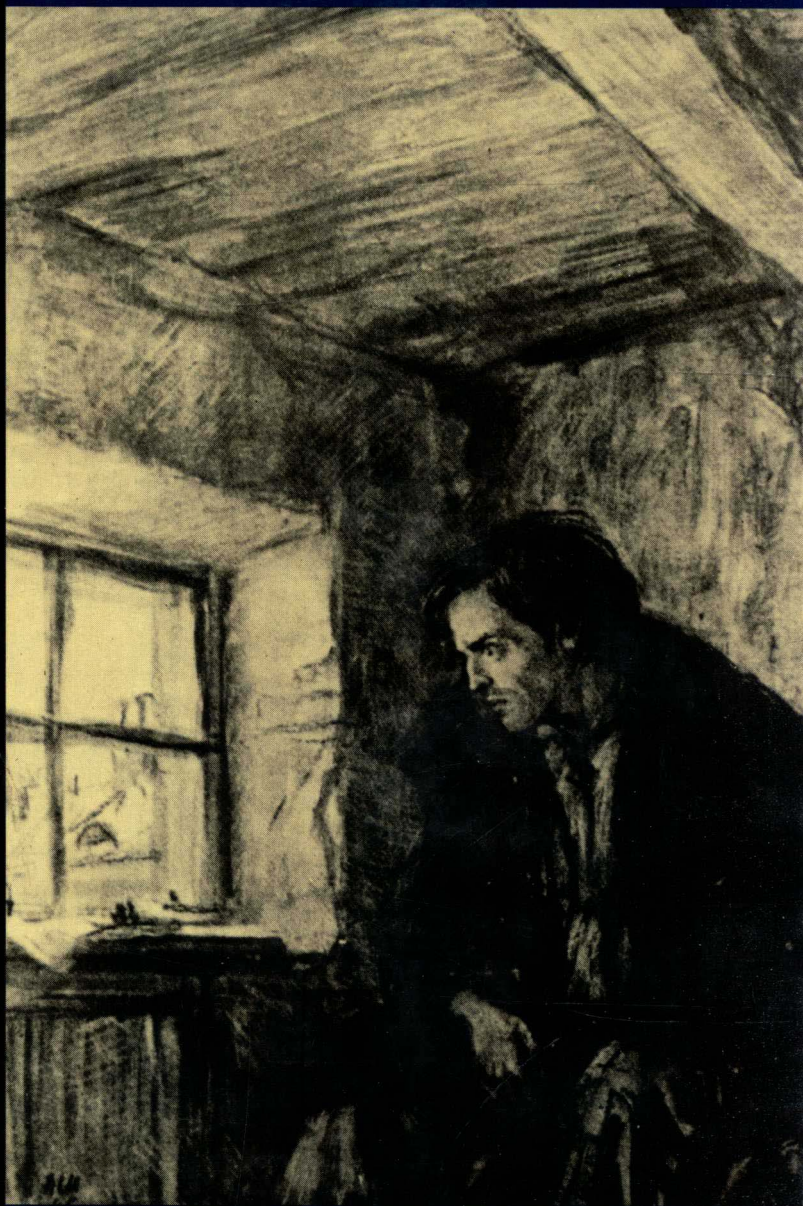


Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Fyodor Dostoevsky's
Crime and Punishment



Modern Critical Interpretations

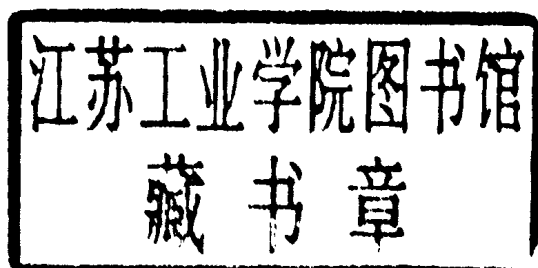
Fyodor Dostoevsky's
Crime and Punishment

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities

Yale University



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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of Dostoevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Joyce Banerjee and Henry Finder for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon Raskolnikov's quest for metaphysical freedom and power, a quest he does not so much repudiate as simply abandon. Alfred L. Bem begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a meditation upon the guilt-ridden consciousness of Raskolnikov. In Edward Wasiolek's reading, the poet W. D. Snodgrass's suggestion that the pawnbroker is a displaced representative of Raskolnikov's mother is expanded into a fuller psychoanalytic reading of the supposed displacement.

