

JAN BRODAL

Raskol'nikov – the Unrepentant Sinner

Some years ago it fell to my lot, in my capacity of literary translator, to occupy myself one and a half years with F.M. Dostoevskij's novel "Prestuplenie i nakazanie", and, not least, with its protagonist Rodion Romanovič Raskol'nikov. A fascinating personality, although not a completely endearing one. Working on the material, I soon found that Rodion Romanyč could not at all be an exponent of Dostoevskij's famous ideal of *smirenje* or humility, rather the opposite. What about his much advertised conversion by the help of the saintly Sonja Marmeladova? It turned out not to be so easy to detect either. Rodion Romanyč prostrates himself on the haymarket, kissing the earth, he asks Sonja to read for him the chapter on Lazarus in The Holy Writ, he accepts the cross Sonja offers him; still nothing substantial seems to happen with his character and state of mind. "He is the same – solitary, morose, proud," rightly comments Konstantin Moculskij.¹

Still it was difficult to escape the impression that many prominent scholars seemingly insisted on Rodion Romanyč's status as a good boy, even if Dostoevskij's own writ seemed to make it clear that he was simply persisting in his evil ways. The whole matter seemed full of ambivalence and contradictions, and provoked me to try to clarify things a little for myself and for others trapped by this strange discrepancy. Below follows something of what I found in a closer examination of the novel, and particularly of the epilogue.

Raskol'nikov is attracted to Sonja, yet tortures her and scolds her, even, towards the end of the novel proper, calling her a great sinner – *velikaja grešnica*. He, twice a murderer, calls the saintly Sonja a sinner. He never styles himself a sinner, maybe because he – in spite of having a Christian background – now feels himself totally outside the confines of theology. Clearly no conversion of Rodion Romanyč has taken place,

¹ Konstantin Moculskij, *Dostoevsky*. Translated, with an introduction by Michael M. Minihan. Princeton, New Jersey 1971, p. 311.

even by the end of the novel proper. Admittedly, Raskol'nikov gives himself up to the authorities, but that does not mean that he is transformed in the Christian sense of the word. As we know, even completely innocent people have given themselves up as perpetrators of crimes they never committed. And Raskol'nikov's behaviour on the haymarket, so thoroughly commented on by Vjačeslav Ivanov, appears in Ivanov's interpretation rather to be the momentary realization of the fallacy of his own hubris, than a manifestation of Christian atonement.

One might even say that the transformation of Rodion Romanyč is impossible not only for psychological reasons, but for literary and stylistic reasons as well. If one observes his behaviour closely it becomes obvious that his movement is not linear, but circular – he is moving in concentric circles. In a way one might say that he is imitating the architectural structure of St. Petersburg whose canals and rivers also constitute some sort of concentric structure – certainly “Prestuplenie i nakazanie” is essentially a novel about imperial St. Petersburg. Rodion Romanovič is constantly reverting – to the place of murder, to Sonja, to the rest of the Marmeladov family, to his own family, visiting the capital. To the place of the murder he reverts even in Porfirij Petrovič's interviews with him, when he would have done better to keep his mouth shut.

How has it come into being then, the apparently quite widespread interpretation of “Prestuplenie i nakazanie” as a novel about a conversion to Christianity, a description of the homecoming of the apostate Rodion Romanyč to the faith of his childhood?

One reason may be the evident parallel between the protagonist's life and his author's life. Was not the young Dostoevskij exposed to the very same erroneous and detrimental theories as the hero of his novel, namely those of Messieurs Fourier & Cie? And didn't he return to the holy Russian *počva*, like Rodion Romanyč on the haymarket, by way of Siberia, the promised land of sinners and saints alike? In this perspective, that good old religion becomes the key to the whole question and “Prestuplenie and nakazanie” emerges not only as a *roman à thèse*, but as an *Entwicklungsroman* as well.

