

Fate in *Crime and Punishment*

DAVID MATUAL, *Wright State University*

In several passages of *Crime and Punishment* and especially during the confession scene with Sonia in Part V, Chapter 4, Raskolnikov attempts to clarify the motive which has impelled him to murder and rob the old pawnbroker, Alena Ivanovna. His difficulty in identifying the cause of his actions makes him one of the most fascinating and bewildering characters in world literature—a criminal in search of a motive, as Philip Rahv once observed.¹ The first suggestions of a motive are made at the very beginning of the novel in the numerous references to the hero's penurious condition. The nineteenth-century Russian critic Dmitrii Pisarev accepts these allusions at face value and asserts that Raskolnikov kills for money alone.² Pisarev's explanation is undermined by the hero's failure even to count the money he has stolen. Nevertheless, the financial factor must not be rejected out of hand. Raskolnikov's impoverishment is, if not the direct motive of his crime, the background against which his malevolent idea is conceived. A second motive, adumbrated in Part I and elaborated in Part V, is the so-called humanitarian motive. Alena Ivanovna is a scavenger living on the helplessness of her clients. The profits reaped from her usurious rates will go to a monastery after her death. Early in the novel Raskolnikov overhears a student tell a young officer that the murder of such a woman is an insignificant price to pay for the confiscation of her wealth and its distribution to the needy. Arithmetic justifies such a course: one life is lost (and a useless one at that) while thousands are saved. Raskolnikov is struck by the proposition because he himself has been thinking the very same thing. A third explanation of the crime—the "great man" theory—is found in the hero's article on crime and the psychology of the criminal. According to its central thesis certain men are ordained by history to accomplish momentous tasks, and, in order to reach their goals, they are empowered to bypass conventional morality and violate any rule that obstructs their way. Raskolnikov explains his Hegelian notion to Sonia in Part V, but discovers that he cannot accept it any more than she can understand it. The reader, however, must not dismiss this argument too quickly, for Dostoevsky himself attached considerable importance to it. In a long letter to his publisher he outlined the plot of *Crime and Punishment* and characterized his hero as a young man beguiled by certain "incomplete ideas" espoused by the members of his social milieu.³ This motive, like all the others, has a firm foundation in the data of the novel. For Raskolnikov truly believes, or wishes to believe, that he is such an extraordinary man, living beyond good and evil. A fourth explanation of the crime is akin to the "great man" theory. It views the hero's actions as an assertion of free will and the autonomy of the individual—themes which occupy a prominent place in several of Dostoevsky's earlier writings, especially in *Notes from Underground*. Raskolnikov says that he committed the murder for himself alone, that he wished to prove that he was not a louse but a man, i.e., a *free* man. In view of the author's preoccupation with the theme of volitional freedom it is not unreasonable to give this motive its due consideration. A fifth motive is also worthy of comment. Raskolnikov commits murder, it is claimed, because he is seeking suffering for himself. His numerous verbal and biographical ties to such spiritual masochists as Marmeladov, Katerina Ivanovna, and especially Mikolka, the young peasant who confesses to the hero's crimes, make this explanation quite plausible. According to a sixth

explanation Raskolnikov's unbalanced state of mind leads him to the perpetration of the crime. Because the narrator alludes so frequently to his hero's delirious condition before and after the murder, this theory also contains an element of truth. Indeed, the greatness of *Crime and Punishment* is at least partially attributable to the multiplicity and validity of all the motives either adduced by Raskolnikov himself or suggested by the novel's events.

There is still another explanation of the murder to be considered. It too seems valid to me, although it has often been denigrated and rejected by critics and scholars. Raskolnikov's crime may be seen as the result of the direct and indirect intervention of an external, supernatural force. At various places in the novel it is called "fate," "God," or the "devil," but they all amount to the same mysterious power. Evidence for this motive is abundant especially in Part One, which presents the history of the crime, and in Part Six, when Raskolnikov begins the long journey toward his spiritual conversion.