Michael Holquist investigates what he calls Raskolnikov's historicism as a clue to the puzzle of his motives. Raskolnikov's failure to repent, together with the extraordinary consciousness of Svidrigailov, is rightly seen by A. D. Nuttall as calling the Christian design of the novel into question. In Robert Louis Jackson's exegesis of part 1 of *Crime and Punishment*, the dialectics of consciousness operate so as to drive Raskolnikov "underground" towards murder, rather than to the desired goal of human love.

Derek Offord contextualizes the novel in the radical thought contemporary with Dostoevsky. Theory and life are seen as the true dialectical contraries of the novel by John Jones. Carnivalization, one of the great subjects of the celebrated Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, is related by him to the metaphor of space in *Crime and Punishment*, in a brief but highly evocative excursus that fittingly concludes this volume.

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I

Introduction

I

Rereading *Crime and Punishment*, I am haunted suddenly by a recollection of my worst experience as a teacher. Back in 1955, an outcast instructor in the then New Critical, Neo-Christian Yale English department dominated by acolytes of the churchwardenly T. S. Eliot, I was compelled to teach *Crime and Punishment* in a freshman course to a motley collection of Yale legacies masquerading as students. Wearied of their response to Dostoevsky as so much more Eliotic Original Sin, I endeavored to cheer myself up (if not them) by reading aloud in class S. J. Perelman's sublime parody "A Farewell to Omsk," fragments of which are always with me, such as the highly Dostoevskian portrayal of the tobacconist Pyotr Pyotrvtich:

"Good afternoon, Afya Afyakiévitch!" replied the shopkeeper warmly. He was the son of a former notary public attached to the household of Prince Grashkin and gave himself no few airs in consequence. Whilst speaking it was his habit to extract a greasy barometer from his waistcoat and consult it importantly, a trick he had learned from the Prince's barber. On seeing Afya Afyakiévitch he skipped about nimbly, dusted off the counter, gave one of his numerous offspring a box on the ear, drank a cup of tea, and on the whole behaved like a man of the world who has affairs of moment occupying him.

Unfortunately, my class did not think this funny and did not even enjoy the marvelous close of Perelman's sketch:

"Don't take any flannel kopecks," said Afya gloomily. He dislodged a piece of horse-radish from his tie, shied it at a passing Nihilist, and slid forward into the fresh loam.

Dostoevsky had his own mode of humor, but he might not have appreciated Perelman either. *Crime and Punishment* is less apocalyptic than *The Brothers Karamazov*, but it is apocalyptic enough. It is also tendentious in the extreme, which is the point of Perelman's parody, but Dostoevsky is so great a tragedian that this does not matter. Raskolnikov is a powerful representation of the will demonized by its own strength, while Svidrigailov is beyond that, and stands on the border of a convincing phantasmagoria. Until the unfortunate epilogue, no other narrative fiction drives itself onwards with the remorseless strength of *Crime and Punishment*, truly a shot out of hell and into hell again. To have written a naturalistic novel that reads like a continuous nightmare is Dostoevsky's unique achievement.

