Life Is Elsewhere
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La province n’existe pas par elle-même.
— Honoré de Balzac, 1841

Even though we’re provincials and we’re most certainly worthy of pity for that, nonetheless we know that so far in the world nothing so new has happened that we would weep for having missed it.
— Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1872

“All these new ideas, reforms, and theories—it’s all reached us out in the provinces, but to see everything and see it clearly, one must be in Petersburg”: thus does a character in Crime and Punishment explain what he hopes to gain from coming to the capital.\(^1\) And judging from Dostoevsky’s own career, he concurred: as much as he professed his love for the common people or hinted at the spiritual riches to be found in the Russian countryside, he showed little inclination to remove himself from the center—that is, from Petersburg. Not only was the capital the seat of print culture and state power, it also seems to have struck him as the only point of view from which one might “see everything and see it clearly.” Dostoevsky would have agreed with Jules Michelet’s description of Paris as “the center [that] knows itself and knows all the rest,” the only place where the provinces can “see themselves” and thus learn to “love and admire themselves in a superior form.”\(^2\)

Tolstoy’s symbolic geography is radically different: for him the capital—any capital—is no place for seeing clearly. Tolstoy’s family property and noble lineage afforded him his own center, the estate at Iasnaia Poliana, where he felt supremely
at home and which provided him a stable vantage point from which he would always view the world. Dostoevsky's background connected him to a significantly lower and more precarious stratum of the gentry, which perhaps helps explain why gentry estates rarely appear as meaningful "centers" in his work. With no Iasnaia Poliana to retire to, he made his way to the capital—the undisputed center of Russian intellectual and especially journalistic life—where he proceeded to make a name for himself. Here the new (to Russia) mechanisms of print culture allowed him to publish works that could then be distributed far and wide: so even as Dostoevsky's texts sometimes critique the idea of a center that serves as an organizing Logos, making meanings for and dispensing them to passive "outliers," in his own life he was careful to locate himself in such a center so as to make use of its power to spread ideas.

This chapter begins with a brief look at Tolstoy's symbolic geography, an imaginary landscape that is by no means structured around a provintsia/stolitsa binary and is thus an exception to the rule that is the subject of this book. The overview of Tolstoy serves as background to a closer analysis of Dostoevsky's geography, an analysis focused on Demons—a novel in which both the provintsia/stolitsa binary and the trope of Russia's empty provinces take on great determinative power. If Dostoevsky at times recapitulates familiar images of the provinces, in Demons he also makes ideological use of them in ways that are strikingly original, dwelling on the essentialized difference between center and periphery in order to underscore how provincial isolation fosters a dangerous kind of intellectual vulnerability.

**Tolstoy's Uncentered Heartland**

The comparative insignificance of the provintsia/stolitsa opposition in Tolstoy's world is perhaps best exemplified by The Death of Ivan Ilych (1886). Tolstoy's always-already-dying state servitor begins his life in Petersburg, advances his career by moving around to various provincial postings, and finally secures a position back in the imperial capital. While Ivan's return to Petersburg is associated with his ascent in the bureaucracy, his life there is fundamentally no different from his life in provincial places. Indeed one must read fairly closely to notice when he finally moves (back) to Petersburg, and neither in the story's opening lines nor elsewhere in the narrative is the location made definite. Literature has taught us to expect that an ambitious provincial bureaucrat (particularly one who, like Ivan Ilych, is originally from Petersburg and is married to a status-conscious wife) will have his eyes on that prize, the imperial capital, above all others—indeed, that he will be obsessed with the capital. Such expectations are not fulfilled in Tolstoy's text. Ivan Ilych has spent years in provincial posts, but he never seems to be intent on moving back to the capital: so uninterested is Tolstoy in the
provintsia-stolitsa binary that he is willing to make his bureaucrat protagonist almost implausibly indifferent to geography.

Which is not to say that Tolstoy’s work neglects the capitals: Moscow and Petersburg feature prominently in War and Peace and Anna Karenina, novels that contributed significantly to the distinctive mythologies of both cities. Here Tolstoy helped to consolidate images that had taken shape in literature over the preceding decades in a series of texts, which often defined Moscow and Petersburg by comparing them to each other. Eugene Onegin, for instance, sets homey Moscow against worldly Petersburg, and essays by Gogol, Herzen, and Belinsky juxtapose the two capitals in order to bring the salient features of each into sharp relief. (As I have noted before, the incessantly recurring juxtaposition of Moscow and Petersburg seems to have reinforced the tendency to collapse everything outside of them into the category of “the provinces.”) Tolstoy, too, sets the two capitals against each other, but he almost never implies comparisons between the (blank) provinces and the (meaningful) capitals.

War and Peace begins in the two capitals, but it soon moves outside of them. This “decentralizing design,” as Ani Kokobobo writes, reflects the historical events of 1812, when “the regions of Smolensk, Yaroslavl, and other cities [came to] embody the image of Russia as a larger whole”—thereby making the point that neither Moscow nor Petersburg was capable of representing all of Russia. In fact Napoleon’s grave error is to assume that Moscow—what he calls “the Asiatic capital of this great empire, the sacred city of Alexander’s people”—stands in for the entire country, whereas Kutuzov, by contrast, “realizes that Russia is greater than one city.”

Hence the “progressive decentralization” Kokobobo traces in Tolstoy’s novel, as we follow “characters originating in Russia’s centers [who] relocate themselves to other parts of the country in order to escape the French invasion.”

War and Peace makes explicit the symbolic content of the nation’s real physical space, and this space is definitely not blank provintsia. Our attention is directed to Russia’s actual geography: specific rivers crossed, plains surveyed, redoubts fortified, cities taken and abandoned, etc. Clearly Tolstoy is taking part in the process by which the events of 1812 were used to “[fill Russian] geography with symbolic content,” as one historian has put it—a process that becomes visible if we plot on a map the many place names that Tolstoy mentions. In addition to a significant cluster of place indicators in Austria (representing the 1805 campaign), the most striking feature of such a map would be the great density of references in the large area around Moscow: here the map is so crowded with “pins” that we cannot even read the place names. What this tells us is what we already know—namely, that the main sites of the 1812 campaign are the book’s symbolic focal point. Finally, we can clearly see an east-west line of references, the line that traces the French army’s advance and retreat across the continent.
As this line on the map suggests, a narrative that focuses on an invading army and on efforts to repulse the invaders will probably be shaped by a certain type of symbolic geography. This geography is likely to reveal an acute awareness of borders and borderlands, and to pay close attention to actual distances: in *War and Peace* we will find nothing like *Dead Souls*’ baffling assertion that the story’s setting is “not far from both capitals.” Furthermore, any story about driving out invaders is unlikely to leave much of the nation’s space blank and unworthy of attention (an elision that the provinces-capitals binary tends to encourage). A war story cannot afford to assume that any space is necessarily going to be insignificant, because in a war, almost anyplace (for instance, Borodino) might prove to be the most important place of all. Tolstoy makes a point of telling us that a day before the great battle, his characters do not know how to pronounce the name of this still-obscure town (which, as Saul Morson points out, is like an American saying “Gettysville” instead of “Gettysburg,” or not knowing how to pronounce “Antietam”). *War and Peace* reminds us that Borodino was not yet an iconic place name, radiant with national meaning and heroic memory.