The account of the crime and the events that lead up to it is a veritable history of good fortune and fantastic coincidences, all of which the hero attributes to a force beyond himself. When he visits the pawnbroker for a "test," he eludes the attention of several janitors. In a subsequent episode he walks to the outskirts of the city, falls to the ground exhausted, and has a dream in which an old horse is flogged to death by a band of drunken peasants. Upon awaking he cries, "Thank God, it's only a dream." These words are quickly followed by the incredulous plaint: "God! Can it really be, can it really be that I will actually take an axe, hit her on the head, and shatter her skull? That I will slip in her sticky, warm blood, jimmy the lock, steal and tremble and hide all covered with blood? With an axe? Lord, can it really be?"⁴ After the dream he picks himself up and heads back for his apartment. He is now free, the narrator tells us, from "this spell, the sorcery, the charm, the obsession." Yet unaccountably he does not go home directly but passes instead through Haymarket Square, where he learns by chance that Lizaveta, the pawnbroker's half sister, will be gone that evening and Alena Ivanovna will be in the apartment alone. Hearing this, he feels "like a condemned man" and "suddenly with all his being he felt that neither his reason nor his will were free any more and that everything had been settled for good" (p. 52). Later, when Raskolnikov looks back on his circuitous journey from the outskirts of Saint Petersburg to his room and the conversation casually overheard on the square, he explains the entire incident as the "predestination of fate" (p. 50). From the very beginning of his murderous idea he sees the "presence of certain special influences and coincidences" (p. 52). It is by chance that he first learns of Alena Ivanovna; it is by chance that he hears a conversation between an officer and a student passionately declaring the utter futility and harmfulness of her existence; and it is by chance that he has been entertaining the same thought.

Raskolnikov is struck, even horrified by the information he gleans from the conversation in Haymarket Square. Even more striking is the manner in which it is conveyed. A tradesman and his wife tell Lizaveta to come to their place "in the seventh hour" (*v semom chasu*, p. 51). The same substandard Russian word for "seventh"—*semoi* instead of *sed'moi*—occurs later just before Raskolnikov leaves his room for Alena Ivanovna's apartment. While he is fussing with the false pledge he will use to avert her suspicion, an unidentified voice from the courtyard alerts him: "It's long past six!" (Literally, "It's been the seventh hour for a long time," *Semoi chas davno*, p. 57). In the original, the coincidence is perfectly obvious, although Raskolnikov does not notice it.

Nor does he notice that the abrupt and urgent cry goading him to action suggests even more persuasively than the other chance happenings of Part One that a mysterious external power is deeply involved in his thoughts and deeds. The narrator makes this even clearer as the moment of the murder approaches. Raskolnikov feels "as if someone had taken him by the hand and pulled him, irresistibly, blindly, with supernatural force, without objection. It was just as if the wheel of a machine had caught a clump of his clothing and begun to pull him in" (p. 58). After leaving his room, he finds an axe under a bench. He does not merely see it; it *shines* to him as if to call attention to itself. No one notices him take the object. His explanation of this stroke of luck points once again to his persistent faith in preternatural powers: "If reason fails, there's always the devil" (p. 60). Fortune seems to smile on him again when he passes through the gate to Alena Ivanovna's building, for a haycart entering before him conceals him from the gaze of the people on the street. After killing the pawnbroker and her half sister, Raskolnikov takes temporary refuge in a vacant apartment on the second floor. Some painters had been working there earlier, but now they have left "as if on purpose" (p. 69). The hero returns to his own building, replaces the axe without being seen, and retires to his room. Everything appears to have come off without a hitch. His every step has been guided and even constrained, or so he believes. Dostoevsky, through the thoughts of the hero, the words of the narrator, and the events antecedent to the crime, has created, it would seem, a very cogent case for the theory of an external force as a prime mover in the plot of *Crime and Punishment*.

Nevertheless, this theory has had little success with those who have written on Raskolnikov's motivation. In a recently published collection of critical essays on *Crime and Punishment* Robert Louis Jackson argues that in order to explain the myriad of happenstances and coincidences the hero has recourse to the notion of fate because he has lost all faith in God or in the meaningfulness of God's world. The "fate" Raskolnikov has come to believe in is nothing more than the inevitable consequences of his own behavior, "the iron logic of his own, inner fatality."⁵ The Soviet critic G. M. Fridlender takes a similar position. In his view the theory of fate is a reflection of the hero's emotional state and is therefore a corollary of the highly dubious theory of madness.⁶ Konstantin Mochul'skii, who has written the most perceptive study of Dostoevsky's *Leben und Werk*, compares Raskolnikov with the tragic hero of antiquity perishing in a vain struggle with Fate. He can be saved, it is argued, only through faith in Christ; without that faith he becomes the plaything of destiny.⁷

The most troublesome and ultimately most unsatisfying element in these remarks is the assumption that God and fate are *opposed* to each other. It is, of course, quite true that Raskolnikov has abandoned God and that he frequently imputes his crime to the power of fate. But by the same token can it be maintained that God has abandoned *him* and ceased to be a part of his life? It seems quite possible to me that Raskolnikov has incorrectly identified the external power that besets him and that what he regards as a sinister force is in fact the benevolent action of God's grace. The question of the role of fate in the novel should be treated not solely in terms of its psychological validity; rather, it must be viewed in the context of the problem of good and evil and of Dostoevsky's notion of theodicy.