Raskolnikov never does repent and change, unless we believe the epilogue, in which Dostoevsky himself scarcely believed. Despair causes his surrender to Porfiry, but even his despair never matches the fierce ecstasy he has achieved in violating all limits. He breaks what can be broken and yet does not break himself. He cannot be broken, not because he has found any truth, objective or psychological, but because he has known, however momentarily, the nihilistic abyss, a Gnostic freedom of what is beyond our sense of being creatures in God's creation. Konstantin Mochulsky is surely right to emphasize that Raskolnikov never comes to believe in redemption, never rejects his theory of strength and power. His surrender, as Mochulsky says, "is not a sign of penitence but of pusillanimity." We end up with a pre-Christian tragic hero ruined by blind fate, at least in his own vision. But this is about as unattractive as a tragic hero can be, because Raskolnikov comes too late in cultural history to seem a Prometheus rather than a bookish intellectual. In a Christian context, Prometheus assimilates to Satan, and Raskolnikov's pride begins to seem too satanic for tragedy.

Raskolnikov hardly persuades us on the level of Dostoevsky's Christian polemic, but psychologically he is fearsomely persuasive. Power for Raskolnikov can be defined as the ability to kill someone else, anyone at all, rather than oneself. I meet Raskolnikov daily, though generally not in so extreme a form, in many young contemporaries who constitute what I would call the School of Resentment. Their wounded narcissism, turned against the self, might make them poets or critics; turned outward, against others, it makes them eminent unrest-inducers. Raskolnikov does not move our sympathy *for him*, but he impresses us with his uncompromising intensity.

Svidrigailov may have been intended as Raskolnikov's foil, but he got

away from Dostoevsky, and runs off with the book, even as old Karamazov nearly steals the greater work away from the extraordinary Dmitri. Raskolnikov is too pure a Promethean or devil to be interested in desire, unless the object of desire be metaphysical freedom and power. He is a kind of ascetic Gnostic, while Svidrigailov is a libertine Gnostic, attempting to liberate the sparks upward. If Raskolnikov portrays the madness of the Promethean will, then Svidrigailov is beyond the will, as he is beyond the still-religious affirmations of atheism. He lives (if that can be the right word) a negativity that Raskolnikov is too much himself to attain. Raskolnikov killed for his own sake, he tells Sonia, to test his own strength. Svidrigailov is light years beyond that, on the way downwards and outwards into the abyss, his foremother and forefather.

The best of all murder stories, *Crime and Punishment* seems to me beyond praise and beyond affection. Dostoevsky doubtless would impress me even more than he does already if I could read Russian, but I would not like him any better. A vicious obscurantism inheres in the four great narratives, including *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*, and it darkens *Crime and Punishment*. Only *The Brothers Karamazov* transcends Dostoevsky's hateful ideology because the Karamazovs sweep past the truths that the novelist continues to shout at us. Tolstoy did not think that Dostoevsky's final and apocalyptic novel was one of the summits of the genre, but then he liked to think of Dostoevsky as the Russian Harriet Beecher Stowe and would have wanted old Karamazov to have resembled Simon Legree.

What seems to me strongest in Dostoevsky is the control of visionary horror he shares with Blake, an imaginative prophet with whom he has absolutely nothing else in common. No one who has read *Crime and Punishment* ever can forget Raskolnikov's murder of poor Lizaveta:

There in the middle of the floor, with a big bundle in her arms, stood Lizaveta, as white as a sheet, gazing in frozen horror at her murdered sister and apparently without the strength to cry out. When she saw him run in, she trembled like a leaf and her face twitched spasmodically; she raised her hand as if to cover her mouth, but no scream came and she backed slowly away from him towards the corner, with her eyes on him in a fixed stare, but still without a sound, as though she had no breath left to cry out. He flung himself forward with the axe; her lips writhed pitifully, like those of a young child when it is just beginning to be frightened and stands ready to scream, with its eyes fixed on the object of its fear. The wretched Lizaveta was

so simple, brow-beaten, and utterly terrified that she did not even put up her arms to protect her face, natural and almost inevitable as the gesture would have been at this moment when the axe was brandished immediately above it. She only raised her free left hand a little and slowly stretched it out towards him as though she were trying to push him away. The blow fell on her skull, splitting it open from the top of the forehead almost to the crown of the head, and felling her instantly. Raskolnikov, completely beside himself, snatched up her bundle, threw it down again, and ran to the entrance.

