yourself for somebody else? Stranger things have happened.”

[1] In V. Goethe’s “Faust,” (1829), Mephistopheles takes on the guise of a large black dog in order to serve Faust; an image that was later on toyed with by M. Bulgakov in “Master and Margarita” (1928-1940?). North European folklore also has many episodes where the Devil appears as a dark-coloured canine.

[2] Although the trickster is hardly likely to indulge in soul-searching (in Russian: богогоискательство), this notion of him acting according to higher motives is discussed in “The Hero-Trickster Discussion” by Robert H. Lowie (1909).

[3] M. Carroll also bases his argument on the Freudian view that trickster acts as a “tempter” figure
drawing out people’s hidden desires. I claim that it is rather human potential that the 19th century trickster is preoccupied with.

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