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## The Crisis of Self-Understanding in Dostoevsky

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“Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams...”

He was silent for a while.

“... No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone....” (Conrad 64-5)

Marlow, the speaker in the passage above, seeks to convey an idea. He finds himself as incapable of communicating this idea as he is of communicating the concept and importance and essence of a dream. Yet where Marlow failed, Dostoevsky succeeded; the incapacity of the one highlights the accomplishment of the other. Throughout *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky imparted the life-sensation of his central character, Raskolnikov, showing the desire of a human soul to know and understand itself. Marlow could not understand himself well enough to describe his own inner workings, and neither could Raskolnikov – but Dostoevsky could. In the

words of his hero, which are the outpourings of his soul, one can see the conflict clearly while possible interpretations of those inner workings struggle for dominance. One can hear that conflict verbally expressed in jarring, radical flip-flops and strange little cruelties. The actions Raskolnikov commits show what is at stake: total inertia and a fall into villainy on the one hand, and free will turned toward God on the other. All of the ignoble insecurities and incongruous patterns weave together into a real person that trudges blindly off of the page and into readers' minds as a confusing picture. Through the thoughts, words, and actions of Raskolnikov, Dostoevsky paints the story of each wretched and inexpressible soul.

The novel begins with the hero in a pensive mood, which prevails through the entire narrative. He quests to understand himself. Not every human being seeks this end; many go about their daily lives without wondering what they are and without concern for what they may become. He spends nearly every waking moment pondering the mysteries of his own mind and its capability for evil: “I want to attempt such a thing, and at the same time I’m afraid of such trifles!” he thought with a strange smile. ‘... Why on earth am I going now? Am I really capable of *that*?’ (4). By the end of the novel, we find that he is, indeed, capable of that evil – and also of much good (537). In this way, Dostoevsky creates and uses Raskolnikov as a lens to write about his own struggle with the questions of human nature, which began in him at an early age (Scanlan 9). Instead of envisioning a more traditional work about a murderer whose motive is clear and unquestionable, his idea regarding Raskolnikov’s motivation was “to identify it with the totality of his consciousness, and to have changed that conception to a more conventional one would have led to the withering of that fine insight; and what that insight comes to, in the last analysis, is that human consciousness is inexhaustible and incalculable” (Rahv 19). The direct results of this idea, which became reality in *Crime and Punishment*, are Raskolnikov’s own

attempts at self-understanding. Rahv explains further: “Never quite certain as to what it was exactly that induced him to commit murder, he must continually spy on himself in a desperate effort to penetrate his own psychology and attain the self-knowledge he needs if he is to assume responsibility for his absurd and hideous act” (20). That self-knowledge is critical to the narrator in *Notes from Underground*; it is no less critical to Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Its ultimate importance comes from the apparent alternative: disintegration into oblivion or meaninglessness. It is not merely a plot device:

It originates rather in Dostoevsky’s acute awareness (self-awareness at bottom) of the problematical nature of the modern personality and of its tortuous efforts to stem the disintegration threatening it. Thus Raskolnikov ... is represented throughout under the aspect of modernity ... [which is] understood as spiritual and mental self-division and self-contradiction. (Rahv 21)

This *schism* of the self, avoided at any cost, drives Raskolnikov to his murderous test.

Before he reaches that point, however, his words show the conflict within. One sees it in his interaction with the policeman and the drunk girl. Dostoevsky shows the snapping point when a soul changes its tune in one sharp discordant jump (49). Again, just after the dream of the beaten horse, he exclaims (regarding the act of murder), “I knew very well I could never endure it, so why have I been tormenting myself all this while?” (59) For a moment he is free: “‘Lord!’ he pleaded, ‘show me my way; I renounce this cursed ... dream of mine!’” (60). But, wandering in a daze back to his apartment, he hears a conversation in the street which gives him a clear shot at committing his crime, and he is sent right back into his cursed dream. He is a romantic of sorts, ascribing enormous cosmic significance to the smallest and most coincidental of things. In this instant, he believes that fate has preordained him to do *that* which he had

momentarily renounced. And because of the complexities of the ideas struggling within him, he grows more certain of his own special nature. These and many other touches display the masterwork of Dostoevsky in creating an entire personality complete with history and conflict of the soul. Bakhtin, in his commentary on Dostoevsky's poetics, writes:

The uniqueness of Dostoevsky lies not in the fact that he monologically proclaimed the value of personality (others had done that before him); it lies in the fact that he was able, in an objective and artistic way, to visualize and portray personality as another, as someone else's personality, without making it lyrical or merging it with his own voice – and at the same time without reducing it to a materialized psychic reality. (12-3)