Then we have the influence of Dostoevskij the critic on the interpretation of Dostoevskij the fiction writer: look and behold, Fedor Michajlovič himself has given us the clue. Where? In his famous letter to

Michail Katkov of September 1865. Katkov was the editor of the (conservative) literary journal *Russkij vestnik*, and was later to publish the novel in the usual Russian way, that is by instalments in of the “thick” literary journals. Recommending his novel – which at that point still remained an unwritten concept in his mind. – Dostoevskij writes as follows about his hero, Rodion Romanovič Raskol’nikov:

Nerazrešimye voprosy vosstajut pered ubijceju, nepodozrevaemye i neožidannye čuvstva mučacet ego serdce. Božija pravda, zemnoj zakon beret svoje i on končacet tem, čto prinužden na sebja donesti. Prinužden, čtob čotja pogibnut’ v katorge, no primknut’ opjat’ k ljudjam; čuvstvo razomknutosti i raz’’edinennosti s čelovečestvom kotoroe on oščutil totčas-že po soveršenii prestuplenija, zamučilo ego. Zakon pravdy i čelovečeskaja priroda vzjali svoje ubeždenie. (...) Prestupnik sam rešaet prinjat’ muki, čtoby iskupit’ svoje delo. Vpročem trudno mne raz’’jasnit’ vpolne moju mysl’.²

Although Dostoevskij’s conclusions here may seem less transparent than those we find in many interpreters of the novel (he for instance does not mention the Christian faith even once), it nevertheless could be inferred that his status as a Christian writer was at stake if the forces of Good did not emerge victorious in the eternal struggle against the forces of Evil. In the view of influential interpreters, Raskol’nikov’s conversion must follow, or the novel will be bereft of its internal logic.

Victor Terras concludes succinctly: “Crime and Punishment is a Christian novel; Raskol’nikov will be healthy again only when he has overcome his pride, and embraced Sonja’s Christian faith, as happens in the epilogue.”³

But, many prominent scholars seem inclined to put Raskol’nikov’s conversion much earlier in the novel, making it chiefly a novel of atonement. A well-reputed Norwegian colleague, the late Sigurd Fasting, concludes after having cited Dostoevskij’s letter to Katkov:

The way of Raskol’nikov is the way of atonement and suffering. (...) It is the prostitute Sonja who is the bearer of Dostoevskij’s

² F.M. Dostoevskij, *Pis’ma*, ed. A.S. Dolinin, Moscow 1929-1958, Vol 1, p. 419.

³ Victor Terras, *A History of Russian Literature*, New Haven & London 1991, p. 58-59.

Christian ideals, and in the novel it is she who introduces him to the way of atonement and suffering. (...) It is a matter of course that she follows him to Siberia, and it is thanks to her that Raskol'nikov faces resurrection.⁴

Having cited Terras as well Fasting, we may conclude that there exist different hermeneutical traditions as to this particular part of the novel's message. The present writer has to admit at once that he agrees with Terras in his thesis, which concludes that no real atonement or resurrection takes place in the mind of Rodion Raskol'nikov within the confines of the novel proper. I would like to go even further. My assertion is that it is comparatively easy to prove that Raskol'nikov's "resurrection", as S. Fasting styles it, does not take place during the epilogue either.

"As happens in the epilogue ...". Even this phrase of Terras's strikes one as somewhat odd. The conclusion of a novel as it were outside the confines of the novel proper is not often encountered. The volume containing "Prestuplenie i nakazanie" in the most complete edition of Dostoevskij's works embraces 421 pages.⁵ Only approximately ten of those pages are devoted to the epilogue. One wonders why any writer, let alone one of Dostoevskij's stature, should not be able to drive his point home during such a lengthy description of his theme. Dostoevskij's negative attitude to Raskol'nikov even makes one wonder if the author might have abandoned his purpose on the way, if he ever had it.

The epilogue – in its time a fashionable literary convention – was a sort of summing up of what happened to *dramatis personae* after the novel proper had come to an end. Puškin applies it in "Pikovaja dama", telling us about Herman's tragic fate. Essentially, the novel was finished at that point, therefore those epilogues were quite often rather perfunctorily written, a characteristic which has been used about the epilogue of "Prestuplenie i nakazanie" as well.

⁴ Sigurd Fasting, Dostoevskij. Utgitt og med et forord av Jostein Børtnes, Oslo 1983, p. 348-349.