The anonymous provincial towns that serve as ground zero of provinciality in other authors’ work do not feature in Tolstoy’s most famous novels. When Tolstoy does depict provincial towns he gives us their names; their *provintsial’nost* is not emphasized—that is, they do not serve to showcase a monotonous, derivative, or second-rate culture. For instance when *War and Peace* takes us briefly to Voronezh, what happens there (matchmaking for Nikolai and Maria) is every bit as significant as what happens anywhere else. If Voronezh is marked as “provincial” in the sense of backward, it is so only in Nikolai’s own thinking: here he adopts an uncharacteristically free manner of dancing, Tolstoy tells us, because he “feels the need to surprise them with something unusual, something that they would have to accept as being the usual thing in the capitals despite being unknown to them in the provinces [v provintsii].” And when *Anna Karenina*’s Levin goes to Kashin for *zemstvo* elections, the town itself is left virtually undescribed; all the focus is on Levin and the other noble landowners who have converged there to vote, and who can in no sense be construed as provincials.

In place of the empty provinces trope, Tolstoy’s major works typically imagine a decentralized agricultural heartland organized around a number of gentry estates, with the estates serving as focal points toward which nearby surrounding areas direct their resources and attention. The word “surrounding” is important: we might imagine the geography implied by Tolstoy’s texts as a continuous and relatively homogeneous stretch of space punctuated by dots of concentrated significance and activity. Surrounding these dots are tracts of rural land that are organically
connected to the estates. The estate-dots are not exactly “nodes” since they are not usually represented as connecting points in a network; instead of emphasizing how these places are linked to each other by roads or other lines of communication, Tolstoy tends to depict each estate as a more or less self-sufficient world in a more or less symbiotic relationship with the directly adjacent countryside.

Tolstoy's gentry estates seem “real” in the sense that they are carefully drawn places capable of fostering genuine (organic, nonimitative) culture, but we feel little need to locate them on a map. Except in *War and Peace* when the French army is approaching, in general we remain only vaguely conscious of precisely where in European Russia the various Rostovs, Bolkonskys, Levins, and Oblonskys have their homes. It is possible to figure out the estates' approximate locations—we can establish, for instance, that in *War and Peace* Bald Hills is further from Moscow than is Bogucharovo—but the information is not crucial. The same holds for *Anna Karenina*: here as in *War and Peace*, every estate is a distinct mini-civilization, but the distinctiveness has little to do with location (and once again it is instructive to recall the American literary tradition, in which it is impossible to imagine a generic “farm” that could be in either, say, Kansas or New Hampshire). Thus Tolstoy gives us a degree of geographic and topographic specificity, but instead of being pressed into the service of imagining regional particularity, specificity is used to emphasize national unity. In other words, this is not regionalism.

Tolstoyan estates are often not especially lavish, but they are almost always the locus of an authentic and coherent culture; they are often inward-looking, but not exactly isolated and usually not sealed off from “the world outside.” His Rostovs and Bolkonskys and Levins move back and forth between estate and capital (something that Gogol's provincial gentry, for instance, never do); both worlds are thoroughly real and accessible to Tolstoy's characters, though they may prefer one or the other. Even his most modest and unsophisticated estates, the ones that are indeed isolated and insular, cannot be called provincial. The landed noblemen who inhabit them, whether rich or poor, feel themselves to be utterly *at home* in these places, and they are not comparing themselves to a distant standard (and as we have seen, anxious comparison is a prerequisite of provinciality). An extreme instance of this authenticity would be the tiny, self-contained world of “Uncle's” estate in *War and Peace* (books VII and VIII), a place where imitation is inconceivable because there can be nothing from “outside” available for imitation in a place whose culture is so thoroughly constant, homogeneous, and internally consistent. Even when Tolstoy represents an estate falling into inauthenticity—as does Anna's and Vronsky's English-inflected “play farm” toward the end of *Anna Karenina*—it does not become provincial in the sense of being behind or culturally incoherent. Instead it becomes just self-consciously modern, too deracinated and flimsy to serve as a setting for what Tolstoy deems real life.
Both *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* imply a close accord between the peasantry and the traditional gentry, strongly suggesting that whatever essence the two classes supposedly have in common is the basis of an “organic” Russian culture—and what is organic is the opposite of what is provincial. In other words, Tolstoy fineses the relationship between peasant/rural culture and estate culture (or to put it differently, between pastoral and provinciality) in order to draw on peasant authenticity, and peasant permanence, for his own ends. In order to be at risk of being provincial, you must be striving to be modern; unlike someone who is adhering to a supposedly timeless code (as do peasants and genuine noblemen, in Tolstoy’s view), someone who tries to keep up with the times is bound to fail at least on occasion, at which point he or she has no “authenticity” to fall back on. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the very phenomenon of provinciality is closely tied to modernity and progress—and Tolstoy did not view modernity and progress as ideals. In his major fiction, a lack of interest in provincial towns goes along with a lack of interest in most of the distinctly modernizing types who were in reality transforming Russia in the post-Reform era, like *raznochintsy*, merchant capitalists, members of the professions, and other elements of the messy “middle strata” that shaped urban life.\(^\text{10}\)

Tolstoy’s various paeans to traditional class hierarchy (most notably in *Childhood* and *War and Peace*) seem to be motivated as much by revulsion at the adulterated nature of modern social categories as they are by simple nostalgia for the past. His more admirable characters tend to register displeasure when they notice what they take to be modernity’s unpalatable incursions into peasants’ lives, as for example in his early work “Morning of a Landowner,” when a flashy, modern reproduction of a general’s portrait in a peasant’s hut bodes ill. Peasants are supposed to stay peasants; as long as they do so, they certainly cannot be provincials (though they are subject to other vices). In Tolstoy’s view staying the same is a large part of what defines peasants, and ideally noblemen as well; there is nothing less appropriate to a supposedly timeless essence than following changing “fashions” or generally mixing it up in any way.

