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Svidrigajlov and Dunja – Some Notes on Plot Relations in Dostoevskij's *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*

Arkadij Ivanovič Svidrigajlov figures among the strangest and most curious characters of Dostoevskij's oeuvre. Svidrigajlov is a peeping Tom and the supposed murderer of his own wife. At first glance he is a negative character from top to bottom in addition to being what the well-known Dostoevskij scholar Sven Linner with one of his favourite expressions would have named “a sladostrastnik”. But as Dostoevskij shows us, Svidrigajlov is nevertheless not incapable of committing altruistic deeds, and of being friendly to other people. Thus he is and remains perhaps the most complex and ambivalent of all Dostoevskij's many complex and ambivalent characters.

Svidrigajlov acts as a sort of mediator between Raskolnikov's natural family and his “adopted family”, the Marmeladovs, first and foremost Sonja. Svidrigajlov, or rather the idea of Svidrigajlov as it functions in the fictional web, is introduced quite early in the first part of the novel, where the author hints at the pattern “young girl chased by middle-aged seducer with a predilection for underage girls”. This constellation never ceased to thrill the author, and is mentioned and/or used several times.

When sketching the character of Svidrigajlov, Dostoevskij seems to have taken pains to emphasize his quality of being a man out of this world, or at least an utterly strange and enigmatic figure; the continuation of a dream, as the author himself puts it. Take for instance his family name, which has a Lithuanian background – grand duke Svitrygaila was a prominent figure in the time when the Lithuanian state was ranked among the largest and most powerful in Europe; he even has a street named after him in today's Vilnius.¹ At the same time the author makes Svidrigajlov stress his own anonymity, telling Raskol'nikov:

¹ This odd character and not less odd family name, has sparked off some speculation of more or less etymological nature among Dostoevskij scholars. For instance, Nikolaj

“Verite vy, choťja by čto-nibud' bylo; nu pomeščikom byt', nu, otcem, nu, ulanom, fotografom, žurnalistom ... n-ničego, nikakoj special'nosti! Inogda daže skučno...”

Why this masquerade on the part of Svidrigajlov? It is well known that Svidrigajlov is a landowner, and a wealthy one at that. So he has already obtained his rank and position in society. Maybe this is Dostoevskij being coquettish about his own origins; his family had its roots in Lithuania. Or he is hinting at himself, or rather himself in the capacity of a gambler? As a gambler Dostoevskij was notorious, and pages after pages have been devoted to this side of his personality.

About Svidrigajlov's activities as a gambler at the croupier's table, we do not know much. But that he is a player, or even a gambler, is and remains evident. For him life seems to be a never-ending play, and it gives him great pleasure every now and then to introduce new cards and combinations into the play. As we will see, his stakes are nothing but Life and Death – Death camouflaged in the guise of “the voyage to America”. It is soon apparent what this mysterious voyage signifies.

Svidrigajlov and Dunja are posed against each other, Svidrigajlov at gunpoint, but still in complete control of the situation. In the end, Svidrigajlov emerges victoriously from his nerve-racking verbal duel with Avdot'ja Romanovna, but he has not succeeded in what was his main objective, to obtain her voluntary submission. So nothing remains for him except suicide, “the voyage to America”.

Nasedkin in his *Dostoevskij. Encyklopedija*, (Moscow 2003, p. 428) asserts that Svidrigajlov's family name must be derived from the German word *geil* (*voluptuous*, “horny”, *sladostrastnyj*). If this is so, Dostoevskij must have had high thoughts of the language capacities of his readers. As to the historical Svitygaila (this is how the Lithuanians write his name), he was a member of the reigning dynasty of Lithuanian grand dukes, and was ruling Grand Duke during the years 1430-32 (he is supposed to have lived from 1370 to 1452). Svitygaila is described as ambitious and greedy for power. During a visit to Krakow in 1386 he took the baptism (to Roman Catholicism) and received the Christian (and Polish) name Bolesław. This can hardly have been to Dostoevskij's liking, as his works abound in negative descriptions of Poles and Catholics. On the other hand Svitygaila is said to have had his power base among the Orthodox Slav population of the realm (the forerunners of today's White Russians). As they had embraced *pravoslavie* when the Lithuanians proper were still pagans, they probably had Dostoevskij's favour.

But before this happens, we have observed Svidrigajlov trying to attain his goals with less dramatic means, many of them involving considerable sacrifice on his part. He pays the costs connected with the funeral of Ekaterina Marmeladova and gives money to the family, thus safeguarding the maintenance of the children. He offers Rodion Romanovič ten thousand roubles, to help Avdot'ja Romanovna stave off the unwanted marriage to Lužin and help her and her mother from falling into permanent destitution. Certainly this is not welfare from Svidrigajlov's side, his favours have their price. But still it makes it impossible to regard him unilaterally as a "bad guy". Dostoevskij's preference for all sorts of scandalous scenes may lead the unscrutinizing reader to interpret all of his sayings literally. A closer reading, however, often reveals that they are hearsay or unconfirmed gossip. Not least is this the case with Svidrigajlov, who evidently likes to create some sort of mythology around himself.

