Dostoyevsky's Unabomber

A new kind of crime is on the American mind—the philosophical murderer who acts out of what he sees as principle. With Raskolnikov, the Russian novelist anticipated it.

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Soon after dawn on a very cold winter morning in 1849, fifteen Russian criminals were led, in groups of three, before a firing squad. They were all insurgents against the despotism of Czar Nicholas I. They were mostly educated men, idealists in pursuit of a just society. They felt no remorse. Several were professed atheists; all were radicals. A priest carrying a cross and a Bible accompanied them. The first three were handed white gowns and shapeless caps and ordered to put them on; then they were tied to posts. The rest waited their turn. Each man in his own way prepared to die. The sun was beginning to brighten; the firing squad took aim. At just that moment, there was a signal—a roll of drums—and the rifles were lowered. A galloping horseman announced a reprieve. Although the condemned were unaware of it, the execution was staged, and the reprieve was designed to demonstrate the merciful heart of the Czar. Instead of being shot, the criminals were to be transported in shackles to a Siberian penal colony. One of the men went permanently mad. Another, fifteen years afterward, wrote "Crime and Punishment," an impassioned assault on exactly the kind of radical faith that had brought its author to face the Czar's riflemen that day. It was a work almost in the nature of double jeopardy: as if Fyodor Dostoyevsky in middle age—defender of the czar, enemy of revolutionary socialism—were convicting and punishing his younger self yet again for the theories that the mature novelist had come to abhor.

A new type of crime is on the American mind—foreign, remote, metaphysical, even literary, and radically different from what we are used to. Street crime, drunken crime, drug-inspired crime, crimes of passion and greed and revenge, crimes against children, gangster crime, white-collar crime, break-ins, car thefts, holdups—these are familiar, and to a degree nearly expected. They shake us up without disorienting us. They belong to our civilization; they are the darker signals of home. "Our" crime has usually been local—the stalker, the burglar, the mugger lurking in a doorway. Even Jeffrey Dahmer, the cannibal sadist who kept boys' body parts in his kitchen refrigerator, is not so very anomalous in the context of what can happen in ordinary neighborhoods: a little girl imprisoned in an underground cage; children tormented, starved, beaten to death; newborns bludgeoned; battered women, slain wives, mutilated husbands. Domesticity gone awry.

All this is recognizable and homespun. What feels alien to America is the philosophical criminal of exceptional intelligence and humanitarian purpose, who is driven to commit murder out of an uncompromising idealism. Such a type has always seemed a literary construct of a particular European political coloration ("The Secret Agent," "The Princess Casamassima"), or else has hinted at ideologies so far removed from tame Republicans and Democrats as to be literally outlandish. Then came the mysterious depredations of the Unabomber. Until the melodramatic publication of his manifesto, the Unabomber remained a riddle—unpredictable, unfathomable, sans name or habitation. In garrulous print, his credo revealed him to be a visionary. His dream was of a green and pleasant land liberated from the curse of technological proliferation. The technical élites were his targets—computer wizards like Professor David Gelernter, of Yale, a thinker in pursuit of artificial intelligence. Maimed by a package bomb,

Gelernter escaped death; others did not. In the storm of interpretation that followed the Unabomber's public declaration of principles, he was often mistaken for a kind of contemporary Luddite. This was a serious misnomer.

The nineteenth-century Luddites were hand weavers who rioted against the introduction of mechanical looms into England's textile industry; they smashed the machines to protect their livelihoods. They were not out to kill, nor did they promulgate romantic theories about the wholesome superiority of hand looms. They were selfish, ruthlessly pragmatic, and societally unreasonable. The Unabomber, by contrast, is, above all, a calculating social reasoner and messianic utopian. He hopes to restore to us cities and landscapes clear of digital complexities; he means to clean the American slate of its accumulated technostructural smudges. And if Theodore Kaczynski turns out to be guilty as charged, then we can also acknowledge him to be selfless and pure, loyal and empathic, the sort of man who befriends, without condescension, an uneducated and impoverished Mexican laborer. It is easy to think of the Unabomber, living out his principles in his pollution-free mountain cabin, as a Thoreauvian philosopher of advanced environmentalism. The philosopher is one with the murderer. The Napoleonic world-improver is one with the humble hermit of the wilderness.

