

Conrad and Dostoevsky, and Natalia and Sonia

Edward Wasiolek, University of Chicago

The case for the influence of *Crime and Punishment* on *Under Western Eyes* has been made so often that it has led Lewitter to speak of the connection as too obvious to be discussed.¹ But the fact of the matter is that the discussions have churned the same stew in a small pot, largely the similar pattern of crime, confession, and punishment. Jocelyn Baines's discussion of verbal echoes some two decades ago is still probably the most helpful comparison and bears reproducing: "In *Under Western Eyes* there are verbal echoes of *Crime and Punishment*. It may perhaps be fanciful to suggest that they are deliberate, but the fact remains that some of the most dramatic phrases of *Under Western Eyes* have their less dramatic counterpart in Dostoevsky's novel. Thus Razumov's 'Do you conceive the desolation of the thought--no one-to-go-to?' recalls Marmeladov's 'Do you understand, sir, do you understand what it means when you have absolutely nowhere to turn?' Razumov calls Natalia Haldin a 'pre-destined victim' just as Raskolnikov calls Sonia Marmeladov an 'eternal victim.' Natalia Haldin says: 'It is impossible to be more unhappy,' and Sonia says to Raskolnikov: 'There is no one--no one in the whole world now so unhappy as you.' Then Razumov's 'It was myself, after all, whom I have betrayed' recalls Raskolnikov's 'I murdered myself, not her!'"²

These are by and large justifiable and legitimate echoes. But there is a great deal more, and Lewitter is surely cavalier in dismissing the complexity and profundity of the comparison when he speaks of the similarities and divergences as superficial and obvious. One could add the following similarities between the two works: Raskolnikov and Razumov are both students; both have similar temperaments. Razumov is self-isolating, irritable, and contemptuous of others, as is Raskolnikov. Razumov's name "razum" means reason in Polish and Russian, and Raskolnikov's crime is largely a crime of reason and abstract intention. No one has noted that the name of Raskolnikov's friend Razumikhin begins with the word "razum" as does Razumov's. Razumikhin in *Crime and Punishment* is, however, an embodiment of clear practical thinking, with a healthy and almost cheerful attitude toward the difficulties Raskolnikov broods about. Dostoevsky thus introduces an ambiguity into the concept of "reason," giving us both its destructive reach and its practical and healthy embodiment.

Razumov's drama revolves around his relationships to a sister and mother, and Raskolnikov's equally around a mother and sister. Raskolnikov's mother dies from grief for her son, and Mrs. Haldin dies from grief for her son. If Snodgrass's and my own work on the mother as a displaced victim of Raskolnikov's rage is correct, Raskolnikov may have committed the murder

¹ L.R. Lewitter, "Conrad, Dostoevsky, and the Russo-Polish Antagonism," *Modern Language Review* 79 (July 1984) 653-63.

² Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960) 370.

because of too much mothering; Razumov, because of too little.³ Razumov wants to work within the system; Raskolnikov has worked within the system and revolts against it. Razumov gets sick after he betrays Haldin; Raskolnikov is sick for almost a week after he kills the pawnbroker. Both men have the sense of being cut off from humanity after their respective crimes.

Jeffrey Berman has charted the various suicidal impulses that Razumov has, but did not point out that Raskolnikov has similar suicidal impulses.⁴ Both men contemplate suicide while standing on a bridge. Raskolnikov thinks of throwing himself into the water, but is saved from doing so by watching a woman throw herself into the Neva. Again, the night before he gives himself up to the authorities, he contemplates suicide by looking into the water of the Neva. And in the notebooks, Dostoevsky has him go out and shoot himself on three occasions.

There are doublings in both novels. In *Under Western Eyes*, Razumov and Haldin and Razumov and Ziemianych. *Crime and Punishment* is replete with Raskolnikov's doubles: the murdered pawnbroker as a double of his internalized hate for his mother; Marmeladov as the Raskolnikov weighed down with a conventional and burdensome love; Svidrigaylov as the externalization of the will to destroy; and Sonia as the externalization of his capacity to redeem himself. And just as Ziemianych comes to take on the burden of guilt for the betrayal of Haldin for Razumov, the artisan Nikolay takes on the guilt of Raskolnikov's murder. Razumov has an absent father, and Raskolnikov has a dead father.