Nothing could be more painfully effective than: "She only raised her free left hand a little and slowly stretched it out towards him as though she were trying to push him away." We think of the horrible dream in which Raskolnikov sees a poor, lean, old mare beaten to death with a crowbar, and we may reflect upon Nietzsche's darkest insights: that pain creates memory, so that the pain is the meaning, and meaning is therefore painful. Dostoevsky was a great visionary and an exuberant storyteller, but there is something paradoxically nihilistic in his narrative visions. The sublime mode asks us to give up easier pleasures for more difficult pleasures, which is altogether an aesthetic request. Dostoevsky belongs not to the sublime genre but to the harsher perspectives of the apocalyptic. He insists that we accept pains that transcend aesthetic limits. His authority at apocalypse is beyond question, but such authority also has its own aesthetic limits.

The Problem of Guilt

Alfred L. Bem

It is often said that Dostoevsky's "novel-tragedy" gravitates toward a single major "catastrophic" event, one usually connected with a crime; what has not been sufficiently stressed is that Dostoevsky's focus is not crime at all, but its corollary—guilt. . . . We shall not be concerned here with any objective norms of guilt and crime, but only with those psychological substrata on which these norms rest. . . . Crime will be understood only as the *awareness by the subject himself of some moral norm which he has violated*, quite apart from whether this violation has been recognized externally, morally, as a real crime. Without such a limitation [in the definition of crime] the correlation between guilt and crime, which plays such a crucial role in Dostoevsky, would be incomprehensible. Quite often, particularly in Dostoevsky's earlier works, the feeling of guilt becomes extremely and even tragically intense when only an extremely vague sense of a concrete crime lends support to this feeling. In other words, the objective crime which awakens a feeling of guilt may turn out to be so insignificant as to provide no explanation for the intense feeling of guilt. In this case the tragedy of guilt can be understood and disclosed only by presupposing that the *concrete crime serves as a surrogate for some crime not openly manifested yet present in the psyche*, like a trauma or pressure of conscience.

To understand Dostoevsky's thought one must allow for the presence in the human psyche of a feeling of sinfulness as such, independent of the existence of any concrete crime—what we might call *the feeling of original*

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sin. . . . We can assume, then, that the feeling of sin, of guilt can be present in the psyche unaccompanied by any consciousness of crime. Indeed, the guilt-ridden consciousness often seeks a crime, as though it wished to free itself from an overwhelming sense of fatality and enter the world of ordinary human criminality, apparently more tolerable to human consciousness than the intense pressure of metaphysical sinfulness. It is only here that we can find an explanation for Dostoevsky's idea that "each of us is guilty for all," and for his characteristic notion of the "desire to suffer." With the latter in mind we can turn to the episode in *Crime and Punishment* with the house painter Mikolka, the workman who takes on himself Raskolnikov's crime. The episode is a minor one, but of central importance for our theme.

No one first meeting the painter Mikolka Dementiev suspected in him a spiritual complexity which would lead to his puzzling assumption of guilt for the murder of the old lady. We find an ingenuous, life-loving lad, with a taste for the bottle. Porfiry Petrovich, a man not without insight, characterizes him this way:

First he's immature, still a child; and not that he's a coward, but sensitive, a kind of artist type. Yes, really. You mustn't laugh at me for explaining him like that. He is innocent and completely impressionable. He has feelings; he is a fantast. He can sing and dance, and they say he can tell stories so people gather from all around to listen. And he'll go to school and he'll laugh himself silly because somebody somehow crooked a finger at him; and he'll drink himself senseless, not because he's a drunkard, but just every now and then, when people buy him drinks; he's like a child still.