⁵ F.M.Dostoevskij, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v tridcati tomach. T. 6, Prestuplenie i nakazanie, Leningrad 1973*. Citations from the epilogue are taken from this edition.

The epilogue is divided into two parts. The first one concentrates on what goes on in Raskol'nikov's trial, and what else happens in his life before his departure to Siberia. Rodion Romanyč states that the reason for him to confess and give himself up to the authorities, was "pure repentance" ("čistoserdečnoe raskajanie") (411/27). However, it soon turns out that this probably is a show Raskol'nikov puts on in order to impress the court, as later Dostoevskij expressly negates Raskol'nikov's words in the court: "No on ne raskaivalsja v svoem prestuplenii" (471/31-32).

Raskol'nikov's status as a good and caring son is nevertheless maintained, and quite a large space is devoted to descriptions of the doings of his mother and sister, but since Raskol'nikov the family man was extolled already in the novel proper, this does not substantiate any claim of positive development in him after that time.

Now he and Sonja might be named newlyweds, but they are quite unlike usual honeymooners. And properly speaking, they are not married either. For whereas Dostoevskij takes pain to emphasize that his friend Razumichin and Avdot'ja Raskol'nikova get legally married (414/ 13), nothing is said about the marital status of Rodion and Sonja. From the point of view of the church, their relationship might even have been regarded as a case of fornication. Even if Rodion Romanyč grumblingly accepts her taking care of him, he shows no real affection. In relation to his guardian angel Sonja, it can scarcely be said that any positive development or real change takes place, until we reach the very last pages of the epilogue. During most of the epilogue Raskol'nikov's attitude to her is as described below:

Sonja prjamo pisala, čto on, osobenno vnačale, ne tol'ko ne interesovalsja ee poseščenijami, no daže počti dosadoval na nee, byl neslovoochotliv i daže grub s neju, no čto v konec eti svidanija obratilis' u nego v privyčku i daže čut' ne v potrebnost', tak čto on daže toskoval, kogda ona neskol'ko dnej i ne mogla poseščat' ego. (416/7-13).

The citations above are all taken from the first part of the epilogue. Raskol'nikov's conversion has not as yet taken place. But still there is the last part of the epilogue to take into consideration. Now we approach one

of the most interesting sequences of the epilogue, namely where Raskol'nikov describes his murders as "a miss", or "a pure blunder" (*promach*). (417 / 3):

Stydit'sja li emu bylo svoej britoj golovy i polovinčatoj kurtki? No pred kem? Pred Sonej? Sonja bojalas' ego, i pred neju li bylo emu stydit'sja? A čto že? On stydilsja daže i pred Sonej, ktoruju mučil za eto svoim prezritel'nym i grubym obraščeniem. No ne britoj golovy i kandalov on stydilsja: ego gordost' sil'no byla ujazvljena, on i zabolet ot uvjazlennoj gordosti. O, kak by ščastliv on byl, esli by mog sam obvinit' sebja! On by snes togda vse, daže styd i pozor. No on strogo sudil sebja, i ožestočennaja sovest' ego ne našla nikakoj osobenno užasnoj viny v ego prošedšem, krome razve prostogo promachu, kotoryj so vsjakim mog slučitsja. On stydilsja imenno togo, čto on, Raskol'nikov, pogib tak slepo, beznadežno, glucho i glupo, po kakomu-to prigovoru slepoj sud'by, i dolžen smiritsja i pokoritsja pred „bessmyslicej” kakogo-to prigovora, esli chočet skol'ko-nibud' uspokoit' sebja. (416-417/38-7)

Neither does Raskol'nikov, not even at this late time, renounce his declaration of faith to the tenets of fourierism as they appear in his personal version:

Čem, čem, - dumal on, - moja mysl' byla glupee drugih myslej i teorii, rojaščichsja i stalkivajuščichsja odna s drugoj na svete s tech por kak ètot svet stoit? Stoit tol'ko posmotret' na delo soveršenno nezavisimym, širokim i izbavlenym ot obydennych vlijanij vzgljadom, i togda, konečno, moja mysl' okažetsja vovse ne tak...strannoju. O otricateli i mudrecy v pjatačok serebra, začem vy ostanavlivaetes' na poldoroge! (417/30-36).