Finally, one must repeat what is most fundamental about the comparison, that is, the similar structure of crime, confession, and punishment. The crime is something thrust upon the hapless Razumov; for Raskolnikov, it is a carefully planned act of protest against the conditions of society and, perhaps, against the psychological dependence on his family, as well as a metaphysical revolt against one's dependence on God himself. Although there is crime, confession, and punishment in both novels, there is also redemption in Dostoevsky's but none in Conrad's.

But the most fascinating comparison between the two novels may be in the confession scene of each. How the authors handle this crucial and sensitive scene tells us something about how they see their heroes and how they see crime and punishment and the condition of man. The scene also may lead us to a substantial revision of how we are to look at Natalia Haldin. Both Raskolnikov and Razumov confess to the women they love, and neither is quite able to get the words out. Razumov points to his breast, and Sonia guesses what Raskolnikov cannot quite get out. A third person is present at the confession of each: the professor is present at Razumov's confession, and Svidrigaylov is present at Raskolnikov's confession, though neither Sonia nor Raskolnikov are aware of it. Each man confesses when he no longer has anything to fear from exposure and is therefore safe. The death of Ziemianych makes Razumov safe,

³ W.D. Snodgrass, "Crime for Punishment: The Tenor of Part One," *Hudson Review* 12 (Summer 1960) 202-53. Edward Wasiolek, "Raskolnikov's Motives: Love or Murder," *American Imago* 31 (Fall 1974) 252-69.

⁴ Jeffrey Berman, *Joseph Conrad: Writing as Rescue* (New York: Astre, 1977) 133.

and the death of Svidrigaylov removes the only person who could implicate Raskolnikov in the murder. Both men confess not only to a woman, but because of a woman; and both confess because of their love for the woman.

Yet there are significant differences in the confession scene. During the moments when Raskolnikov attempts to tell Sonia that he has murdered, Sonia is all emotion: her face is pale, she wrings her hands, and she is breathless with fear, anxiety, and sympathy for Raskolnikov. And when she guesses that he is the murderer, she throws her arms around him and exclaims "Oh my god, what have you done to yourself." She is all sympathy and tormented love. There is not a thought about herself; her being is all in Raskolnikov. When Razumov confesses, Natalia collapses onto a chair that the professor provides for her and she exclaims, "It is impossible to be more unhappy." She is referring to her own unhappiness and not to Razumov's. These are almost the same words that Sonia says to Raskolnikov: "Oh, I don't think there is anyone in the world more unhappy than you are!" Sonia speaks of Raskolnikov's unhappiness and Natalia speaks of her own unhappiness. Natalia speaks no words of sympathy for Razumov and, indeed, in the events that follow shows no sympathy. She does not visit him in the hospital, expresses no pity for his crippling at the hands of Nikita, and no pity for the further mutilation he endures by the train running over him. She also has no desire to retain the diary that he has bequeathed to her. If she has read it with any care, she shows no particular reaction to it. Her only comment to the professor has to do, characteristically, with herself and not him: "I was defenceless." When both she and Razumov are settled in Russia, others visit the maimed and dying Razumov but not Natalia. Sonia, on the other hand, is constantly at Raskolnikov's side: she follows him to Siberia, visits him in the prison hospital, and rejoices at his conversion. She is sacrifice and forgiveness incarnate. Natalia makes no sacrifice for Razumov and speaks no words of forgiveness. In the aftermath of the confession, Razumov goes to his room and attempts in his diary to explain to himself and to the absent Natalia why he confessed. Raskolnikov does not have to speak to an absent Sonia; she is there and with a desperate desire to understand why he murdered the two women. The confessions of both are unsatisfactory, but what a difference of form. Raskolnikov attempts to explain his actions to a sympathetic and loving creature, in a dialogue of shared pain and perplexity. Razumov writes in his diary to an absent Natalia, and in a mode that underscores his aloneness. He speaks of his love for her, but there is no dialogue of returned love, as there is between Raskolnikov and Sonia. The act of solitary writing at the most crucial juncture of his life is a reconfirmation that his life, even after the confession, remains uncomprehended by another in love and sympathy.

