

Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

I. The Reckoning

The whole city is preoccupied with the detention of some young people (Petrashevsky, Golovinsky, Dostoevsky...and many others), who, it is said, reach the number 60, and this number will no doubt increase with the uncovering of links with Moscow and other cities. (K.N. Lebedev, 1849)

Today, December 22 [1849], we were driven to Semyonovsky Parade Ground. There the death sentence was read to us all, we were given the cross to kiss, swords were broken over our heads, and our final toilet was arranged (white shirts). Then three of us were set against the posts so as to carry out the executions. We were summoned in threes; consequently I was in the second group, and there was not more than a minute left to live. I remembered you, my brother, and all yours [...] Life everywhere is life, life is in ourselves and not in the external. (Dostoevsky, Letter to Mikhail Dostoevsky, 1849)

In the course of several years...I never saw a sign of repentance among these people; not a trace of despondent brooding over their crimes, and the majority of them inwardly considered themselves absolutely in the right. This is a fact. (F. Dostoevsky)

2. The Urban Crucible

I think I should like to turn myself into Eugene Sue and describe the mysteries of Petersburg. I have a passionate love for mystery. I am a fantasist, a mystic, and I confess to you that Petersburg – I do not know why – has always seemed to me to be some kind of mystery. (Dostoevsky, *Petersburg Visions in Verse and Prose*)

We understand Dickens in Russia, I am convinced, almost as well as the English, and maybe even all the subtleties; maybe even we love him no less than his own countrymen; and yet how typical, distinctive, and national Dickens is. (Dostoevsky, *Diary of a Writer*)

The heat in the street was terrible: and the airlessness, the bustle and the plaster, scaffolding, bricks, and dust all about him, and that special Petersburg stench, so familiar to all who are unable to get out of town in summer – all worked painfully on the young man's already overwrought nerves. The insufferable stench from the pot-houses, which are particularly numerous in that part of town, and the drunken men whom he met continually, although it was a working day, completed the revolting misery of the picture. (*Crime and Punishment*, Part i, Chapter I)

Raskolnikov went straight to the Voznesensky Bridge, stopped in the middle of it, leaned both elbows on the parapet, and gazed along the canal. After parting from Razumikhin he had felt so weak that he was hardly able to drag himself so far [...] He felt someone standing beside him, on his right, and looked up; it was a tall woman wearing a kerchief on her head, with a long, yellow, hollow-cheeked face and red-rimmed, sunken eyes [...] The filthy water parted and engulfed her for a moment, but then she rose to the surface and drifted gently with the current, face downwards, with her head and legs in the water and her skirt ballooning under her like a pillow. (*Crime and Punishment*, Part ii, Chapter vi)

It's a town of half-crazy people. If we had any science in this country, the doctors, lawyers, and philosophers could conduct very valuable researches in St. Petersburg, each in his own special sphere. There are few places which exercise such strange, harsh, and sombre influences on the human spirit as St. Petersburg. (*Crime and Punishment*, Part vi, Chapter iii)

At an opposite pole we find a modernism that arises from backwardness and underdevelopment. This modernism first arose in Russia ... in our own era with the spread of modernization – but generally, as in old Russia, a truncated and warped modernization – it has spread throughout the Third World. The modernism of underdevelopment is forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity, to nourish itself on an intimacy and struggle with mirages and ghosts. In order to be true to the life from which it springs, it is forced to be shrill, uncouth and inchoate. It turns in on itself, and tortures itself for its inability to singlehandedly make history. (Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*)

3. The Motive

It is a psychological account of a crime. The action is contemporary, in the present year. A young man, an expelled university student, *petit bourgeois* in origin, and living in extreme poverty, who through the superficiality of his thought and the instability of his ideas has surrendered himself to certain strange and half-baked notions which are in the air... (Dostoevsky's letter to Katkov)

This is an obscure and fantastic case, a something that could only happen in our day, when the heart of man has grown troubled, when people quote sayings about blood "refreshing", when the whole of life is dedicated to comfort. (*Crime and Punishment*, Part vi, Chapter 2)