In the post-emancipation world of *Anna Karenina*, Levin is disgusted by the social indeterminateness of a smarmy upstart merchant, who is, in class terms, neither fish nor fowl. At the end of the novel when Oblonsky goes to work for the railway, we are meant to see his decision as a capitulation to a mongrelized and ethic-less modernity, a cloudy medium into which the essence of Russia’s old nobility will be dissolved. Levin, by contrast, insists that he himself is something pure and apart. Consider for example his proud retort to the accusation that he is a “reactionary”: “I’ve never really thought about who I am. I am Konstantin Levin, that’s all.”\(^\text{11}\) In other words, Levin naturalizes his class position, presenting it as an immutable fact that he does not even have to think about (not true, of course:
Levin thinks about his class position all the time). For Tolstoy, it seems, peasants are fine, noblemen are fine, even priests are fine: but mixtures are not so fine. And mixtures are the stuff that both modernity and provinciality are made of.

**Dostoevsky and the “Fantastic Center”**

Tolstoy asks us to pay equal attention to a wide variety of Russian places: his texts generally discourage the semiotic privileging of the capitals, pushing back against the familiar tendency to allow centers to become oversaturated with meaning at the expense of other locations. Dostoevsky, by contrast, is much more likely to reproduce the symbolic geography we have seen over and over from the 1830s on—an imaginary landscape in which significance and authority are so intensely concentrated in the capitals that the rest of Russian space risks being reduced to blankness. As early as his feuilletons of 1847, Dostoevsky assumes what we might call the radical centrality of Russia’s capital, a quasi-magical location that is also a force, a mysterious power capable of bringing together Russianness, modernity, and the future. In the Russian capital, he writes,

> with every step, you hear, feel and see the contemporary moment and the idea of the present moment. . . . [Petersburg] is still in the process of becoming, of creating itself; its future is in an idea; but the idea belongs to Peter I, and it is taking form . . . not just in the Petersburg swamp but throughout all of Russia, all of which lives by Petersburg alone. Everyone has already felt in themselves the force and the blessing of the Petrine direction [napravljenia]. . . . Therefore all are beginning to live. . . . Everything lives and is supported by Petersburg alone. (18:26)

“All of Russia, all of which lives by Petersburg alone”: here we could not be further from the geography of *War and Peace*, with its emphatically decentralized geography and its attention to local realities.

Only in fleeting moments does Dostoevsky seem willing to critique such a worldview. For instance, toward the very end of his life, in an 1881 installment of *Diary of a Writer*, he appears to contradict his earlier remarks on the all-powerful and all-encompassing nature of the Russian center. Railing against those who would take Petersburg to represent all of Russia, even if the capital might believe itself capable of doing so, he writes:

Petersburg has got to the point where it definitively considers itself to be all of Russia. . . . In this sense Petersburg is following the example set by Paris, despite the fact that it doesn’t resemble Paris at all! Paris took shape historically in such a way that it swallowed up all of France, the whole significance of her political and social
life, her whole import. Take Paris away from France, and what's left?—nothing but a geographic definition. Some of us imagine that it's the same here as in Paris, that in Petersburg all of Russia has been brought together. But Petersburg is by no means Russia. . . . Take one look outside Petersburg and you’ll see the ocean of the Russian land, an ocean vast and bottomless. (27:14)

Here he seems to edge toward an understanding of Russian geography that might allow what is local and specific to exist meaningfully on its own terms (“Petersburg is by no means Russia”)—but a page or two later he quickly retreats from this possibility:

Our people [narod nash], in their various locales [i po mestam sidia], will say exactly the same thing they would say were they all together—for they are one. Whether they are scattered or brought together, they are one because their spirit is one. Each place [mestnost'] would contribute only its local particularity, while on the whole, in general, everything would be in agreement and unified. (27:21)

Yes, he sees value in talking to the people (narod) scattered across Russia’s far-flung locales (“locally, in district towns,” etc.): but if you investigate these places, he says, you will simply find the same thing again and again (“on the whole, in general, everything would be in agreement and unified”). “Local particularities” are acknowledged, but the provinces/capital binary is preserved, even reinforced. Having urged his readers to “look outside Petersburg” for the real Russia, Dostoevsky immediately assures us that the search should not take long, since every Russian place is sure to recapitulate the same idea.

Russian unity was a key value for Dostoevsky, who claimed elsewhere in the Diary (in 1876) that Europeans might well envy the “force of political unity” (sila politicheskogo edinstva) that characterized Russia (22:111). And such unity seems to have presupposed for him a high degree of centralization. Dostoevsky’s faith in centralization finds expression in his response to the Gatsitskii-Mordovtsev exchange of 1875 (analyzed in the previous chapter), a debate concerning the proper role of provincial (or “regional,” oblastnaia) culture in Russia’s intellectual and cultural life. After the Petersburg journalist Mordovtsev made a case for “the law of centralization” (“it is natural that everything in the provinces be drawn to the centers”), Gatsitskii and other provincial intellectuals responded with arguments for decentralization (the nation is only as strong as its “numberless” regional centers, and real progress assumes the “widest possible dissemination” of enlightenment). When Dostoevsky weighs in with “A Regional New Word”—“Oblastnoe novoe slovo,” an 1876 entry in Diary of a Writer—he comes down firmly on the side of centralization. Though he acknowledges the provinces’ desire to “virtually
emancipate themselves from the capitals” and “say their own word,” he nonetheless downplays the importance of regional uniqueness in favor of Russian unity. The particularities of regions will be important only because they will confirm that “in each place throughout Russia, all of Russia exists” (23:6–7). The relationship of the provinces to Russia is at best synecdochic: the provinces are worthy of representation when a provincial part can stand in for the Russian whole.

This is not to say that Dostoevsky fails to see provincial places as integral parts of Russia. In Diary of a Writer, for instance, he often turns his gaze to the provinces. Many of the Diary’s entries are devoted to aggregating and (re)disseminating information from provincial publications and letters received from far-flung readers—but the aggregating, interpreting, and re-disseminating of provincial information is being done in and by a center. Here Dostoevsky is not so different from those educated Russians who had long been lamenting the center’s dearth of knowledge about the provinces and calling for information-gathering efforts to render these places more useful to the centralized state, a phenomenon I have discussed in earlier chapters. His approach, like theirs, assumes both that the provinces have something essential to contribute to the life of the nation and that this contribution can only be made via the capital. As Luzhin says in Crime and Punishment, “to see everything and see it clearly, one must be in Petersburg” (6:115).