In the Unabomber, America has at last brought forth its own Raskolnikov—the appealing, appalling, and disturbingly visionary murderer of "Crime and Punishment," Dostoyevsky's masterwork of 1866. But the Unabomber is not the only ideological criminal (though he may be the most intellectual) to have burst out of remoteness and fantasy onto unsuspecting native grounds. He is joined by the Oklahoma City bombers, the World Trade Center bombers, the abortion-clinic bombers. The Weathermen of the sixties, who bombed banks and shot police in order to release "Amerika" from the tyranny of a democratic polity, are close ideological cousins of the Russian nihilists who agitated against Alexander II, the liberalizing czar of a century before. That celebrated nineteen-sixties mantra—to make an omelette you need to break eggs—had its origin not in an affinity for violence but in the mouthwatering lure of the humanitarian omelette. Only the gastronomic image was novel. In the Russian sixties, a hundred years earlier—in 1861, the very year Alexander II freed the serfs—a radical young critic named Dimitry Pisarev called for striking "right and left" and announced, "What resists the blow is worth keeping; what flies to pieces is rubbish." Here was the altruistic bomber's dogma, proclaimed in the pages of an intellectual journal—and long before *The New York Review of Books* published on its front cover a diagram of how to construct a Molotov cocktail.

Like the Unabomber, Raskolnikov is a theorist who publishes a notorious essay expounding his ideas about men and society. Both are obscure loners. Both are alienated from a concerned and affectionate family. Both are tender toward outcasts and the needy. Both are élitists. Both are idealists. Both are murderers. Contemporary America, it seems, has finally caught up with czarist Russia's most argumentative novelist.

And in "Crime and Punishment" Dostoyevsky was feverishly pursuing an argument. It was an argument against the radicals who were dominant among Russian intellectu-

als in the eighteen-sixties, many of them espousing nihilist views. In the universities, especially, revolutionary commotion was on the rise. Yet there was an incongruity in the timing of all these calls for violent subversion. Petersburg was no longer the seat of the czar of the repressive eighteen-forties, the tyrannical Nicholas I, against whose cruelties convulsive outrage might be justly presumed. Paradoxically, under that grim reign even the most fiery radicals were at heart gradualists who modelled their hopes on Western reformist ideas. By the rebellious sixties, the throne was held by Nicholas's moderate son and successor, whose numerous democratic initiatives looked to be nudging Russia toward something that might eventually resemble a constitutional monarchy. The younger revolutionary theorists would have none of it. It was incomplete; it was too slow. Liberalism, they roared, was the enemy of revolution, and would impede a more definitive razing of evil.

The first installments of "Crime and Punishment" had just begun to appear in the Slavophile *Russian Messenger*, an anti-radical, establishment-glorifying periodical, when a student revolutionary made an attempt on the life of the Czar as he was leaving the gardens of the Winter Palace to enter his carriage. The government responded with a Draconian crackdown on the radicals. "You know," Dostoyevsky wrote cuttingly to his publisher in the aftermath of these events, "they are completely convinced that on a *tabula rasa* they will immediately construct a paradise." But he went on to sympathize with "our poor little defenseless boys and girls" and "their enthusiasm for the good and their purity of heart." So many "have become nihilists so purely, so unselfishly, in the name of honor, truth, and genuine usefulness!" he said. "They are helpless against these stupidities, and take them for perfection." And though in the same letter he spoke of "the powerful, extraordinary, sacred union of the Czar with the people," he objected to the increase in repression. "But how can nihilism be fought without freedom of speech?" he asked.