It is a cruel irony that Razumov seeks his love in someone who cannot requite it, who cannot see him, but can see only the brother in him, and who finally is indifferent to him. Natalia reinforces what has been Razumov's most painful experience in life: that is, the awareness that he is unloved and alone. Razumov confesses, it seems, to break out of the isolation and loneliness that his betrayal and lie have condemned him to. But his confession cannot break through Natalia's indifference. The revolutionaries touch him. Natalia ignores him. They visit him in Russia; Natalia does not. She is occupied with helping strangers, but not in helping the desperate hand that has been held out to her. In this respect Tekla is more the Dostoevskian character than is Natalia. She

resembles Sonia in following Razumov to his exile and punishment without question. She is the consoler, but not the redemprix.

What we get in Conrad, by way of contrast to Dostoevsky, is crime and punishment, but no redemption. Razumov cries out after confessing that he has been "washed clean," and it is true that the lie has been washed away. But what is left is neither redemption nor consolation. Razumov has broken through the isolation of self only to find, for the most part, the isolation of other selves. His "redemption" is to be "deafened" to the world about him. Razumov may be in love with Natalia, but she is not in love with him. He has been a surrogate brother to her, and all her interest is concentrated on this fact. Once he is no longer that, she seems to be drained of interest in him. This is no minor matter, and shows us a character—surely the best of the revolutionary lot—who cannot value a person for his own sake, but only for what he represents. She looks through Razumov and not at him; feels her brother in him but does not feel him; listens to his voice for a hint of her brother's words, but does not hear his own voice of anguish and despair. Sonia loves Raskolnikov in himself and for himself. She does not want to carry her little brick for the building of humanity's happiness any more than Raskolnikov. She is totally and overwhelmingly dedicated to him, and to the mystery of his individual being. It is that unqualified dedication, based on no condition, that brings Raskolnikov to an acceptance of himself and the world about him.

One will want to excuse what appears to be Natalia's lack of sympathy and even indifference because of the shock of the confession upon her. Sonia is shocked, too, but it is Raskolnikov's emotions that overwhelm her, not her own. Natalia's indifference to Razumov has not been commented upon, probably because she seems to be a creature of so much gentleness, tenderness, and good wishes for others. Critics have found fault with every character in this novel, but not with Natalia. She is not only the professors' darling but also the critics'. Suresh Raval speaks of her "purity of intention"⁵; Robert Haugh speaks of "truth shining in her eyes"⁶; Cooper, of her "sweetness";⁷ and Baines, of her nobility and warmth. Baines says: "Natalia Haldin is Conrad's most effective portrait of a woman. She is a noble, intensely idealistic girl, an identical type to Antonia Avellanos, but Conrad develops her character more fully and give her greater warmth."⁸ Even L.R. Lewitter, who has given us the most thorough analysis of the connections between Dostoevsky and Conrad, speaks of Natalia's "loyalty, dignity, courage, selflessness, and idealism."⁹ The best that critics can muster in criticizing her is to distance themselves from the naiveté of her hopes for humanity, although acknowledging the beauty of her faith in mankind.

It is no accident that Sonia is from the St. Petersburg underground, a prostitute, and a woman pressed to the wall by the economic conditions of her life.

⁵ Suresh Raval, *The Art of Failure: Conrad's Fiction* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986) 137.

⁶ Robert F. Haugh, *Joseph Conrad* (Norman: Norman Oklahoma Press, 1957) 134.

⁷ Christopher Cooper, *Conrad and the Human Dilemma* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970) 76. "Despite Conrad's approval of Tekla, she lacks the advantage of Natalia Haldin's youth and sweetness."

⁸ Baines 361.

⁹ Lewitter 659.

She has all the reasons to give herself to no one but herself. Natalia does not know the marginal and underground life of the people, but only her own abstract ideas of who they are and what they want. She is dedicated to the ideals of her brother and her own abstract conceptions of justice. The chorus of praise for this gentle woman has come, I believe, from the beauty of her wishes for humanity. She envisions a time of universal love and harmony, when the lion will lie down with the lamb. This is a familiar sentiment in Dostoevsky's novels, and one that he has a harsh view of. Such visionaries are for him, at best, sentimental dreamers who accomplish nothing; at worst, they are the destroyers of mankind. The Underground Man is never more foolish than when he dreams of man reconciled with man.

