

Trinity College Cambridge
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Good Books

Fyodor Dostoevsky: *Crime and Punishment*

Bible Reading: John 11: 28–44

James Carleton Paget

Crime and Punishment, which was first published in 1866, and had originally been written for a Russian newspaper, as Dostoevsky, at a difficult time in his life, sought to write his way out of debt, is at one level the story of a double murder and its consequences. The intense and morose student, Rashkolnikov, suffering bad times and encouraged by his own complex and distorted sense of justice, decides to kill with a hatchet a pawnbroker, Alyona, to whom he owes money. In doing so, he is forced to kill her pious and good sister who happens upon the murderous scene as Rashkolnikov is about to leave it. By a series of chances he escapes unseen; and much of the rest of the novel is taken up with a presentation of Rashkolnikov's developing understanding of his actions, of his wildly variant forms of reaction to what he has done, and to his eventual decision, brought about by his growing relationship with a prostitute, Sonya, whose family Rashkolnikov has helped out in straitened circumstances, to confess his crime to the authorities, some of whom have in any case become suspicious of him (and this in spite of the confession of another man to the crime). In an epilogue we hear of his punishment in Siberia and of what some take, on the basis of the reading from the novel you have heard today, to be his movement towards a form of redemption, which, ostensibly at least, seems bound up with a growing religious sensibility, reflecting a similar sensibility in Sonya, who has gone to Siberia to look after him.

When I first read this novel many years ago, as a crusty and discontented teenager, I thought that Rashkolnikov's redemption, or his movement towards it, seemed an odd, even an unfortunate, ending to the novel. Better, so I thought, to leave this curiously frenzied and tormented character, in a state of suffering, suffering, which as Dostoevsky makes plain in the final part of the novel, is not only suffering which comes from the punishment that we believe, or at least most of us believe, Rashkolnikov deserves, but suffering, too, which emerges from Rashkolnikov's sense that he has failed to live up to the thoughts which caused him in the first place to murder the unfortunate Alyona and her pious sister, Lisateva. Was not the book, so I thought, best conceived as a tragedy in which we observe the crime of Rashkolnikov, motivated by a certain moral blindness, even by forces beyond his control, then his moment of self-realization, when he accepts that what he has done is sinful, and then his change in fortune caused by the subsequent suffering which follows from that? All of this seemed, at least to me at that earlier point in my life, to reflect neatly the abiding features of the tragic form, as first set out by Aristotle.

Did not what Dostoevsky had given us at the end of this book seem like a curiously unintegrated add on against that background? Was there not, then, something artistically unsatisfying about this ending? Perhaps, but then again, perhaps not. Perhaps, in fact, the epilogue is precisely the point at which the work should end, and it is a meaningful, understandable conclusion to this complex and difficult piece of writing.

At the heart of this novel stands what appears to be a senseless act, the murder of an admittedly unattractive and old pawnbroker, and the unintended murder of her sister. But the act, of course, at least at the beginning of the novel, appears to be justified according to its perpetrator. One argument is utilitarian and put into the mouth of a student Rashkolnikov happens to overhear. "Kill her and take her money, so that with its help you may then devote yourself to the service of all humanity and the common good. Won't one tiny transgression pale before thousands of good deeds?" And the other is a kind of extraordinary man theory in which such a person, referred often in the novel as a Napoleon, has the right to step over certain obstacles as the fulfillment of his idea requires. But this polyphony of justification, taken by some critics to reflect aspects of western thought, some nihilistic in origin, isms, which Dostoevsky sought to oppose, can never satisfy Rashkolnikov, for rather than his act making him happier or even richer, it throws him into a deeper, harsher place than he was before, into a confused and frenzied state of mind, in part reflected in the misty and gloomy atmosphere of St. Petersburg, where suicide and other forms of human distress are an ever-present reality. His thoughts have served simply to alienate himself further from a society in whose midst he felt alienated enough, and murder comes to be seen in some senses as the most egregious expression of that disconnectedness.