This mixture of contempt for the radicals and solicitude for their misguided, perplexed, and perplexing humanity led to the fashioning of Raskolnikov. Pisarev striking right and left was one ingredient. Another was the appeal of self-sacrificial idealism. And a third was the literary mode through which Dostoyevsky combined and refined the tangled elements of passion, brutishness, monomaniacal principle, mental chaos, candor, mockery, fury, compassion, generosity—and two brutal axe murders. All these contradictory elements roil through Raskolnikov with a nearly Joycean effect, but if stream of consciousness flows mutely and uninterruptedly, assimilating the outer world into the inner, Raskolnikov's mind—and Dostoyevsky's method—is zigzag and bumpy, given to rebellious and unaccountable alterations of purpose. Raskolnikov is without restraint—not only as an angry character in a novel but as a reflection of Dostoyevsky himself, who was out to expose the entire spectrum of radical thought engulfing the writers and thinkers of Petersburg.

This may be why Raskolnikov is made to rush dizzyingly from impulse to impulse, from kindliness to withdrawal to lashing out, and from one underlying motive to another—a disorderliness at war with his half-buried and equivocal conscience. Only

at the start is he seen, briefly, to be deliberate and in control. Detached, reasoning it out, Raskolnikov robs and murders a pawnbroker whom he has come to loathe—an unpleasant and predatory old woman alone and helpless in her flat. He hammers her repeatedly with the heavy handle of an axe:

Her thin hair, pale and streaked with gray, was thickly greased as usual, plaited into a ratty braid and tucked under a piece of horn comb that stuck up at the back of her head... He struck her again and yet again with all his strength, both times with the butt-end, both times on the crown of the head. Blood poured out as from an overturned glass.

Unexpectedly, the old woman's simpleminded sister just then enters the flat. She is disposed of even more horribly: "The blow landed directly on the skull, with the sharp edge, and immediately split the whole upper part of the forehead, almost to the crown."

The second slaying is an unforeseen by-product of the first. The first is the rational consequence of forethought. What is the nature—the thesis—of this forethought? Shortly before the murder, Raskolnikov overhears a student in a tavern speculating about the pawnbroker: she is "rich as a Jew," and has willed all her money to the Church. "A hundred, a thousand good deeds and undertakings ... could be arranged and set going by the money that old woman has doomed to the monastery!" exclaims the student.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of lives put right; dozens of families saved from destitution, from decay, from ruin, from depravity, from the venereal hospitals—all on her money. Kill her and take her money, so that afterwards with its help you can devote yourself to the service of all mankind and the common cause... One death for hundreds of lives—it's simple arithmetic! And what does the life of this stupid, consumptive, and wicked old crone mean in the general balance? No more than the life of a louse, a cockroach.

Startled by this polemic, Raskolnikov admits to himself that "*exactly the same thoughts* had just been conceived in his own head"—though not as harmless theoretical bombast.

The theory in Raskolnikov's head—Benthamite utilitarianism, the greatest good for the greatest number, with its calibrated notions of what is useful and what is expendable—had been current for at least a decade among the Westernizing majority of the Russian intelligentsia, especially the literati of the capital. In supplying Bentham with an axe, Dostoyevsky thought to carry out the intoxications of the utilitarian doctrine as far as its principles would go: brutality and bloodletting would reveal the poisonous fruit of a political philosophy based on reason alone.

A fiercely sardonic repudiation of that philosophy—some of it in the vocabulary of contemporary American controversy—is entrusted to Raskolnikov's affectionate and loyal comrade, Razumikhin:

It started with the views of the socialists... Crime is a protest against the abnormality of the social set-up—that alone and nothing more, no other causes are admitted—

but nothing! ... With them one is always a "victim of the environment"—and nothing else! ... If society itself is normally set up, all crimes will at once disappear, because there will be no reason for protesting...Nature isn't taken into account, nature is driven out, nature is not supposed to be! ... On the contrary, a social system, coming out of some mathematical head, will at once organize the whole of mankind and instantly make it righteous and sinless... And it turns out in the end that they've reduced everything to mere brickwork and the layout of corridors and rooms in a phalanstery!