Concerning the question of a possible conversion to Christianity on the part of Raskol'nikov, his attitude to suicide is interesting as well. As we know, in the Christian system of values, suicide is a sin, and a serious one at that. Suicide is not compatible with Christian dogmas. But Raskol'nikov seems to embrace it without objections:

On stradal tože ot mysli: začem on togda sebja ne ubil? Začem on stojal togda nad rekoj i predpočel javku s povinoju? Neuželi takaja

silu v ètom želanii žit' i tak trudno odolet' ego? Odolet' že Svidrigajlov, bojavšijsja smerti? (418/4).

Raskol'nikov's worries then are caused, not by the fact that he has murdered and inflicted fear, pain and death on two innocent people. He is worried because his pride, his *amour propre* has been hurt. He declares his abhorrence of *smirenje* and *pokornost'*, two of the main notions of Dostoevskij's moral universe. Certainly, this man is not someone who could be taken as a repenting sinner, redeemed by Sonja's humble and self-sacrificing love. He reproaches himself for being silly, but not for having broken the fifth commandment.

Raskol'nikov has no feeling of guilt whatsoever: "Nu, čem moj postupok kažetsja im tak bezobrazen? govoril on sebe. – Tem čto on – zlo-dejanie? Čto značit slovo "zlodejanie"? Sovest' moja spokojna." (417 / 37-39).

Taking into consideration Dostoevskij's glorification of the plain Russian, of *prostoj russkij narod*, it is interesting that his fellow prisoners in the *ostrog* nourish an almost instinctive dislike of Raskol'nikov, whom they persecute and beat: "Ty bezbožnik! Ty v Boga ne verueš'! kričali emu. – Ubit' tebja nado!" (419/ 5-7).

One of the most famous passages of the novel is the delirious dream Raskol'nikov has when lying ill in the *ostrog*, the fever dream of the epilogue. He dreams that a terrible pestilence coming from Asia (a contemporary Bird's flu?) is striking at the peoples of Europe and making them die in thousands. Some scholars have interpreted this passage as the ultimate and decisive proof of Rodion Romanyč's conversion, as for instance professor Fasting:

In the novel's epilogue, the writer intimates how suffering works its mysterious wonders in his soul, and how the mental crisis in which he is, manifests itself in a serious physical illness. Through a delirious dream he has, Dostoevskij shows that the settling of accounts with the nihilists already have started in his subconscious (...). Raskol'nikov's physical recovery signifies that he is mentally cured as well, cured from the pestilence of nihilism (...) and this metamorphosis of his is proven by his declaration of love for Sonia – the first human being he again is able to love (...).⁶

En passant: Dostoevskij's prophetic gift once more celebrates triumphs. He calls the dangerous germs trichinas, but from the point of view of the patients, Bird's flu germs or trichinas may come to the same thing. The main constellation is Asia – dangerous germs.

The dream of this modern version of the Black Death makes for exciting reading, but as a proof of Rodion Romanyč's conversion, I do not think this passage should detain us for a long time. The situation described in the dream sequence, simply has no relevance to Raskol'nikov's own life; he does not appear there, and neither does Sonja. As for the "declaration of love", it is impossible to find; on the contrary Dostoevskij wrote: "Oni choteli bylo govorit', no ne mogli". (421/39)

True enough – at this point there are some inklings of a change in Raskol'nikov, namely concerning his relationship to Sonja:

On dumal ob nej. On vspomnil, kak on postojanno ee mucil i terzal ee serdce; vspomnil ee bednoe, chuden'koe ličiko, no ego počti i ne mučil teper' èti vospominanija: on znal, kakoju bezkonečnoju ljubov'ju iskupit on teper' vse ee stradanija. (422/7-10).