Svidrigajlov's "charitable deeds" are pivotal in the plot, insofar as they keep up the excitement towards the end of the novel, where Raskol'nikov's postulated conversion gradually will be taken as more or less certain by many readers. On the whole, the last chapters of the novel are gradually more and more concentrated on the possible development hinted at in the epilogue.

Those are pivotal points in the narration, and they are most of them somehow related to Avdot'ja Romanovna, since it is her existence that largely directs Svidrigajlov's actions. They also explain the split personality of Svidrigajlov, and – indirectly – the split personality of Raskol'nikov himself, hinted at in the very title of the novel: Raskol means "split", "schism". It is no wonder that so many scholars have asserted that Svidrigajlov is in fact envisaged as Raskol'nikov's double. All the more so as the motive of the double was very popular during the epoch of romanticism, and Dostoevskij himself had used it before in his *Dvojnik*, the tale of the hapless Jakov Petrovič Goljadkin, who because of the mischief of his double ends up in an asylum – another favourite topos of romanticism. In Svidrigajlov there is likewise a note of the jester; not without reason Dostoevskij tells us that Svidrigajlov accompanies one of his utterings by "a rougish smile" ("plutovskaja ulybka").

It is open to doubt whether Avdot'ja is a central figure in Dostoevskij's famous novel or not. The fact that she is Rodja's sister and the daughter of Pulcheri'ja Aleksandrovna Raskol'nikova gives her a special weight, but still she (together with her mother) stands somewhat aloof. They are connected with the plot line centered on Dun'ja's suitor, Petr Petrovič Lužin, and appear rather as observers and commentators of the great drama which takes place around and within their son and brother. She, like Lužin, may therefore be considered a secondary character, insofar as her bearing on the plot of the novel is not primary but chiefly auxiliary.

Still the figure of Dun'ja is well worth a closer analysis. This is especially borne out if we observe her in conjunction with the complete fictional texture supplied us by the rest of *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, as well as of Dostoevskij's oeuvre as a totality. In many ways, Dun'ja is Sonja's opposite, arousing carnal desire rather than metaphysic piousness. Her physical likeness with her brother Rodja is stressed, similarly her stunning beauty. In many ways she reminds the reader of Nastas'ja Filippovna Baraškova in the *Idiot*, a woman for whom men may lose their temper, and even commit murder. It is typical that Rodja reacts to her sister with feelings of jealousy; emotionally he seems much more engaged by her than by his saving angel, Sonja Marmeladova.

Nastas'ja Filippovna was "a kept woman" as the time would have put it, the mistress of the landowner Afanasij Ivanovič Tockij. A well-known scholar, Richard Peace, has drawn some interesting conclusions about the similarities of the two characters – based of course rather on typological than on factual foundations, since Dunja never ended up like Nastas'ja Filippovna.

Lužin's decision to marry Raskol'nikov's sister can be seen as a debased version of a perennial cliché (already mocked by Dostoevskij in *Notes from the Underground*) – the saving of a fallen woman. Because of the attentions of Svidrigajlov, Dunja does, at first, appear to be such a woman, but it is typical of Lužin's bourgeois caution that his interest in her dates only from the moment of her rehabilitation (though perhaps he is wishing to perpetuate the myth when he finds accommodation for her and her mother in what appears to be a St. Petersburg brothel). Lužin is

convinced that in marrying Dunja he “is raising her up” to his own level and is thereby performing a feat of gallantry (*podvig*).²

Peace’s hypothesis may seem somewhat far fetched. Still, Dostoevskij’s interest in the kind of women described in the characters of Dunja and Natasja Filippovna is evident, and possible to trace not only in his fiction, but in his life as well, for instance in his romance with Apollinarija Suslova.

The dramatic scenes between Svidrigajlov and Dunja belong to the highlights of Dostoevskij’s literary art. They also show the mastery with which Dostoevskij employed the subtle nuances of the Russian language. With Arkadij Ivanovič Dunja is sometimes addressed with *vy*, sometimes with *ty*; Svidrigajlov almost exclusively sticks to *vy*, the polite way of addressing somebody, as would be expected between an employer and his employee. The more angry and hurt Dunja feels, the more frequently she uses *ty*.

We are reminded that Arkadij Ivanovič has told us that “she made the first step”. Svidrigajlov is certainly not the most trustworthy of men, still this sows suspicion that there may have been an intimacy between them. An innuendo? Most certainly. A lie? Most likely. A slanderous insinuation? That cannot be excluded.

For such is the literary world of Dostoevskij, a world of scandals and gossip, a world that arises from the assumption that nothing can be taken for granted, everything originates in hearsay, and must necessarily be scrutinized before any safe conclusions are drawn.

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² Cf. Richard Peace. *Dostoyevsky. An Examination of the Major Novels*, Cambridge 1971, p. 31.