The phalanstery, a coöperative commune, was the brainchild of Charles Fourier, who, along with Saint-Simon (and well before Marx), was an enduring influence on the Francophile Russian radical intelligentsia. But Razumikhin's outcry against the utopian socialists who idealize the life of the commune and fantasize universal harmony is no more than a satiric rap on the knuckles. Dostoyevsky is after a bloodier and more threatening vision—nihilism in its hideously perfected form. This is the ideological cloak he next throws over Raskolnikov: it is Raskolnikov's manifesto as it appears in his article. The "extraordinary man," Raskolnikov declaims, has the right to "step over certain obstacles" in order to fulfill a mission that is "salutary for the whole of mankind":

In my opinion, if, as the result of certain combinations, Kepler's or Newton's discoveries could become known to people in no other way than by sacrificing the lives of one, or ten, or a hundred or more people who were hindering the discovery, or standing as an obstacle in its path, then Newton would have the right, and it would even be his duty ... *to remove* those ten or a hundred people, in order to make his discoveries known to all mankind.

Extraordinary men—Lycurgus, Solon, Napoleon—call for "the destruction of the present in the name of the better," and will lead the world toward a new Jerusalem.

To which Razumikhin, recoiling, responds, "you do finally permit bloodshed *in all conscience*." And, just here, in the turbulence of Razumikhin's revelation—and prefiguring Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn, and Sharansky—Dostoyevsky makes his case for the dismantling of the Soviet state half a century before the revolutionary convulsion that brought it into being.

Yet the mammoth irony of Dostoyevsky's life remains: the writer who excoriated the radical theorists, who despised the nihilist revolutionaries, who wrote novel after novel to defy them, once belonged to their company. It is easy to dislike him, and not because the spectacle of a self-accusing apostate shocks. He ended as a Slavophile religious believer; but in his twenties he was what he bitterly came to scorn—a Westernizing Russian liberal. Nevertheless, a certain nasty consistency ruled. At all times, he was bigoted and xenophobic: he had an irrational hatred of Germans and Poles, and his novels are speckled with anti-Semitism. He attacked Roman Catholicism as the temporal legacy of a pagan empire, while extolling Russian Orthodoxy. He was an obsessive and deluded gambler, scheming to strike it rich at the snap of a finger: he ran madly to the roulette tables of Europe, and repeatedly reduced himself and his pregnant young second wife to actual privation. In danger of debtors' prison in Russia,

he was compelled for years to wander, homeless and wretched, through Germany and Switzerland. In Wiesbaden, he borrowed fifty talers from Turgenev and took ten years to repay him. He held the rigidly exclusionary blood-and-soil tenet that the future of civilization lay with Russia alone. He was seriously superstitious and had a silly trust in omens and dreams. He was irritable, sometimes volcanically so, and inordinately vain. And, if all these self-inflicted debilities of character were not ugly enough, he suffered from a catastrophic innate debility: he was subject, without warning, to horrifying epileptic seizures in a period when no medical controls existed.

Though not quite without warning. Dostoyevsky's fits were heralded by a curious surge of ecstasy—an "aura" indistinguishable from religious exaltation. He underwent his first seizure, he reported, on an Easter morning: "Heaven had come down to earth and swallowed me. I really grasped God and was penetrated by Him." But there may have been unidentified earlier attacks, different in kind. At the age of ten, he experienced an auditory hallucination: he thought he heard a voice cry "A wolf is on the loose!" and was comforted by a kindly serf who belonged to his father.

Later fits repeatedly triggered the divine penumbra. He was well prepared for it. From childhood, he had been saturated in a narrow household piety not unlike the unquestioning devoutness of the illiterate Russian peasant. Prayers were recited before icons; a clergyman came to give lessons. The Gospels were read, and so were the Acta Martyrum—the lives of the saints—with their peculiarly Russian emphasis on passive suffering. No Sunday or religious holiday went unobserved, on the day itself and at vespers the evening before. Dostoyevsky's father, a former Army doctor on the staff of a hospital for the poor outside Moscow, frequently led his family on excursions to the great onion-domed Kremlin cathedrals, where religion and nationalism were inseparable. Every spring, Dostoyevsky's mother took the children on a pilgrimage to the Monastery of St. Sergey, sixty miles from Moscow, where they knelt among masses of the faithful before an imposing silver reliquary said to contain the saint's miraculous remains. None of this was typical of the Russian gentry of the time. Neither Tolstoy nor Turgenev had such an upbringing. Joseph Frank, Dostoyevsky's superb and exhaustive biographer, explains, "Most upper-class Russians would have shared the attitude exemplified in Herzen's anecdote about his host at a dinner party who, when asked whether he was serving Lenten dishes out of personal conviction, replied that it was 'simply and solely for the sake of the servants.' "