"For one life taken, thousands saved from corruption and decay! One death, and a hundred lives in exchange – why, it's simple arithmetic!" (*Crime and Punishment*, Part I, Chapter, vi)

I did not commit murder in order to use the profit and power I gained to make myself a benefactor to humanity. Rubbish! I simply murdered, I murdered for myself, for myself alone [...] what I needed to find out then, and find out as soon as possible, was whether I was a louse like everybody else or a man, whether I was capable of stepping over the barriers or not. Dared I stoop and take power or not? Was I trembling creature or had I the *right*... (*Crime and Punishment*, Part v, Chapter iv)

This is the so-called 'Napoleonic' motive [...] Napoleon iii had attempted to justify the actions of his uncle [Napoleon i] in a book, which appeared in Russian translation as Dostoevsky was working on his novel, *The History of Julius Caesar*. (Richard Peace, 'Introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition')

Crime and Punishment, *The Possessed*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* embody a reassertion and an elaboration of this compelling concern [with violence] in terms of both their thematic import and structural pattern. Murder is presented as an act generated exclusively by the rational mind of the murderer. It is a product of pure intellect, a rationally argued "calculated" act of violence. (Alexandra F. Rudicina, 'Crime and Myth')

Raskolnikov's murder must mean something, but at the time it is committed its significance is far from evident [...] "Murder," says Northrop Frye, "is doubtless a serious crime, but if private murder were a major threat to our civilization it would not be interesting to read about it." Raskolnikov's theory suggests that the murders might in fact portend a threat to civilization, but even Porfiry, the police examiner suggests there are more significant and monstrous crimes. (Lois M Welch, 'Luzhin's Crime')

4. Modern Power

'No, sir! If, for example, in earlier times it was said to me "Love your neighbour" and I acted on it, what was the result?' continued Peter Petrovich, with perhaps excessive haste. "The result was that I divided my cloak with my neighbour and we were both left half-naked [...] Economic truth adds that the more private enterprises are established and the more, so to say, whole cloaks there are in a society, the firmer will be its foundations and the more will be undertaken for the common good." (Crime and Punishment, Part ii, Chapter v)

In spite of these good qualities, Andrey Semenovich really was rather stupid. He had joined the forces of progress and 'our younger generation' out of conviction. He was one of the countless and multiferous legion of nondescripts, putrescent abortions, and uninformed obstinate fools who instantly and infallibly attach themselves to the most fashionable current idea, with the immediate effect of vulgarizing it and of turning into a ridiculous caricature any cause they serve, however sincerely [...] "And it's all nonsense and has nothing at all, to do with the women's question." (Crime and Punishment, Part v, Chapter i)

It began with the Socialists' view. You know what that is: crime is a protest against the unnatural structure of society - and only that, nothing more, and no other causes are admissible [...] they explain everything by the "deleterious influence of the environment" - and that's all! Their favourite cliché... From that it follows that if society is properly organized, all crimes will instantly disappear, since there will be nothing to protest against, and everybody will immediately become law-abiding. Nature is not taken into account, nature is banished, nature is not supposed to exist! (Crime and Punishment, Part iii, Chapter v)

I introduced myself: - a landowner, a widower, bearing a well-known name, with such-and-such connections, and with money - what does it matter that I am fifty and she is not yet sixteen? Who will consider that? [...] Has it ever struck you that the Sistine Madonna really has a fantastic face, a face of melancholy and almost simple-minded piety? Well hers is something like that. The day after we received her parents' blessing I took with me fifteen hundred roubles' worth of things [...] You will agree that to hear such an avowal, alone, from a little sixteen-year-old angel in a muslin dress, with a mass of little curls, blushing with maidenly shame and with tears of enthusiasm in her eyes - you will agree that it is rather a temptation. (Crime and Punishment, Part vi, Chapter iv)

You won't run away [...] The fugitive's life is hard and hateful, and your first need is for a definite position and existence, and a suitable atmosphere, and what sort of atmosphere would you have? If you ran away, you would come back of yourself. You can't get on without us. (Crime and Punishment, part vi, Chapter ii)

