

Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment

The Crime

1. 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 1)

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)

Everything, however, went without a hitch. The porter's door was closed but not locked [...] But Raskolkikov had so completely lost his powers of reasoning that he went straight to the door of the lodge and opened it. If the porter had asked him what he wanted, he might quite possibly have simply handed him the axe. (Crime and Punishment, Part I, Chapter vii)

"In the evening, by a cunning trick, I stole the key of her box from Katerina Ivanovna and took out all that was left of the money I had brought her [...] No, there is no need to be sorry for me! I ought to be crucified, crucified, not pitied!" (Crime and Punishment, Part I, Chapter 2)

This is the so-called 'Napoleonic' motive [...] Napoleon iii had attempted to justify the acts 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 intellection, 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. Technologies of Modern Power

"But recently Mr. Lebezyatnikov, who is a follower of the latest ideas, was explaining that in this age the sentiment of compassion is actually prohibited by science, and that that is how they order things in England, where they have political economy." (Crime and Punishment, part i, chapter 1)

"Of course, here you have a common commercial transaction, an undertaking for mutual profit [...] Why don't they see what all this means, or are they turning a blind eye on purpose?" (Crime and Punishment, part i, chapter iv)

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')

Shift the object and change the scale. Define new tactics in order to reach a target that is now more subtle but also more widely spread in the social body. Find new techniques for adjusting punishment to it and for adapting its effects. Lay down new principles for regularizing, refining, universalizing the art of punishing...Reduce its economic and political cost by increasing its effectiveness and by multiplying its circuits. In short, constitute a new economy and a new technology of the power to punish. (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)

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)

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

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

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)

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

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