Dostoevsky’s tendency to view centralization as key to Russia’s strength does not prevent him from recognizing the distortions that inevitably attend such centralization. The risks posed by the center’s hyperconcentration of authority and power are made especially clear in Demons, a novel that reflects on how an intensely centralized view of the nation’s geographic space affects and in fact deforms Russian ways of thinking, especially political thinking. Here Dostoevsky both reproduces and critiques a conceptual geography that reduces provincial Russia to a meaningless blank or an appendage of the capitals. By taking an infamous real-life Moscow event, the so-called “Nechaev Affair,” and moving it to a nameless provincial city, Demons responds to an imaginary geography that can locate meaning only in a center, whatever or wherever the center may be.

Every contemporary reader would be expected to know about the events Dostoevsky used as Demons’ point of departure, and to know that these events took place in Moscow. In November of 1869 the revolutionary Sergei Nechaev, recently returned from Europe, incited a group of young radicals at Moscow’s Petrovsky Agricultural Academy to kill a fellow member of their political circle.14 The murder took place on the grounds of the academy. But Demons is set not in Moscow but rather in what the elusive and decidedly provincial narrator constantly refers to as u nas, meaning “in our province” or “in our (provincial) town.” Where exactly is this town supposed to be, and what does it matter? A few very general features of the unidentified provincial city recall Tver, where Dostoevsky
spent part of the year 1860: the town in *Demons* is divided by a river and there is a textile factory on the outskirts. Such, however, would seem to be the extent of the topographical correspondence. Tver’s specific topography, its monuments, history, and regional character all fail to play any important role in the narrative. When Dostoevsky’s narrator remarks that “our town” has “a big marketplace” and “a decrepit church of the Nativity that is a most notable antiquity” (10:252), he is saying nothing that might not be said about many, many Russian towns. Thus the setting of *Demons* is not Tver in the way that, for example, the setting of Nikolai Leskov’s “Levsha” is Tula: at most *Demons* might be said to refer to a kind of Tver-in-quotation-marks, another quintessentially average town evoking the averageness of provincial places generally.

In fact on the novel’s first page, the narrator introduces “our town” as a place that “up till now was not remarkable for anything” (10:7)—thereby signaling to us that *Demons* makes explicit what will be implicit in, say, the town of Skotoprigonevsk in *Brothers Karamazov*. For while the setting of *Brothers Karamazov* is given a name, it is no more specifically characterized than is *Demons*’ anonymous and imaginary gubernskii gorod. Like the setting of *Demons*, Skotoprigonevsk is defined largely by its averageness, its ability to stand in for any provincial place. Dostoevsky seems to have based Skotoprigonevsk to some extent on the town of Staraia Russa, but in *Brothers Karamazov* we learn no more about Staraia Russa *per se* than we do about Tver in *Demons*, simply because neither novel is much concerned with the specificities of life in a particular Russian place. Besides this averageness, the other defining characteristic of both towns is isolation (the narrator of *Brothers Karamazov* tells us that Skotoprigonevsk is seventy or eighty versts from the nearest railroad station, which makes it even more isolated than the setting of *Demons*)—and *Demons* will make explicit the fact that provincial isolation encourages ideological vulnerability.

Like others before him, Dostoevsky is relying on the trope of the provincial backwater to make an argument about Russia itself. The point is not that the benighted characters in *Demons* are provincials; the point is that all of Russia has placed itself in a provincial relationship to European culture, as is illustrated by the radicals’ wholesale acceptance of imported ideas. Moving the action from Moscow to the provinces serves to underscore this fact. Because provincial culture can so convincingly be represented as derivative and meager, it is not hard to understand why it puts up no resistance to ideas that come in from outside, thereby allowing these ideas to run amok. In this way the provincial town simply stands in for the nation as a whole; as one character asserts, “Russia is now . . . the place in the whole world where anything you like can happen with the least resistance” (10:287). Were *Demons* set in Moscow, it would be more difficult for Dostoevsky to convey the power of the spurious *idée fixe* that animates nearly all
of the characters, simply because in Moscow these characters would have had to contend with the metropolis’s proliferation of competing ideologies and its myriad claims on their attention (witness what happens to Raskolnikov’s thinking when he tries to pursue one grand idea to its conclusion in Petersburg). Certainly if Demons were set in the capital, Dostoevsky would have to work harder to make the grandly general points about morality, Russianness and Western influence that he is clearly interested in making.

The placelessness of Demons’ provincial place relies on a symbolic geography in which only the center has the power to confer meaning on the chaotic phenomena of life. In this novel as in so many other texts, the provinces are a place where it is hard to make sense of things, a place where meanings are more likely to dissolve than to coalesce. Dostoevsky’s static provincial town, animated only by the promiscuous circulation of rumor and gossip, clearly recalls Gogol’s in various gorod Ns: all are characterized by what Demons’ narrator calls “mental anarchy” (10:509). Like the characters in Dead Souls and The Inspector General, Dostoevsky’s provincials keep their eyes trained on a distant center (whether Petersburg, Moscow, or Paris) because there is nothing local that signifies. In Dostoevsky’s text as in Gogol’s, provincial society does of course have its local mores (gubernskie poriadki, the narrator calls them; 10:234), but the self-identified gubernskii gorod never forgets its own provinciality, its subordination to and dependence on some far-off central place.

One result of knowing oneself to be provincial is a constant readiness to take orders from someplace else. Virtually every character in Demons is convinced that real life is happening somewhere far away, somewhere “out there.” Even more important, all are convinced that for those who are in the provinces, meaning can accrue only to actions that are sanctioned or directed from afar by some “central” intelligence or force. The provincial radicals, we are told, are always ready to change their minds “at the first hint from our progressive corners in the capital” (10:28). Thus Pyotr Verkhovensky gains power in large part by associating himself, in the minds of the provincials, with a place that he constantly refers to as “there.” For example, in the key conversations in which he manages to manipulate first the dim-witted provincial governor and then his own followers, Verkhovensky repeats various forms of the word “there” over and over. To the governor he says, “no one there has yet issued any orders . . . I have not yet taken upon myself any such orders from there . . . I could have chosen . . . to fly straight over there, that is there where I first gave my explanations,” and so on. In this brief passage forms denoting location or motion to or from “there” (tam, tuda, and ottuda) occur seven times, and five times they are actually in italics, as part of Verkhovensky’s successful attempt to convince the governor that he (Verkhovensky) is allied with the powers-that-be in Petersburg.
Later Verkhovensky uses the same vocabulary to convince his provincial followers that he speaks for the radical masterminds who are supposedly directing the revolutionary show from somewhere abroad: he assures them that everything is “known there”; “there they don't lose track of a single hair or a single speck of dust” (10:420; italics in the original). In such passages it is clear that this authoritative tam need not be specified geographically. The important thing is that it is not here (on the edge) but rather there (in the center); what provincials yearn for is always somewhere else, “not here, not at this place, but ‘there,’” as Epstein writes. Ideas reach the provinces only after having passed through “there” (usually, but not always, Petersburg), and the provincials are ready to credit virtually any idea that comes to them by way of this path. For while we might be inclined to assume that the substance of real life would naturally be “here” (where one actually is), to these characters “here” seems utterly insubstantial; only “there” can they locate a fullness of meaning that approaches the real.