Raskolnikov is, as Walter Schubart has claimed, a "sinner full of grace," who passes "from crime through repentance to rebirth."⁸ Why "crime"? Dostoevsky is surely not suggesting that crime—in this case murder—is the

sine qua non of spiritual regeneration, but for Raskolnikov it becomes the first step on the difficult road to salvation. In his study of Dostoevsky's Christian *Weltanschauung* Nikolai Losskii contends that evil and its objectification in crime are never absolute. Either they contain an element of good or they create those circumstances which favor the triumph of good.⁹ To be sure, all depends on the attitude of the criminal. If moral good is alien to his nature, if he fails to feel the slightest remorse after his crime, the process of regeneration is frustrated and nullified. This is hardly the case with Raskolnikov, however. *Crime and Punishment* is replete with references to his piety as a child and his acts of kindness as an adult. (Consider, for example, his aid to the young girl about to be raped by the stranger, his solicitude for the Marmeladov family, and his defense of Sonia at the funeral repast.) These periodic manifestations of good combined with his frequent feelings of revulsion toward the crime both before and after its commission make him susceptible, as it were, to the effect of divine grace. But the ultimate goal of palingenesis cannot be achieved without the ordeal of suffering, or in the words of Nikolai Berdiaev, "only great suffering occasioned by evil can raise a man to a greater height."¹⁰ Raskolnikov can ascend that height only by assuming suffering, and he suffers only because he feels more and more keenly the discrepancy between his criminal behavior and the innocence of an earlier existence which is fortified by Sonia's love. She and the positive characters in the novel mirror the conflict in his heart and prefigure the ultimate victory of good.

It is not without reason that the Biblical story of the raising of Lazarus plays such a central role in the book. The theme of physical resurrection presented in the tale is ultimately bound up with Raskolnikov's conversion, for he is portrayed as a latter-day Lazarus. Before his first interview with the police inspector Porfiry Petrovich he decides that he will have to "sing Lazarus" (p. 189). The Russian phrase *pet' Lazaria* means "to complain of one's troubles." Raskolnikov means only this and nothing more. Yet his phraseology underlines this most vital theme of *Crime and Punishment*. During the ensuing conversation Porfiry Petrovich asks him whether he believes in the Biblical miracles, especially the supreme miracle—the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Raskolnikov answers affirmatively. The subject of their discussion obviously remains on his mind, for in a later conversation with Sonia he wishes to read the same story from her New Testament. Unable to find it, he lets Sonia read to him. Her measured and appropriately emphatic tones clearly indicate that she is aware of the parallel between the gospel account and the drama unfolding before her. When she reaches the verse in which Martha, the sister of Lazarus, tells Christ that her brother has been lying in the tomb for four days, she vigorously stresses the word "four." The same number is associated with Raskolnikov and his doubles in numerous contexts. The Russian word for "tomb" (*grob*) is equally significant in this passage. On an earlier occasion Raskolnikov's room is compared to a coffin. The importance of this detail is evident only in the original because Russian uses the same word for "tomb" and "coffin." Like Lazarus, Raskolnikov is in his tomb waiting to be summoned forth. In the light of these parallels the hero's spiritual resurrection in the epilogue appears not only justified but inevitable.

Regeneration is the teleology of *Crime and Punishment*. The importance Dostoevsky attached to it can also be seen in his notebooks. In an early version reference is made to the fact that Raskolnikov's mother used to read the gospel to him and that for some reason the words "Talitha koum" ("Get up, little girl") are lodged in his memory.¹¹ The passage he remembers so faintly is found in Mark V: 41. Jairus, an official of the synagogue,

implores Jesus to heal his daughter. When he reaches her bedside, however, she has already died. Assuring the family that the girl is only asleep, he commands her to rise and she obeys. The miracle of resurrection is a lingering memory in the notebooks; the story of Lazarus is the spiritual *dynamis* of the finished novel.

What then does God have to do with the perpetration of the crime and the regenerative process it initiates? There is much evidence to indicate that God *wills* the murder, however unconventional and even blasphemous that position may seem. It is not that evil for its own sake is part of the divine plan; it is the consequences of an evil act that matter. The fundamental Christian myth of resurrection, so prominently represented in *Crime and Punishment* by the story of Lazarus, is centered in the belief that without evil and death there can be no resurrection; without suffering there can be no joy. The evil represented in the novel by the murder of Alena Ivanovna and Lizaveta is the instrument of Raskolnikov's salvation. In the notebooks we find this curious statement, which does not, however, appear in the final text: "Inscrutable are the ways in which God finds man."¹² In this case the "inscrutable way" is crime. In more positive terms the notion of spiritual resurrection is found in this note, which appears under the heading "The Main Idea of the Novel": "He went to the Marmeladov girl [i.e., Sonia] not at all out of love but as if he were meeting with Providence."¹³ In the final version this note is attenuated somewhat, but the theme of providential guidance is still there. Raskolnikov goes to Sonia to confess his crime, and the narrator observes: "Pensively he stopped before the door asking himself a strange question: 'Do I have to tell her who killed Lizaveta?' The question was strange because at the same time he suddenly felt that not only could he not help telling her but that it was impossible even to postpone this moment even temporarily. He still didn't know why it was impossible; he only *felt* it, and this agonizing awareness of his impotence in the face of necessity almost crushed him" (p. 312).