The Possessed is full of characters, almost all repulsive, who are working for the future harmony of mankind. In life, too, Dostoevsky wrote with acerbity of those liberals who saw a beautiful "peasantry" yet knew nothing about the individual peasant and did not want to know anything about him.¹⁰ According to Dostoevsky, the liberals accepted the people on condition that they accommodate themselves to their beautiful abstractions. In a series of articles in his *Diary*, Dostoevsky spoke of the difficulty of accepting the peasant as he was: the real peasant with his drunkenness, cruelty, dirt, and filthy habits. The dreamers of universal justice and beautiful mankind were in their dreams in love with abstractions, and as such indifferent to individual men. For Dostoevsky, such an abstract love of humanity is almost always an active hatred for humanity, because it is an avoidance—and annihilation—of the particular human being.

Natalia has the beneficent traits Conrad gives her, and he gives them to her without irony, but he also shows that such traits can exist side by side with a terrible indifference to individual life. It is this gentle Natalia with her beneficent dream who never seems to be aware of the fact that her brother murdered not only a despotic official, but also his accomplice and innocent bystanders. One of Conrad's intentions in the novel is to show how autocracy has worked to distort and deform Russian life, not only directly in the spying, lying, and craven obedience, but indirectly and more generally in the way it has distorted even the generous and loving impulses of Russians. Natalia is an example of such a distortion. She is loving and gentle, but she is cruel in the way she loves and what she loves.

It should not be surprising that Conrad would have strong reservations about Natalia's idealism. Conrad hated such "noble" causes as much as did Dostoevsky—witness his correspondence with Cunningham Graham. Conrad saw, as did Dostoevsky, and indeed Freud, that it was easy to love man in the abstract and hard to love him in the person. Conrad's work can be read almost as a kind of interrogation of the value, reality, and nature of "idealism." Much of the moral tension of *Lord Jim* rests in Conrad's ambivalence about whether or not Jim's idealism is beautiful or ugly, life-giving or life-taking. Marlow is taken with Jim, in part, because he would like to believe with Jim that we can deny our history, and remake ourselves according to our ideal notions of ourselves. *Nostromo* is a veritable codex of idealistic visions and ignoble realities.

¹⁰ F.M. Dostoevsky, *Dnevnik pisatelya za 1876 god*, July-August (Paris: YMCA Press, n.d.) 145-148.

It is surely not unfair to characterize Charles Gould in such terms, and if Jose Avellanos is more idealistic and dreamy than Charles, his ideas are shown to be ineffective. By the time we come to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad has lost all faith in the ameliorative function of idealism. Conrad's "idealism" to be "real" has to be underpinned by some transcendent justification of the idealism, and for him there is no transcendent justification.

Dostoevsky's argument against idealism was unrelenting and never ending, but he never gave up believing that there was the possibility of the truly good act. He continued to believe in "transcendence" even while showing how bestial and destructive man was in actuality. It is this tension between a depraved human being and the possibility of a redeemed nature that gives his works that special tone of depravity and holiness. Conrad lost his belief in transcendence fairly early, and he becomes increasingly ferocious in his attack on men's capacity to be disinterested. He continued to recognize that good acts—other than those that issue as by-products of self-interested acts—occurred, but he could not explain them except as some accidental debris of life. Men's intentions and acts were not valorized by anything, and if they were good, it was by way of habit, or external discipline, or accident.

This is why Razumov's "confession" is mysterious in its motivation and its consequences. We know why Raskolnikov confesses, although the motives are so many and so complex it is difficult to settle with certainty on a single motive. He is confessing because he craves punishment, because God has moved his soul, because he has discovered that he is not an extraordinary man, because he is oppressed by the society about him, because he hates his mother, and because he feels useless and humiliated by the very status of living—and most of all, because Sonia offers him an infinite and unconditional love. We do not know why Razumov is confessing: he does not believe in God, or the revolution, or the transformative power of love. And in his diary, he says with considerable emotional force that he has not been converted. Razumov confesses for no reason at all. Everyone seems to agree that he confesses because of his love for Natalia, and because he can no longer live with the lie of his betrayal of Haldin any longer in the presence of such love. But that explains the provocation to confession, and not the motive and purpose. He is "washed clean," but of what? Of a lie, of course. But what is left after he is washed clean? And what transformation does he experience as a consequence of the punishment he endures? Why in confessing does Razumov seek punishment from the revolutionaries whom he does not love—indeed, whom he has only disgust for? The consequences of his confession are not a transformed soul and a regenerated Razumov, and certainly not a loved Razumov. Tekla is a nurse, but she is not a redeemer. Razumov does not believe in anything before the confession, and he does not believe in anything after the confession. Indeed, one can argue that the confession simply maims him.