The little cabal in Demons can exist only as long as it can see itself as one of an interconnected series of similar piaterki (revolutionary cells, groups of five) all tied together, in a way that they themselves cannot understand but must take on faith, by an all-seeing, all-ordering consciousness somewhere “out there.” Thus the conspirators prove themselves more than ready to believe that Verkhovensky is “an emissary come from abroad with full plenary powers” (10:302). And Verkhovensky is successful in manipulating them precisely because he has painted what one of the conspirators calls “a picture of Russia covered by an endless network [set’iu] of knots” (10:418). It is the provincials’ acceptance of this oft-repeated spatial image—“a whole network of piaterki,” “an endless multitude of piaterki . . . the whole of Russia covered with a network”—that leads them to listen so eagerly to talk of the “central committee” (tsentral’nyi komitet) directing everything from afar (10:510, 424).

In fact the recurrence of the root tsentr—“this fantastic center,” “our foreign centers,” “a central but up till now unknown to us . . . committee” (10:416, 424, 418)—signals the provincials’ faith that only a center has the power to render meaningful whatever they do, including something as senseless as an unmotivated murder. “I am acting on instructions from the central committee,” Verkhovensky tells them, “and you must obey” (10:424). Elsewhere he drives home the connection between the central power that he represents and the necessity of submission: “You are only a single knot in an endless network of knots, and [thus] you owe blind obedience to the center,” he declares (10:418). Having chosen to believe that “their unit is only one of hundreds and thousands of similar piaterki, just like theirs, scattered all over Russia, all depending on some sort of central, huge but secret place, in turn organically linked to the European universal revolution” (10:303), the provincials must also resign themselves to the belief that their
actions can have no meaning without this network. If you are out in the provinces, and you accept that all power and significance are located in some far-off center (in this case, wherever the “European universal revolution” may be happening), then of course it pays to think that your peripheral place is indeed “organically linked” (albeit by an invisible web) to something that really counts, something central. And if you believe yourself to be merely “one among hundreds and thousands,” each one indistinguishable from the next and each utterly insignificant on its own, you are uniquely vulnerable to ideas like Verkhovensky’s.

Dostoevsky evokes the conspirators’ intensely provincial worldview through repetition of the word set’ (net, network, circuit, system) and the visual and spatial image this word conveys—a picture of Russia as an unvarying plain stretching out into the distance, randomly dotted with identical specks.24 The picture is by no means unfamiliar: one thinks, for example, of the Russian landscape in Dead Souls, which Gogol famously describes as “exposed, desolate, and flat . . . like specks, like dots [tochki, znachki] are the low-lying towns scattered over the plains.”25 An even more extreme example is the setting of Dmitry Grigorovich’s Anton Goremyka, where the only discernible “landmarks” are holes; here the empty, flat space is so unreadable that even a local can lose his way amidst “boundless fields stretched outward among [still] other fields and swamps,” “endless flat fields” traversed by a “dead road.”26 Demons draws on such images of Russia as a vast homogeneous plain lacking legible markers, a space where nameless towns are seen merely as “specks” on the low horizon—although, as I have argued, Dostoevsky’s provincials choose to believe that these insignificant specks can assume importance if they can become “knots” (uzly) by being placed in relationship to some higher organizing power. Once linked to such a center, Dostoevsky’s characters believe, the dots have a chance of becoming nodes in a system of meaning.27

And it matters little whether or not the “network” really exists: what is important is the worldview that allows Demons’ provincials to be duped into believing that it does. As Verkhovensky manipulates his followers into murdering their former comrade Shatov, it is this belief that makes the conspirators feel “like flies caught in the web of a huge spider”—a telling simile that links the novel’s pervasive imagery of nets and networks (including the train lines entangling the countryside “like a spider web”) with the characters’ inability to extricate themselves from Verkhovensky’s plot (10:421, 375). Shatov himself, who knows that Verkhovensky’s network is a fiction, nonetheless dreams in the hours before his death that he is tangled up in ropes that leave him unable to move (10:432)—yet another evocation of the tightening web in which these characters find themselves trapped.

When Stavrogin carefully hangs himself on a “strong silk cord” (10:516), his chosen method of suicide resonates again with this imagery of webs, knots, and nets, plotted lines and (self-imposed?) traps. This suggests that even though Stavrogin
has not participated actively in the townspeople’s never-ending circuit of gossip and rumor (the fuel on which Demons’ narrative engine runs) and has instead remained intriguingly silent, he is nonetheless as thoroughly enmeshed in their system as are his various satellites. And as the absent presence around whom the provincial revolutionaries hover—toward whom they look for the fullness of meaning that they trust will be revealed in and by ideology—Stavrogin is of course closely identified with the geographic and cultural fact of Petersburg.

Both Stavrogin and Petersburg embody what one of the provincial conspirators calls a “fantastic center” (fantasticheskii tsentr, 10:416), “fantastic” in the sense that it does not and perhaps cannot truly exist. The fact that Stavrogin has left Petersburg suggests as much: having found no there in the capital, he returns to the provincial periphery, where his ideological development ceases and where he comes to serve merely as a way for the provincials to delude themselves into thinking that what they are doing has coherence and purpose. Once again the parallel with Gogol’s vision of the provinces/capital relationship becomes apparent. In The Inspector General, for example, far-off Petersburg serves as the patently unreal and quasi-magical ideal that motivates every character in the play. In Donald Fanger’s words, Petersburg in Gogol’s text (like Stavrogin in Dostoevsky’s) is a “conferring power,” a “seat of authority, ground of judgment”—but by the end of The Inspector General the capital proves to be an empty idea, functioning only as “a powerful absence” in the play.28

Near the end of Demons an outed conspirator, who by this point should understand that Verkhovensky’s plot was almost certainly a sham, nonetheless continues to assert hysterically that there exists an “endless multitude” of piaterki linked by the mysterious network (10:510). By the time the cabal is disintegrating, the conspirators’ panic is fueled above all by the fear that the network is a fiction, that “this fantastic center” might not exist at all; thus as things fall apart, the conspirators demand that Verkhovensky clarify his position “as a representative of the central but up till now unknown to us and practically fantastic committee” (10:416, 418). One would-be revolutionary challenges him in despair, “I think that our foreign centers have forgotten Russian reality and have broken every tie and are simply raving . . . I even think that instead of many hundreds of piaterki in Russia we are the only one and there’s no network at all” (10:424).