But Rashkolnikov is not totally disconnected, as some have sought to portray him (in many ways, as his name in Russian might suggest, he is a divided person) for even after his murder he is moved to acts of mercy and pity as when he gives Mrs Maramaladov money he has recently received from his mother and sister, and money he can ill afford to give up, for the burial of her husband, the hopeless, drunken and despairing former civil servant, who has been run over and killed by a carriage. Moreover, he is moved, instinctively, to sense the inner qualities of Sonya, the step-daughter of Mrs Maramaladov, who, in order to keep her half-siblings and father and step-mother, has been forced into a life on the very fringe of society as a prostitute. Rashkolnikov, one might suppose, on the basis of what he has said about the difference between the lice of this world, the common people, and the great and noble individuals, the Napoleons, would have written off this poor and desperate figure as no more than a louse, and yet it is precisely to her that he gravitates and it is precisely through interaction with her that he will begin to become, in a Dostoevskyan way, more human.

In what I take to be one of the central scenes, literally and metaphorically, of the book, Rashkolnikov comes to Sonya in her small flat, by night, ostensibly to inform her that her step-mother and siblings are now on the streets and that the former appears to be dying of consumption. After Rashkolnikov has suggested to Sonya that perhaps her fate awaits some of her siblings, she declares, instinctively, that God will not allow such a thing to happen, and there then follows a dialogue between the two in which Rashkolnikov, though outwardly sceptical at Sonya's faith ("What if there is no God?" he declares,

almost with contempt), marvels inwardly at Sonya's ability somehow to remain holy within while participating in a life of such moral corruption. "Sonya", we are told, "seemed stronger to him and more wonderful, every minute." And it is then that Rashkolnikov calls upon her to read the story of Lazarus from the New Testament, given to her by one of the women he has murdered, Lisateva. She does so, first hesitatingly, perhaps, as Rashkolnikov thinks, because she finds it difficult to reveal her inmost convictions, but then more assuredly (341). And this reading to him, stirs him also, in spite of himself, one might think, and by the end we know this, because he has declared his desire both to leave the city with her and to confess his crime to her. "I know, and I'll tell it to you – to you alone! I've chosen you." (345). Here, then, are two people, both mired down by the hideous nature of their own situations, the murderer and the prostitute, beyond redemption, inspired, it would appear in different ways by the reading of a text, which has at its centre a sense of restoration, presented graphically in the story of someone miraculously raised from a tomb into the world of the living, of life itself. To some, the Johannine Jesus' cry to Lazarus, "Come forth!", is precisely a call to Rashkolnikov to emerge from his dark and brooding world, reflected in the hovel which is his own flat and to which Dostoevsky refers on a number of occasions, and connect up with the world around him, partially symbolized in the flickering light of Sonya's flat, itself coming close to the interior of an dimly-lit orthodox church.

And that will come only gradually, and in part through suffering. So when Rashkolnikov comes to confess his crimes to Sonya, as he has promised, she tells him that he should go this very minute and stand at the crossroads and kiss the earth that you have defiled and then bow down to all four corners of the world, and say to all men aloud, I am a murderer! Then God will send you life again." And when he asks in amazement "Is it penal servitude you're thinking of Sonya?" she is clear in her response, "Accept suffering and be redeemed by it." And in the same scene, reflecting the Orthodox custom of offering friendship, she offers him the cross made of Cyprus wood that the murdered Lisateva gave her, but he does not take it, not simply, I would contend because he is not yet ready to bear his suffering (when he takes the cross from her he will, almost sarcastically, accept that it is a symbol of his bearing of suffering), but because the cross is a common, wooden cross, something which identifies him with the common people and so is an affirmation of the fact that far from being a Napoleon, a figure who rises above the petty fancies of this world, and can act as he sees fit, his murders were no more than common crimes, the outward expression of a plain sinner.