Suresh Raval alone catches something of the irony of Razumov's confession in the following quotation, but he cannot resist giving it an "uplifting" consequence: "It is Razumov's feeling of love for Natalia together with his awareness of the love of her sorrowing mother, which allows him the first movement toward liberation from captivity to the past. Love does not liberate him from guilt, so much as bring him to a full consciousness of his guilt, so that he can affirm his love only through renunciation. Thus for Razumov to love Natalia is to

disclose those secrets which would make impossible her reciprocation of his love. To love her genuinely is to be forever deprived of her love, although this loss is not without recompense."¹¹ It is the recompense that I question.

Cousineau has detailed how widely Razumov's confession has been taken as some moral triumph,¹² but Razumov does not scale any moral height with his confession. He confesses to break through the wall of loneliness in which circumstances have ensealed him, but he succeeds only in intensifying his solitariness, by way of Natalia's rejection of him and by way of the physical maiming by the revolutionaries. Conrad's universe has no place for regeneration, cleansing, and surely not redemption. Raskolnikov, too, confesses to make others feel him, as Marmeladov had done in the subplot that mirrors and predicts Raskolnikov's drama. He murders, if you will, to make his mother see him as he is and not as she imagines him ideally to be. If he does not succeed with his mother, he succeeds with Sonia. She breaks by her unconditional love the prison of self-justification, self-hatred, and metaphysical loneliness in which he had lived and which he attempts to smash out of. Sonia is able to offer him "another Raskolnikov" washed clean of all the past debris of murderous hatred of himself and others, because another Raskolnikov exists.

The beings of Dostoevsky's characters are not limited by their experiences and history, nor by the wishes and conceptions of others, whether nefarious or beautiful. The beings of Dostoevsky's characters are never finished. Conrad's are. This is why, increasingly in Conrad's works, his characters are definable, and why they carry the burden of their past with them, as with Heyst. "Redemption" for Dostoevsky means that at any instant man can become other than he has been. One's history is not one's person. Personhood is a mystery and cannot be defined without maiming it. But for this to be true, one has to live in infinity, and infinity is Dostoevsky's God. He spoke relatively little about God, and in the *Brothers Karamazov* even argued—by way of Ivan—that the issue of God's existence was an unimportant issue. What he spoke of a lot, one would even say insistently, in various forms was "eternity" or "infinity" and man's constant revolt against limitation. This is why the heart "lifts" even in the most despicable and despairing of circumstances in Dostoevsky's novels, but does not lift in Conrad's works.

Conrad seemed increasingly preoccupied with the issue of human loneliness. And the most absolute aloneness is to have no possibility of being other. The universe for Conrad was a vast indifference, as he asserted again and again, and to avoid being swallowed up in that indifference one had to fight the isolation and loneliness by discipline, work, and comradeship. One could build a wall against loneliness and indifference, but they would always be there, as a kind of ultimate metaphysical reality. Decoud commits suicide because he is swallowed up by the vast indifference of the universe, and Razumov, excluded from human solidarity by way of his birth, upbringing, and the society in which he lived, fights to break through to a connection with others, choosing finally to be maimed and crippled rather than ensealed in the tomb of his solitary self. But his "victory" is won by "deafening" himself to the world, and by withdrawing

¹¹ Suresh Raval, *The Art of Failure: Conrad's Fiction* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986) 137.

¹² Thomas J. Cousineau, "The Ambiguity of Razumov's Confession in *Under Western Eyes*," *Conradiana* 18 (1986): 27-40.

from its fury. At the end he has a nurse in Tekla; Raskolnikov has a redemptrix in Sonia. The difference is telling, not only about Razumov and Raskolnikov, and Natalia and Sonia, but also about Conrad and Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky believed in transcendence; Conrad did not. The vast indifference of the universe that Conrad refers to so often in his works and in his letters has after *Lord Jim* insinuated itself into the hearts of his heroes. This is why Sonia can love and Natalia cannot.