The plural noun (“our foreign centers”) suggests that for the provincial revolutionaries who are eager to follow Verkhovensky, this idea of the tsentr need not refer to a single, specific geographic incarnation in order to do its conceptual work. Here Epstein’s remarks on the role of centralized political power in Russian culture are suggestive: at certain historical moments, Epstein argues, the center itself could “lose its geographic incarnation [plot]” because the autocracy’s geographic transfers of power were capable of “[provincializing] the entire world that had
been abandoned, torn away from the capital-throne” (“in Russian history even the capital not infrequently was transformed into a province, inasmuch as the sovereign would transfer his seat to a specially created or minimally populated ‘center’”). Thus even Moscow and Petersburg might be figured as provinces “in relationship to an imperial power that was always [both] elusive and transcendental.” The imperial state and its portable apparatus of “central” power seem to have conditioned the way Russian culture conceives of an organizing center—which perhaps helps explain why, in Demons, the vague possibility of the movement or proliferation of centers (whatever that might mean) does not lead to the collapse of the basic binary (all-meaningful “there” vs. insignificant “here”) that governs characters’ conceptions of space.

In Demons the “elusive and transcendental” entity (or entities) in relationship to which characters experience their own provinciality in fact seems to have become so thoroughly elusive and transcendental as to defy embodiment in any concrete institution. The result is a symbolic geography that reduces much of Russia’s physical space to blankness, thereby giving rise to the tormenting sense of insignificance that encourages provincials to seek meaning by envisioning their place as one “knot” in a mysterious network. At the moment when Verkhovensky is about to embark on the train that will allow him to make his escape, leaving behind his doomed associates, he claims to have “plenty of such knots in the general network [etikh uzlov obshchei seti u menia dovol’no],” although he concedes that “an extra knot can’t hurt” (10:478).

The noun uzel occurs over and over in Demons. In addition to designating a knot, a node, or a nerve center, it can also signify a juncture in a road—thereby drawing our attention to the ways in which Demons’ image of a vast net of conspiracy stretching out over the Russian landscape resonates with the text’s depiction of the railroads. Railroads and trains are mentioned frequently in the novel. A character prophesies, for example, that “what with the railroads” he cannot believe in “the Russian God” (and in any case everything in Russia will soon “dissolve into mud”); one of the conspirators has worked for the railroad; student radicals travel by railroad to distribute incendiary leaflets (whereas the itinerant peddler of religious texts seems to travel by foot—khodit i Evangelie prodaet; 10:287, 303, 304, 488). Seen as a whole, railroad tracks are shown to form a network of interconnected uzly spreading web-like across Russia’s open spaces.

As such references remind us, Demons was being written and serialized within just a few years of Anna Karenina. But in Anna Karenina, unlike in Demons, our attention is drawn to the narrative function of the train itself: Tolstoy’s locomotive is an image of modernity, technology, industrialization, and speed; the locus of an unprecedented kind of class mixing; and a driving force behind the era’s new social mobility and the dissolution of traditional social bonds and local attachments. In
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this sense the Dostoevsky text that most clearly recalls Tolstoy’s paradigmatic railroad novel is not *Demons* but rather *The Idiot*, in which onrushing trains serve as emblems of sexual passion, violence, and a pernicious version of modernity. In *The Idiot* as in *Anna Karenina*, the locomotive evokes teleological movement (no matter what that *telos* is or whether or not one deems it to be a worthy goal). But *Demons*, by contrast, is not dominated by the image of the train, but rather is structured around images of the *tracks*, a *set* that is associated less with forward movement than with circulation and distribution.

This contrast points to two ways of considering the relationship between railroads and narrative, whether in Dostoevsky’s work or anywhere else: you can focus either on the train itself or on the system created by the rail lines. The first approach (that is, concentrating on the train) tends to privilege questions of time: by drawing our attention to speed, duration, trajectory, and the effort to arrive at a goal, the image of the locomotive tends to foreground a narrative’s end-directed quality. It is this image that Jean Cocteau, for example, was drawing on when he wrote that “everything one does in life . . . occurs in an express train racing towards death.” But if we take the second approach (that is, if we concentrate on the system of interlocking tracks, as *Demons* seems to require), we will instead privilege questions of space: the railroad as a network calls attention to such issues as the legibility or illegibility of the landscape; the relationship between narrative developments and topographic features; the ways in which narrative can represent such oppositions as distance vs. nearness, connectedness vs. isolation, and differentiated vs. homogeneous spaces.

While Dostoevsky’s thematics in *Demons* have little in common with Tolstoy’s in *Anna Karenina*, both writers tell stories that would not have been possible without the transportation technology that was transforming how Russians experienced distance and geographic space. Characters in *Demons* are constantly coming and going—“turning up abroad” or “suddenly appearing” in town. Stavrogin and Verkhovensky arrive unexpectedly on the train (10:157). We last see Verkhovensky at the train station, and Stavrogin spends his final days “six stations away [from town], at the stationmaster’s house,” before coming home “on the early train” to hang himself (10:515). The conspirators’ itinerancy is linked to their efforts to disseminate political tracts across Russia. One just-arrived *studentka-nihilistka*, for example, attends the conspirators’ meeting “practically still in her traveling clothes,” “intending to stay only a day or two and then go on further and further” distributing propaganda along the way (10:302, 304).

So itinerant are these characters that it is almost impossible to track their movements. Paris, Geneva, Petersburg, Moscow, America, Switzerland, Gottingen, Frankfurt, Dresden, Iceland, Greece, Jerusalem, Egypt: an attempt to map the various voyages mentioned in the book reveals only that the effort of precise
mapping yields little in the way of useful information or telling patterns, simply because this is not a narrative in which a character is likely to follow a trajectory through space that corresponds in any way to a “development” (whereas a text like War and Peace establishes “a strong link between Bildung and geographical mobility”). Movement in Demons is less about development or progress than it is about circulation, whether of people, printed texts, gossip, or ideas. Furthermore, all of this frantic, swirling movement occurs outside the bounds of what is narrated. We never witness any of these voyages, and as we sit in the provincial city with the narrator, who seems never to have left town in his life, we experience this pervasive transience merely as report and rumor. The result is a feeling of torpid stasis surrounded by constant movement, movement made possible, somewhere out there, by an ever-ramifying network of connect-the-dot train tracks.