The moment where it became understood that it was more efficient and profitable in terms of economy of power to place people under surveillance....corresponds to the formation, gradual in some respects and rapid in others, of a new mode of exercise of power in eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Michel Foucault, 'Discipline and Punish')

While the Novel censures police power, it has already reinvented it, in the very practice of novelistic representation (D.A.Miller, 1988)

Modernist Anti-Modernity

But the common people of Crime and Punishment do more than round out the picture of social reality: they have an important voice of their own. Unobtrusive allusions to folklore and popular belief, which are embedded in the speech and thoughts of major personages and mini-stories that we can patch together from street-scenes, convey the ethical values of the *narod*. The voice of the people runs counter to the rationalistic theories that Raskolnikov uses to justify the murder, and it is the voice that he must heed in order to be reintegrated into the human community. (Linda Ivantis, 'The Other Lazarus')

Out of similar paternalistic motives [...] Dostoevsky creates a youthful and quasi-educated heroine, Sonya Marmeladova, who must endure many tribulations from the men in Crime and Punishment before abandoning her futile self-sacrifice. She, like the novel's protagonist Rodion Raskolnikov, transgresses a Christian moral precept in the belief that she is acting in the name of a higher justice [...] In reacting to this test of faith, Sonya affirms a renewed belief in divine providence, for which she is rewarded (in accordance with the structure of a Christian resurrection tale) with a new life, provided for financially by Svidrigailov and spiritually by Raskolnikov. (Elizabeth Blake, 'Sonya, Silent No More')

Out of the crowd, noiselessly and timidly, appeared a young girl, and her sudden appearance was strange in that room [...] At length the whispering among the crowd, or some of the words said, seemed to reach her ears; She cast down her eyes, took a step across the threshold and stood inside the room, but still very near the door. (Part ii., Chapter vii)

He had dreamt in his illness that the whole world was condemned to fall victim to a terrible, unknown pestilence which was moving on Europe out of the depths of Asia. All were destined to perish, except a chosen few, a very few [...] All things and all men were perishing. The plague grew and spread wider and wider. In the whole world today only a few could save themselves, a chosen handful of the pure, who were destined to found a new race of men and a new life, and to renew and cleanse the earth; but nobody had ever seen them anywhere, nobody had heard their voices or their words. (Epilogue, Chapter ii)

'Could not her beliefs become my beliefs now [...] But that is the beginning of a new story, the story of the gradual renewal of a man, of his gradual regeneration, of his slow progress from one world to another. (Epilogue., Chapter ii)

The Novel is in origin an oppositional, even parodic form....the central and defining feature of the Crime novel is that in itself and the world, guilt and innocence are problematic (A.C.Hilfer, 1990)

Selected Reading

M. Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981)

Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (1984)

Louis Berger, *Dostoevsky: The Author as a Psychoanalyst* (1989)

R.P. Blackmur, *Eleven Essays in the European Novel* (1964)

Elizabeth Blake, 'Sonya, Silent No More: A response to the Woman Question in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 50.2 (2006), 252-271

Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism* (1966)

Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt* (1977)

Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal (1983)

Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation (1987)

Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years (1995)

Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet (2002)

Linda Ivantis, 'The Other Lazarus in *Crime and Punishment*', *Russian Review* 61.3., (2002), 341-357

Ilya Kliger, 'Shapes of History and the Enigmatic Hero in Dostoevsky: The Case of *Crime and Punishment*', *Comparative Literature*, 62.3 (2010), 228-245

Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky: His Life and Works* (Princeton, N.J., 1967) trans. Michael A. Minihan

P. Travis Kroeker, *Remembering the End: Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (2002)

Alexandra F. Rudicina, 'Crime and Myth: the Archetypal Pattern of Rebirth in Three Novels of Dostoevsky', *PMLA* 87.5, (1972), 1065-1074.

Lois M Welch, 'Luzhin's Crime and the Advantages of Melodrama in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 18.1 (1976), 135-146

Rene Wellek, *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*