Of all the critics who had addressed themselves to the question of God's role or the role of "fate" in *Crime and Punishment*, Jean Drouilly has given, perhaps, the most insightful explanation. "If Reason," he says, "cannot prevent the murder of a contemptible, useless old money-lender, God is there to give the gesture its true meaning. These seem to be the theses maintained by Dostoevsky in his *Crime and Punishment*."¹⁴

Despite the persuasive evidence in the notebooks and the plethora of suggestive detail in Part One there is still no solid foundation for a theory of fate or divine intervention. The notebooks are not, after all, the novel itself but a series of false starts, experiments, and ideas. As far as the striking coincidences and chance occurrences in Part One are concerned, they can all be dismissed, as Jackson and Fridlender maintain, as the hero's attempt to rationalize his own predetermined course of action. Far more convincing arguments in favor of the theory of an external force are presented in Part VI, when Porfiry Petrovich confronts Raskolnikov for the last time. The police inspector represents at first the law of man in pursuit of a criminal and gradually emerges as a spokesman for the law of God as well. He not only perceives God's role in the whole affair but understands the necessity of the suffering which Raskolnikov must endure. Convinced that God has brought Raskolnikov to this denouement, he remarks: "So, I've been waiting and watching, and God is giving you over to me: you are coming to me" (p. 346). After formally accusing Raskolnikov of the murder, he speculates that God

may have been "waiting for this" [i.e., the murder] and later adds: "Perhaps you still have something to thank God for. For all you know he might even be saving you for something" (p. 351). Porfiry Petrovich quite clearly believes that God not only does intervene in the affairs of man but that he will guide Raskolnikov's steps to confession, effect a conversion through the loving influence of Sonia, and lead him to the "new story" suggested in the final paragraph of the epilogue.

The power of *Crime and Punishment* is due in large measure to the profundity of the questions it explores and its refusal to yield any consistently satisfying answers. The motives assigned to Raskolnikov's crime all have a claim on truth, but none is in absolute possession of it. This may also be said of the theory of divine influence. Although it has often been summarily rejected as rationalization or authorial trickery, it commands our attention because it plays such an obviously important part both at the beginning and at the end of the novel. God is "there," as Jean Drouilly has said, to give meaning to the heinous act of murder. Porfiry Petrovich is also "there" to explain to Raskolnikov the mysterious force which he has described as "fate" or the "devil" at various places in the narrative. Even in the epilogue Raskolnikov blames his downfall on "blind fate"; only Sonia's love can help him surmount the obstacle of his intellectual pride and accept the suffering that will presumably purify and renew him. Sonia is also "there" to raise this Lazarus from the dead. She is the objective correlative of that providential force which has guided him from crime through punishment to redemption.

NOTES

¹Philip Rahv, "Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*," *Partisan Review* 27, No. 3 (Summer 1960), p. 399.

²Dmitrii Ivanovich Pisarev, "Bor'ba za zhizn'," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 6 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1901-1903), V, 393.

³For the complete text of the letter see F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-), VII, 310-11. All further references to Dostoevsky pertain to this edition. All translations are mine.

⁴Dostoevskii, VI, 50. All further quotations from the novel will be accompanied by page numbers in the text.

⁵Robert Louis Jackson, "Philosophical Pro and Contra in Part One of *Crime and Punishment*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Crime and Punishment*, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974), p. 39.

⁶G. M. Fridlender, *Realizm Dostoievskogo* (Moscow, Leningrad: Nauka, 1964), p. 207.

⁷Konstantin Mochul'skii, *Dostoievskii: zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1947), p. 255.

⁸Walter Schubart, *Europa und die Seele des Ostens*, 4th and 5th ed. (Lucerne: Vita Nova Verlag, 1946), p. 194.

⁹Nikolai Losskii, *Dostoievskii i ego khristianshoe miroponimanie* (New York: Izdatel'stvo im. Chekhova, 1953), p. 183.

¹⁰Nikolai Berdiaev, *Mirosozertsanie Dostoievskogo* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1923), p. 94.

¹¹Dostoevskii, VII, 91.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁴Jean Drouilly, *La Pensée politique et religieuse de Dostoievski* (Paris: Librairie des Cinq Continents, 1971), p. 274. The translation is mine.