In fact Demons’ whole plot (in both senses of the word) hinges on the workings of this network, simply because it hinges on the possibility of moving relatively quickly through space, and doing so in a particular way: moving from one point to another, from one “knot” to another in the net, and skipping over everything in between. As many nineteenth-century European observers noted, even as railroads linked places together, they did so by destroying the lived reality of space between points, which is to say almost everyplace. In 1840 a French writer asserted, “[the railroads] serve only the points of departure, the way-stations, and the terminals, which are mostly at great distances from each other. . . . They are of no use whatsoever for the intervening spaces, which they traverse with disdain and provide only with a useless spectacle.”36 In the words of one historian, the railroads’ “industrialization of time and space” meant that “the region that could be reached by train from Paris . . . [came to appear] as the product or appendage of the railroad.”

“The product or appendage of the railroad”: this statement suggests the degree to which the railroad’s advent might serve to reinforce or even create a sense of provinciality or peripheralness, a sense of inescapable dependency on a far-off “hub.” Thus Demons’ insistence on the train tracks’ ever-extending web resonates not only with the characters’ paranoia and conspiracy theorizing, but also with their inability to see their own physical place, their “here,” as meaningful in its own right. The railroad encourages them to experience their own geographic reality as nothing more than a “province,” an appendage—because as will see in the following chapter, a location experiences itself as provincial only once it is made aware of another more important location (a “center”), and the distance dividing it from this center. This is exactly what was accomplished by technologies like the railroad over the course of the nineteenth century. The arrival of the railroad means that a place is no longer its own place, but rather a place that is close (or close enough) to another, more central place—as we will see in Chekhov’s Cherry Orchard, for instance.
Dostoevsky uses an isolated (but not wholly isolated) gubernskii gorod to reflect on how a particular symbolic geography can form and deform Russian ways of thinking, especially political thinking. By and large Demons reproduces a familiar, intensely centralized conceptual geography—but at certain points it begins to critique this geography as well, registering its problematic ability to reduce provincial Russia to a meaningless blank or an appendage of the capitals. For instance, one of the provincial conspirators challenges Verkhovensky, “Excuse me, sir . . . even though we’re provincials [provintsialy] and we’re most certainly worthy of pity for that, nonetheless we know that so far in the world nothing so new has happened that we would weep for having missed it” (10:313–14). His assertion implies a healthy skepticism about any hierarchy of meaning that would definitively subordinate “provincial” places to a far-off center.

In fact Demons concludes by challenging any symbolic geography that would represent the Russian provinces as an undifferentiated, illegible expanse covered with insignificant little dots waiting to be connected by a higher power. In the novel’s second-to-last chapter, Stepan Trofimovich, the maundering old “man of the 40s” whom Dostoevsky uses to indict the intelligentsia for its failings, wanders off into the countryside, first on foot and then in a peasant’s cart. Stepan Trofimovich wants to flee the provincial town, but he wants to flee without going to any specific place. In fact, the narrator tells us, “at this moment his chief suffering stemmed from his absolute inability to name or specify a place [nazvat’ i naznachit’ mesto on ni za chto ne mog],” precisely because he sensed that “the instant he were to decide on [going to] any particular city, the ridiculousness and impossibility of his undertaking would become clear in his own eyes: . . . for what was he supposed to do precisely in this town, and why not go to some other?” (10:480–81; emphasis mine). Since Stepan Trofimovich, as an intelligent (member of the intelligentsia) who knows nothing of the common people or Russian reality, assumes that all provincial places mean the same thing (which is to say, they mean nothing), it must be better, he decides, simply to “take to the high road [luchshe prosto bol’shaia doroga]” (10:480).

And here the text takes careful note of the quintessentially Russian topography that Stepan Trofimovich encounters as he finds himself (perhaps for the first time in his life) alone and on foot in the middle of his country’s vast, flat landscape. Significantly, though the high road “passes just half a verst” from the estate where he has lived for decades, he manages to embark on this road only as if by accident (“strangely, he did not even notice at first how he had come upon it,” the narrator tells us; 10:481). Only after walking almost unconsciously for quite a distance does he look around to try to see where he actually is. And where he is, is in Russia, in an almost exaggeratedly monotonous version of the illegible landscape that by Dostoevsky’s day had frustrated the aestheticizing efforts of educated observers for nearly a century:
The old, black and deeply rutted road stretched out before him in an endless thread, planted with its willow trees; to the right—a bare place [goloe mesto], fields harvested long ago; to the left—bushes, and further beyond them, woods. And far, far off, the barely noticeable line of the railroad tracks running obliquely, with the smoke of some train hanging over them. (10:481)

Having insisted on the landscape’s tedium and featurelessness, thereby acknowledging the difficulty of extracting meaning from such a “bare place,” the description ends by drawing our attention to the railroad line that is barely visible in the furthest distance. In this passage the train can only be “far off”—insubstantial as smoke and in effect irrelevant—now that Stepan Trofimovich has stepped off the grid, as it were, and into the Russian landscape.

The people who inhabit this landscape are muzhiki, the peasants whom the lost intellectual encounters in the passage immediately following the landscape description. And while Stepan Trofimovich had hoped to take grandly and abstractly “to the high road,” the peasants keep asking him exactly where he is going. They want to know the name of the actual village that is his destination—and as they repeatedly ask the bewildered old man whether he is headed to Khatovo, Spasov, or Ustevo, we realize that these peasants live in real geographic space (10:483ff). While they know that “visiting foreigners come by rail sometimes [inostrantsy zaezhie po chugunke inoi priezhhaitu, 10:482],” they themselves move through space not on a network of train tracks, but on foot and in the carts, steamer-boats, and coaches to which they repeatedly refer. Thus in the book’s final pages we are introduced to a way of seeing Russian places not as a series of nameless and interchangeable dots against a blank background of “provinciality,” but rather as a collection of real individual locations with their own associations and meanings. The image of Russian space that has informed much of the narrative is replaced by a markedly different image, one that works to undermine the assumption that the whole expanse of provincial Russia constitutes a blank on the map of the nation.

And in a narrative that has been structured by the image of a network that simultaneously facilitates and constrains travel (you go where the train takes you, or where the masterminds in Geneva tell you to go), we conclude instead with an image of unstructured, unpurposeful movement, the kind of movement that is in fact suggested by the chapter title “Stepan Trofimovich’s Last Pilgrimage” (Poslednee stranstvovanie Stepana Trofimovicha [10:479], in which one might also translate pilgrimage as wandering, journeying, or peregrination). A pilgrim (strannik—Leskov’s ocharovannyi strannik, “enchanted pilgrim,” for example) does not move from point to point on a network, experiencing all the spaces in between points as blanks; a strannik is more likely to attend equally to all of the space that
he covers, as do the peasants who live in and pay attention to the off-the-grid places that have no significance for “visiting foreigners [who] come by rail.”

