

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

"Life had stepped into the place of theory," wrote Dostoyevsky in the closing chapter of *Crime and Punishment* (Constance Garnett, tr., New York, The Modern Library, 1950). In a single phrase, one little sentence, Dostoyevsky divides up the history of the world. On the one hand, abstract, idealist, theoretical; on the other, existential, the living, the moment before the God, truth. (Dostoyevsky did for literature what Kierkegaard did for philosophy.)

Crime and Punishment is the story of Raskolnikov, a melancholy student hold up in a dark St. Petersburg garret, who murders an old lady and her daughter. It is a profound psychological study, a police thriller, a gut-haunting fiction. At the very last, imprisoned in Siberia, Raskolnikov is regenerated from the character of a petty Hitler to a repentant individual standing before truth—enlightened, changed. (Actually, Hitler was himself a petty individual, and, but for that fated circumstance of his moment in time, Hitler would have remained a petty individual laboring under his own dark, lonely, abstract theory, never knowing life.)

Raskolnikov's fever dream in that Siberian prison infirmary was the vision which generated the change in him, or, if Sonia was the actual beginning of that change, Raskolnikov's dream was the final stage—even as the murder was his first step while he lived still under the sway of the theory.

He dreamt that the whole world was condemned to a terrible new strange plague that had come to Europe from the depths of Asia. All were to be destroyed except a very few chosen. Some new sorts of microbes were attacking the bodies of men, but these microbes were endowed with intelligence and will. Men attacked by them became at once mad and furious. But never had men considered themselves so intellectual and so completely in possession of the truth as these sufferers, never had they considered their decisions, their scientific conclusions, their moral convictions so infallible. Whole villages, whole towns and peoples went mad from the infection. All were excited and did not understand one another. Each thought that he alone had the truth and was wretched looking at the others, beat himself on the breast, wept, and wrung his hands. They did not know how to judge and could not agree what to consider evil and what good; they did not know whom to blame, whom to justify. Men killed each other in a sort of senseless spite. They gathered together in armies against one another, but even on the march the armies would begin attacking each other, the ranks would be broken and the soldiers would fall on each other, stabbing and cutting, biting and devouring each other. The alarm bell was ringing all day long in the towns; men rushed together, but why they were summoned and who was summoning them no one knew. The most ordinary trades were abandoned, because every one proposed his own ideas, his own improvements, and they could not agree. The land too was abandoned. Men met in groups, agreed on something, swore to keep together, but at once began on something quite different from what they had proposed. They accused one another, fought and killed each other. There were conflagrations and famine. All men and all things were involved in destruction. The plague spread and moved further and further. Only a few men could be saved in the whole world. They were a pure chosen people, destined to found a new race and a new life, to renew and purify the earth, but no one had seen these men, no one had heard their words and their voices. [pp. 528-29]

Raskolnikov's theory of ruthless life and blind existence was that there are common men and uncommon men in the world. The few uncommon men may rise above the rest, to make the step (the Brave New World thing) unconstrained by the Law which was, of course, inapplicable to them, to dare, like Napoleon, to mercilessly conquer worlds, or to kill an old woman, to take the step, which was their right.

"I divined then, Sonia," he went on eagerly, "that power is only vouchsafed to the man who dares to stoop and pick it up. There is only one thing, one thing needful: one has only to dare! Then for the first time in my life an idea took shape in my mind which no one had ever thought of before me, no one! I saw clear as daylight how strange it is that not a single person living in this mad world has had the daring to go straight for it all and send it flying to the devil! I...I wanted to have the daring... and I killed her. I only wanted to have the daring, Sonia! That was the whole cause of it!"

Oh hush, hush," cried Sonia, clasping her hands. "You turned away from God and God has smitten you, has given you over to the devil!"

"...I wanted to murder without casuistry, to murder for my own sake, for myself alone! ...I didn't do the murder to gain wealth and power and to become a benefactor of mankind. Nonsense! I simply did it; I did the murder for myself, for myself alone, and whether I became a benefactor to others, or spent my life like a spider catching men in my web and sucking the life out of men, I couldn't have cared at that moment.... And it was not the money I wanted, Sonia, when I did it. It was not so much the money I wanted, but something else.... I know it all now.... Understand me! Perhaps I should never have committed a murder again. I wanted to find out something else; it was something else led me on. I wanted to find out then and quickly whether I was a louse like everybody else or a man. Whether I can step over barriers or not, whether I dare stoop to pick up or not, whether I am a trembling creature or whether I have the right..." [pp. 405-406]

Murder the woman or cheat at a game of cards, for Raskolnikov it was all the same. Thus the conflict between life and theory, a conflict, potentially in each one of us. When moral truth exists in a society, in its governing structures, its law, its art, its educational systems, then the Hitlers, Napoleons, Raskolnikovs are diminished, they are kept in check. When moral truth, when truth in general, is denied (whether knowledge of it, or the metaphysical/ontological status of it), when truth is rejected in a society then there come, in growing numbers, generation upon generation of little Raskolnikovs and Napoleons and Hitlers—and the whole world goes mad.

Then the God must move in.

The God can kill whole worlds. How are God and Hitler the same? They are both genocides (the Flood, the Holocaust). How are God and Hitler different? Hitler's not God. Nor was Raskolnikov God. To understand this fact, Raskolnikov had to replace abstract theory with real life; he had to exchange bear existence with truth.

Without regeneration in the soul of the individual who has existed without truth, there can no meaning, only violence, cruelty, and empty death. Without reformation in a society lacking truth, there can be no future, only violence, decadence, cruelty, decay (corporate death). Now, we sapients have the law—for the individual it is the Law written on the heart, the conscience, while for the state it is the Law written in creation (nature). One day the last remnant souls will be regenerated, the creation will be renewed, and the Law will be transformed, changed by divine grace into truth and beauty and wholeness.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky anticipated the modern world of Hitler and Stalin, secular existentialism, Nine Inch Nails and post-nuke punk, William 'Naked Lunch' Burroughs and Alan Ginsberg, S&M and anarchy and William Gibson and Prometheus and Frankenstein and Natural Born Killers.¹ Actually, in the 1860's, in Dostoyevsky's Russia and the Western World generally, such romanticized, libertarian, epistemically cynical ideology was already taking hold: Napoleon, the Enlightenment poets Lord Byron and Percy Bissey Shelly, the political philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the secular evolutionists and social philosophers Jean Jacques Rousseau, Ludwig Feuerbach, Thomas Huxley. Our modern life, our happy self-immolation, was anticipated—and warned about—in the prophetic art and writings of William Blake, Sören Kierkegaard, Victor Hugo, Fydor Dostoyevsky. But no one could tell a story like Dostoyevsky. No one could tear your heart out and serve it up on a sterling silver platter like Dostoyevsky.

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¹ E.g., William S Burroughs' *Cities of the Red Night* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956) and *Plutonian Ode* and other poems, 1977-80 (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982). See also, *Dharma Lion, A Biography of Allen Ginsberg*, by Michael Schumacher (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992). For a bad little taste of cyber-punk, see the philosophical children of Burroughs and Ginsberg: William Gibson (*Neuromancer* or *Burning Chrome*), Lisa Mason's *Arachne*, the works of Bruce Sterling.