(part 6, chap. 2)

This characterization tallies completely with our first impression of the house painters on the day of the murder. The witnesses unanimously testified that there was nothing suspicious in their conduct. Both painters, Nikolai and Dmitri, ran out of the courtyard and began to pummel each other in fun. . . . How is it possible that this apparently simple person could come to take on himself somebody else's crime? This psychological enigma must be solved, and Dostoevsky does so; but as usual when a psychological explanation is to be found in the unconscious, Dostoevsky provides an explanation on a conscious level: in this case, introducing the motif of "fear" that he, Mikolka, would be convicted. This fear overcomes Mikolka when he learns about the murder of the old lady and feels guilty

because he had picked up the earrings dropped by the murderer; his fear of being accused became unbearable and he wants to hang himself. Dostoevsky tries to give the reader a convincing explanation of Mikolka's behavior by making us aware of Mikolka's internal distress; but he does not yet make it clear to us why Mikolka decided to assume somebody else's guilt. Porfiry Petrovich hints at the reason for this strange behavior; he suggests that the explanation must be sought elsewhere in Mikolka's moral experiences. The house painter turns out not to be so spiritually uncomplicated as we had imagined; he has his own enigmatic past. Porfiry Petrovich observes:

But did you know that he was a Raskolnik [schismatic, sectarian—ED.]? Well, not a Raskolnik, exactly, but a member of one of those religious sects. There were members of his family who were Runners; they'd run away from worldly involvement. He himself actually spent two years, not long ago, under the spiritual tutelage of some holy elder in some village. . . . He himself was moved to run off into the wilderness! He had the spirit, would pray to God at night, read the old "true" books and re-read them, for hours on end. . . . Well, now, in jail it seems he remembered the honorable elder, and the Bible turned up again, too. Do you know what they mean, Rodion Romanych, when they talk of "taking suffering upon themselves"? They don't mean suffering for anybody in particular, just "one has to suffer." That means, *accept* suffering; and if it's from the authorities, so much the better. . . . You mean you won't admit that our people produce fantastic characters of this sort? Yes, many. Now the elder is beginning to have some effect again, especially after that business with the noose.

(part 6, chap. 2)

The way was clearly prepared for Mikolka's "fantastic" behavior. The news of the murder which had so disconcerted him and led him to attempt suicide was only the most immediate cause which brought to the surface those feelings of guilt that were hidden in the depths of his unconscious.

Precisely the problem of guilt lay at the root of Mikolka's act, not a superficial "fear" of conviction; indeed, Dostoevsky originally had no intention at all of introducing the latter motive. Twice in the notebooks to the novel he stresses the basic "religious" motive in Mikolka's behavior. Thus, in one part of the manuscript we read: "A workman testifies against himself (he had got caught up with religion), wanted to suffer (but gets

muddled). They start pressuring him. And an old man sits there: one has to suffer, he says." A brief note appears in another place. "News at the gathering that a man (a workman) was taken by religion."

We can see from these notes that the root of Mikolka's behavior lay in a "religious" feeling linked with his moral experiences. The fact that Dostoevsky associates these elements in Mikolka's consciousness with the influences of some old religious sectarian serving a prison term with him testifies to Dostoevsky's artistic awareness. Such views on the primordial sinfulness of man were widespread in Russian sectarian religious thought.

One might suspect Dostoevsky of using the whole Mikolka episode only as an artful manoeuvre in the development of a detective story, a way of mixing the cards and holding back the denouement. But his supreme artistry is revealed in another way: concerned with narrative technique, he nevertheless introduces instead of a shallow plot device an incident which is closely connected with the central idea of the novel—the problem of guilt. The house painter, in contradistinction to Raskolnikov who strives to evade responsibility before his conscience for his sin, assumes responsibility for a crime that he did not commit. The interplay between these two responses to the problem of guilt will become even clearer after we examine Raskolnikov's crime.