Why, though, is this called Stepan Trofimovich’s last pilgrimage—have there been others? In this sense the title of Demons’ penultimate chapter brings us back to a claim I made above—that is, the idea that Dostoevsky is using the provinces quite intentionally as a way of developing ideas about Russia as a whole. Stepan Trofimovich, deracinated intelligent that he is, has never not been “wandering” in the way that Pyotr Chaadaev, in his oft-quoted “First Philosophical Letter,” describes his “nomadic” countrymen doing. “Does it not seem that we [Russians] are all in transit? We all resemble travelers,” Chaadaev writes. “We do not even have homes [point même de foyer domestique]. . . . In our houses, we are like wayfarers [dans nos maisons, nous avons l’air de camper]; in our families, we are like strangers; in our cities, we are like nomads, more nomadic than those who wander our steppes, for they are more attached to their deserts than we are to our towns.”

38 Stepan Trofimovich is a wanderer not only in the Russian countryside, where he speaks French to the peasants; he is so thoroughly a product of imported ideas that he is a wanderer anywhere in Russia.

Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the version of Russian culture Stepan Trofimovich represents is one that threatens to render all Russians permanently “alien to themselves”—to adapt Epstein’s description of the “alienation from itself” that is a structural characteristic of the provinces—by placing them in a provincial relationship to European culture. To be provincial in this sense is not only to feel oneself eternally exiled, with one’s “own center . . . taken out of [oneself] and transferred to some other space or time,” transferred, that is, to the elusive tam toward which Dostoevsky’s characters direct a gaze full of longing and submission. 39 More importantly, as Demons makes clear, to be provincial is to be dangerously susceptible to conspiracy theorizing, manipulation, demagoguery—a point Demons reinforces by enlisting a resonant spatial trope to do its ideological work.

And by linking the trope of blank provintsiiia to his era’s most dramatic new technology, the railroad, Dostoevsky incorporates this technology into a vision of Russian geographic space that is at once familiar, evocative, and ideologically significant. Russia’s various apostles of progress generally depicted railways as a connective technology promising prosperity and unity. As Notes of the Fatherland put it in an editorial of 1839, railroads would soon take “people who have been separated” and render them “tightly joined together by the bonds of fellow-feeling and mutual interest.”

40 Decades later the student radical Nikolai Kibalchich depicted the railroad as just this sort of system: “covering Russia by sections with an interconnected network of railroads,” he declared, his countrymen would soon “overtake the rich and advanced nations of Western Europe.” Kibalchich’s vision suggests a landscape divided into a series of legible sectors, all placed into rational
relationship with one other by the rail lines’ connecting and organizing grid. But in *Demons*, the railway system instead mirrors and reinforces an insidious net-like conspiracy spreading out across Russia’s open spaces.\(^{42}\) Railroads may promise connection, Dostoevsky suggests, but as one character in *The Idiot* tells us, they cannot serve as “an idea tying contemporary humanity together” (*sviaziuschchaia nastoiashchee chelovechestvo mysl’*)—for while past ages were unified by a religious ideal, there is no such unifying principle “in our age of vice and railways!” (8:315).

In *Demons* it is particularly clear that Dostoevsky places little hope in Kibalchich’s project of “covering Russia by sections with an interconnected network” of train tracks. Such networks generally have a hub, an organizing center, but not an end-point; in fact, the set’ of the tracks can suggest a system linking everything, but going nowhere. Rather than the precipitous movement of the train itself, the tracks are likely to evoke stasis, even entrapment, as is suggested by *Demons’* picture of the railroads as a spider web. A narrative dominated by the image of such a network implies a certain structure—a structure quite unlike that of *The Idiot*, which is dominated instead by the image of a locomotive, and which seems always to be pointing toward its own climax.\(^{43}\) *Demons*, in keeping with its focus on the set’ of the tracks, ends not with any decisive climax, but with a kind of dispersal. Like the cabal of would-be revolutionaries in Turgenev’s *Virgin Soil*, this group, too, disintegrates having accomplished virtually nothing. Stavrogin’s death is anticlimactic, even trivial, and Verkhovensky slips away on the train to continue his fundamentally pointless “revolutionary” activities. There is no closure here, almost no “ending”—as is suggested by the fact that Verkhovensky himself seems not to believe in any end, but rather in an ongoing endgame. In the novel’s closing chapters, it is this image of the railroad as system—a network linking everything but going nowhere, a grid you cannot escape—that lingers in our minds, the reflection of an endgame that never resolves itself in an ending.

The symbolic geography that structures *Demons* is, I would argue, a version of the one that underlies almost all of Dostoevsky’s works. This vision attends very little to the particularity and variety of Russian places. In the working notebooks for *Demons*, Dostoevsky has his narrator make the point explicitly: “I am not describing the city, its layout, daily life, people, and official positions, nor its social relations, nor the curious shifts in these relations peculiar to the provincial life of our city, as consequences of the ancient, customary mores according to which the city has taken shape or as consequences of new disturbances in these mores owing to recent reforms. *I don’t have time to occupy myself with a picture of our little corner of the world.*” The narrator concedes that “since the affair took place not in the sky but, after all, among us, then it’s really impossible for me never to touch, purely picturesquely, on the everyday side of our provincial life,” but he warns, “I will do this only as much as is required by absolute necessity. I will not
deliberately undertake any description of our contemporary daily life” (11:240–41; emphasis mine).

In the end Demons highlights, confirms, and complicates the pattern we see developed over the course of its author’s career: what matters most to Dostoevsky are not particular places, but instead a “central” place with the power to confer meaning on all the other ones. As he puts it in the feuilleton entry cited above, “all of Russia . . . lives by Petersburg alone” (18:26). This central place is often elusive—or as Demons suggests, it might even be nonexistent—but nonetheless it functions as an essential force, one that not only holds together and animates but seems almost to create Russia. Once again we could not be further from Tolstoy’s geography in War and Peace, with its insistently decentralized view of the country’s space and its frequent recurrence to the specific lived realities of many places, diverse and dispersed. Indeed at times Dostoevsky might almost be writing directly against Tolstoy’s Kutuzov, who intuitively understands that Russia cannot be embodied in or reduced to a single center. If War and Peace reminds us that any place might someday turn out to be the most important place, Dostoevsky’s works are more likely to remind us that without the central place—the capital, elusive as it may be—Russia itself would hardly exist.