He contrasts this with Tolstoy's style of characterization: "Even the hero's final word is given in the shell of someone else's (the author's) word; the hero's self-consciousness is only one aspect of his fixed image and is in fact predetermined by that image, even where thematically consciousness undergoes a crisis and the most radical inner revolution..." (56). Ironically one of the ways that Dostoevsky achieved this display of another consciousness was by putting his characters through constant crisis. At no point until the end of the epilogue can Raskolnikov be said to have found peace within himself. There are times when the conflict has submerged into the background of a social interaction or a momentary feeling of success or resolution; but that conflict remains, setting him apart and generating a "dark sensation of tormenting, infinite solitude and estrangement" (103). That loneliness is characteristic of the soul in conflict over self-understanding. Gazing outward at the external faces of human beings who seem to be so sure of themselves, the self-reflective soul feels alone. In *Notes from Underground*, the narrator cries out: "But at the very outset how much agony I was forced to endure in that struggle! I

didn't believe the same could happen to others and so all my life I have kept it to myself, like a secret." (7) Raskolnikov's abandonment of his mother and sister presents the most poignant example of this sense of separation (*Crime* 312-14). His soul yearns for companionship, but he cannot find it in the arms of his closest friends and family members, and so he must leave them. "Whatever happens to me, whether I perish or not, I want to be alone" (313).

These words are accompanied by the action of walking away, literally and symbolically leaving behind those who love him most because they understand him least. Indeed, Raskolnikov's actions show the struggle within him most clearly. Here, finally one finds the most common focus of literature: the actions of men. Novels rarely dwell at length on the motives and consciences and souls of the characters who act and do. In fact, Dostoevsky touched on this strange idea in *Notes from Underground*:

"I assure you, gentlemen, that to be excessively conscious is a disease, a real, full-blown disease. For the needs of everyday life ordinary human consciousness should be more than sufficient – that is, half or even a quarter less than the portion which falls to the lot of an educated man in our unhappy nineteenth century...."

(6)

Later, the Underground Man expresses a distinct envy of those who do not struggle with self-understanding (9). He feels at once both far above his peers and far below them, condemning their blissful ignorance and coveting their mental wholeness. Unfortunately, the idea of simultaneous superiority and inferiority may even be impossible to communicate to anyone who does not face the internal chaos of Raskolnikov and the Underground Man. But understanding it is critical to grasping the full meaning of Raskolnikov's journey through crisis and conflict to peace in his ultimate destination of Siberia. One of the effects of this crisis of self shows through

in conscious inertia throughout the novels. Inertia is what carries him into murder (72-3). Inertia is what leads him to sleep so often and for so long at various points in the novel (28; 67-8; 86-9; 91; 117-18; etc.). Inertia grips him so strongly that he almost fails to confess his crime (530). In *Notes from Underground*, the Underground Man speaks of this inertia as coming

“directly from being too vividly aware of my own degradation, from the feeling of having gone too far; that it was foul but that it couldn’t be otherwise; that there’s no way out for you, that you’d never make yourself a different person; that even if there remained enough time and faith to change yourself into something different you most probably wouldn’t want to change yourself. And that even if you did want to, you’d end up by doing nothing because there might in fact be nothing to change yourself into. But finally, and most importantly, all this proceeds from the normal, fundamental laws of heightened consciousness and from the inertia which is the direct result of those laws and therefore not only could you not change yourself, you’d simply do nothing at all.” (7-8)

Another effect of the crisis is insanity. Raskolnikov’s mental state varies wildly throughout the novel; at times his head is clear and he is certain of his way (60). At other times, he cannot hang on to any thought at all (86). Both of these things – inertia and insanity – stem from the conflict within. That battle, that disease, finds its roots in the questions of human nature, and free will is the only cure. At the urging of Sonya, he freely chooses to break his inertia and to reject insanity. Only the grace of God in his life could possibly have led him to this point, and indeed the pressing grace of God is solely responsible for keeping him on the right track when his inertia would have led him to flee. But in faith, he confesses his crime and begins to walk the long road to peace through exile in Siberia.

From thought to word to deed and from quest to conflict to murder story, Dostoevsky paints a vivid picture of a soul that chooses the road of faith toward redemption. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow faces a similar choice – but he chooses the easy road. He lies to comfort the wife of a dead man, telling her falsely that her husband’s last word was her name: “It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle” (124). And yet it is no trifle. It shows the inertia of a man’s soul – caught in a conflict to understand itself, giving up instead of pressing on. Dostoevsky’s final message in *Crime and Punishment* is the peace of the hard road.



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