Mikolka, according to Dostoevsky, "got caught up with religion" under the influence of an old religious sectarian; but in order to get caught up on religion he must have had some spiritual motivation. We must therefore assume a feeling of general sinfulness, of primordial guilt in the depths of Mikolka's consciousness, or, more accurately, in his unconscious—a feeling which sought expression in taking suffering upon himself. The "desire to suffer" cannot be explained without the supposition that there is a primordial feeling of guilt, the experience of primordial sinfulness, at the basis of the human soul. The incident involving Mikolka in *Crime and Punishment* is only an artistic expression of this phenomenon observed by Dostoevsky in the depths of his own being. . . .

Raskolnikov, a prisoner of his *idée fixe*, kills an old money lender. The whole novel is built around the unique process of disintegration in the hero's soul: his intellectual life is split off from the life of feeling. I do not know how I can express my thought more precisely here. A state of spiritual unity and harmony gives way to a "disintegration" in which one aspect of a person's being becomes overextended and eclipses the rest. But though driven into the unconscious these other aspects of self can remain active there and affect conduct in a special way. It is still possible then, paradoxically, for a criminal in his acts to preserve some inner nobility: just this inner split in Raskolnikov is the content of *Crime and Punishment*.

Crime is presented here as an unquestioned fact, not only in the formal but also the moral sense. But this fact does not penetrate Raskolnikov's consciousness; it takes the form in his unconscious of a potential power of conscience. To the very end, mind remains unrepentant. Even in prison, after his conviction, Raskolnikov still holds inflexibly to the idea that the murder is justifiable. And yet his whole being, his entire moral nature is shaken precisely by the moral aspect of the murder. Like a shadow, Sonia continually follows him and directs him onto the path of repentance. Dostoevsky portrays this symbolic role of Sonia with amazing power. When Raskolnikov wavers in his decision to confess, Sonia at that very moment is with him as his embodied conscience. As he leaves the police station he sees her:

There, not far from the gate, stood Sonia, numb and deathly pale; and she looked at him with a wild look. He stopped before her. There was something painful and tortured in her face, something desperate. She threw up her hands. A ghastly, lost smile forced its way to his lips. He stood there and grinned. Then he turned back upstairs to the station.

(part 6, chap. 8)

His fate is decided: he confesses to killing the old woman.

Here, then, is an extraordinary situation: in the absence of any conscious feeling, guilt is not only subconsciously present but even determines the final outcome of the spiritual drama. Thus, Dostoevsky is right when he envisages the possibility, too, of Raskolnikov's spiritual resurrection, that is, the restoration of his spiritual unity.

Raskolnikov's Motives: Love and Murder

Edward Wasiolek

W. D. Snodgrass's reading of *Crime and Punishment* brought into the center of attention a whole part of the novel that had largely been ignored by the "classic" explanations of Raskolnikov's motives. He was the first to perceive the tangled and bruising relations between Raskolnikov and his mother, and the first to perceive that the landlady and the pawnbroker are displaced representations of Raskolnikov's mother, so that in striking at the pawnbroker Raskolnikov was striking symbolically at the mother. Before Snodgrass's article was published, very little had been said about the relations between mother and son, and almost nothing about the part these relations play in the murder of the pawnbroker, even though one-fourth of the novel concerns Raskolnikov's relations with his mother.

The sections dealing with Raskolnikov and his mother show hidden aggression toward each other. The mother is intent on reminding Raskolnikov how much she and Dunia have sacrificed for him and how much they are willing to sacrifice for him. Although the mother dwells on her love and affection, she reminds him subtly of his subjecting them to misery and hardship through his refusal to continue his studies and to support himself at the university. Raskolnikov in turn has passively and intentionally revolted against the burden of his mother's love and sacrifice by defeating her expectations of success. He gives up his studies, refuses to find work, and permits himself to fall into dependence and degradation.

The punishing relations between mother and son may not be immedi-

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