This is Rodion in love, and we feel glad for him, because this may signify a return to normalcy, and to normal relations with other human beings. Who knows, if he had met a nice girl earlier, he might have abandoned his mad aspirations of becoming a superman before two innocent people had fallen victim to his delusions. Nevertheless, this is mainly a change in his relationship with Sonja. Nothing has happened to his relation to human society and to Christian religion. And nothing has

⁶ Fasting, op. cit. p. 63-64.

happened to his relation to his own crime. Here we look in vain for a realization of guilt, but find no regrets and no atonement, no repentance.

Our acquaintanceship with Rodion Romanyč and Sonia approaches an end. Let us see if Dostoevskij has any surprises in store for us just before we close the book:

Pod poduškoj ego ležalo Evangelie. On vzjal ego mašinal'no. Èta kniga prinadležala ej, byla ta samaja, iz ktorogo ona čitala emu o voskresenii Lazarja. V načale katorgi, on dumal, čto ona zamučit ego religiej, budet zagovarivat' o Evangelii i navjazyvati' emu knigi. No, k veličajšemu ego udivljeniju, ona ni razu ne zagovarivala ob ètom, ni razu daže ne predložila emu Evangelija. On sam poprosil ego u nej nezadolgo svoej bolezni, i ona molča prinesla emu knigu. Do sich por on ee ne raskryval.

On ne raskryl ee i teper', no odna mysl' promel'knula v nem: "Razve mogut ee ubeždenija ne byt' teper' i moimi ubeždenijami? Ee čuvstva, ee stremlenija, po krajnej mere..."

Ona tože ves' ètot den' byla v volnenii, a v noč' daže opjat' zachvorala. No ona byla do togo ščastliva, čto počti ispugalas' svoego ščastija. Sem' let, t o l ' k o sem' let! V načale svoego ščastija, v inye mgnovenija, oni oba gotovy byli smotret' na èti sem' let, kak na sem' dnej. On daže i ne znal togo, čto novaja žizn' ne darom že emu dostaetsja, čto ee nado ešče dorogo kupit', zaplatit' za nego velikim, buduščim podvigom...

No tut že už načinaetsja novaja istorija, istorija postepenno obnovenija čeloveka, istorija postepenno pereroždenija ego, postepenno perehoda iz odnogo mira v drugoj, znakomstva s novoju, dosele soveršenno nevedomuju dejstvitel'nost'ju. Èto moglo by sostavit' temu novogo rasskaza – no teperešnj rasskaz naš okončen. (422/19-43).

True love is a wonderful thing, indeed. But what about the repentant sinner, the prodigal son and his symbolic homecoming? The prospective convert does not seem especially interested in what is going on outside their mutual private sphere (which certainly is very human and normal). When the caring Sonja hands him a copy of The Holy Gospel, Rodion Romanyč takes it mechanically and – puts it aside, under his pillow,

where it is allowed to stay for a long time – for how long, we do not know exactly, as it remains unopened when the novel ends. True enough, Dostoevskij gives us some vague innuendos about a *podvig*, a great deed or religious feat Raskol'nikov is going to perform once in the future, but it is not specified, and we do not know if it will substantiate

I once asked a pentecostal preacher, being a specialist on conversions and religious revivals, what he thought of a conversion of this kind. – I have to admit that I am not impressed, he answered, – Those things we do better.

As if himself feeling the unsatisfactory stalemate presented by such an ending, Dostoevskij halfway promises us a continuation, in which we will be told about the wonderful future life of Rodion Romanovič Raskol'nikov. But for some reason Dostoevskij never published this continuation, as Gogol never published his sequel to “Mertvye duši”.

If one accept the premises given above, it is possible to introduce some alternative interpretations of Dostoevskij, the writer and the man. This is certainly not a place to do so, but one thing seems obvious if one agrees with the non-existence of a Christian conversion of Raskol'nikov: The novel, maybe even Dostoevskij's whole oeuvre, should perhaps be interpreted in a somewhat more pessimistic vein. In “Besy” Dostoevskij gets rid of the evil forces in a mythical way, making them disappear, as in the Holy Gospel, in a herd of swines. In “Prestuplenie i nakazanie” realism prevails over allegory. There, inherent evil seems somewhat more difficult to get rid of in 19th century Russia than in the mythical landscape of the Bible.

E-mail: jan.brodal@ub.uit.no