And it is precisely this, his place amongst the living and the ordinary, that, even after his trial, and while he is serving a number of years of penal servitude in Siberia, the main concern of the epilogue, that he goes on resisting. Rather than rejoicing in the presence of Sonya, he resists her, insults her, treats her poorly, rejecting the one whose own suffering, own example, own Christ-like love, shown in the midst of misery and indescribable hardship, has showed him the way to redemption. And this appears to be linked to his inability to accept the foolishness and evil of his acts. "How happy he would have been," writes Dostoevsky, "if he really could have regarded himself as guilty of a crime." "It was that alone that he considered to be his crime: not having been successful in it and having confessed it." (552). And just as this failure to accept what he seems earlier to have accepted, the commonality of his deed, in essence its sinful nature, symbolized in his

acceptance of the wooden cross of the woman he murdered “as befits a member of the common people,” keeps him from loving Sonya, so it prevents him from interacting with those who live with him, his fellow prisoners; and they identify his hatred of them, his alienation from them, as atheism and try and kill him. And such a view of Rashkolnikov’s apparent misanthropy, is surely not far from the truth, for to believe in God is, as the story of Lazarus implies, to come out and be with others, to accept one’s connectedness with a wider world and to live in love, a love, with all its difficulties and irresolutions, personified in Sonya. And when finally he collapses in the presence of Sonya, two weeks after Easter, after an illness, kneeling at her feet, and then embracing her, he has emerged from a shed in which he has been working and observed the light and expanse of the Russian Steppe, which extends before his eye, the dead man, as it were, coming forth. “Life”, as Dostoevsky asserts, “had taken the place of dialectics, and something quite different had to work itself out in his mind.” Thoughts, and not just the nihilistic, self-absorbed, thoughts of Rashkolnikov, which had led to his crimes, but debate which stands in the way of an engaged life, had to be extinguished and a new kind of lived love amongst people, not irrespective of them, had to come into being. “It was love that brought them back to life”, we are told.

And it is perhaps telling that Dostoevsky does not fill us with doctrine here, does not tell us how Rashkolnikov will live as that restored person, as that man who in some way reflects Lazarus. Intriguingly, Dostoevsky mentions ongoing suffering, and questions of failure or success are left open, just as the question of what happens to Lazarus after he is raised is left unanswered in the Fourth Gospel. It is enough in some senses that Rashkolnikov has got to that point, where he can see the possibility of a different life – that is wherein the triumph lies, but complex choices no doubt lie ahead.

So the epilogue is no add on, no strange and unsatisfactory ending. Its denouement has been anticipated in the earlier scene in which Rashkolnikov has called upon Sonya to read out the story of Lazarus and in which Sonya’s voice has, for the first time in the work, become confident, a confidence which is reflected in her ongoing attachment to Rashkolnikov. It is the point at which Rashkolnikov’s disconnectedness and confused thinking, his dialectics, if you like, has come to be punctured, and in which his murders, a graphic expression of that sense of distance, can begin to be accepted as the sinful things that they were. Rashkolnikov is no Napoleon, dependent entirely upon his own resourcefulness, but he has come to express himself, to begin to find his voice, amongst the common people, and most remarkably of all, in the arms of a prostitute, just as Christ, the friend of tax collectors and sinners, found company amongst similarly estranged people. To have left Rashkolnikov with nothing other than his suffering, which in my earlier manifestation as an angry and censorious teenager, I had thought would have been better, and which critics of much greater distinction than me have thought to have been more appropriate, would not in the end have satisfied the Christian Dostoevsky. The restoration or resurrection, in part realized at the end, gives it that Christian quality – the tragic transformed, suffering given purpose, not simply in the promise of a resurrection but in the beginnings of the restoration of life in the here and now, in an affirmation of the specifics of life lived in love for God in the face of unexplained difficulty and hardship.