There is speculation that Dostoyevsky's father may have had a mild form of epilepsy himself: he was gloomy, moody, and unpredictably explosive, a martinet who drank too much and imposed his will on everyone around him. In his youth, he completed his studies at a seminary for non-monastic clergy, a low caste, but went on to pursue medicine, and eventually elevated himself to the status of the minor nobility. His salary was insufficient, however, and the family was not well off, despite the doctor's purchase of a small and scrubby estate, along with its "baptized property"—the serfs attached to the land. When Dostoyevsky was sixteen, his father dispatched him and his older brother, Mikhail, both of whom had literary ambitions, to the Academy of Military

Engineers, in Petersburg, in preparation for government careers. But the doctor's plan for his sons came to nothing. Less than two years later, in a season of drought, bad crops, and peasant resentment, Dostoyevsky was informed that his father had been found dead on the estate, presumably strangled by his serfs. Killings of this kind were not uncommon. In a famous letter to Gogol (the very letter that ultimately sent Dostoyevsky before the firing squad), the radical critic Vissarion Belinsky wrote that the Czar was "well aware of what the landowners do with their peasants and how many throats of the former are cut every year by the latter."

Freed from engineering (and from a despotic father), Dostoyevsky went flying into the heart of Petersburg's literary life. It was the hugely influential Belinsky who catapulted him there. Dostoyevsky's first novel, "Poor Folk"—inspired by the social realism of Balzac, Victor Hugo, and George Sand, and published in 1846—was just the sort of fiction Belinsky was eager to promote. "Think of it," he cried, "it's the first attempt at a social novel we've had." He instantly proclaimed the new writer a genius, and admitted him, at twenty-four, into Petersburg's most coveted intellectual circle, Belinsky's own *pléiade*. The talk was socialist and fervent, touching on truth and justice, science and atheism, and, most heatedly, on the freeing of the serfs.

Success went to Dostoyevsky's head. "Everywhere an unbelievable esteem, a passionate curiosity about me," he bragged to his brother. "Everyone considers me some sort of prodigy... I am now almost drunk with my own glory." The *pléiade* responded to this posturing first with annoyance and then with rough ribbing. Belinsky kept out of it, but Turgenev took off after the young prodigy with a scathing parody. Dostoyevsky walked out, humiliated and enraged, and never returned. "They are all scoundrels and eaten up with envy," he fumed. He soon gravitated to another socialist discussion group, which met on Friday nights at the home of Mikhail Petrashevsky, a wellborn twenty-six-year-old. Petrashevsky had accumulated a huge library of political works forbidden by the censors, and was even less tolerant of Christianity than the *pléiade* was: for him Jesus was "the well-known demagogue." To improve the miserable living conditions of the peasants on his land, Petrashevsky had a commodious phalanstery built for them, with every amenity provided. They all moved in, and the next day burned down the master's paternalistic utopia. Undaunted, Petrashevsky continued to propagandize for his ideas: the end of serfdom and censorship, and the reform of the courts. His commitment was to gradualism, but certain more impatient members of the Petrashevsky circle quietly formed a secret society dedicated to an immediate and deeply perilous activism.

It was with these that Dostoyevsky aligned himself: he joined a scheme to print and disseminate the explosive manifesto, in the form of the letter to Gogol, which Belinsky had composed a year or so earlier, protesting the enslavement of the peasants. Russia, Belinsky wrote, "presents the dire spectacle of a country where men traffic in men, without even having the excuse so insidiously exploited by the American plantation owners who claim that the Negro is not a man." Dostoyevsky gave an impressive reading of this document at one of Petrashevsky's Friday nights. His audience erupted

into yells of "That's it! That's it!" A government spy took notes, and shortly after four in the morning Dostoyevsky's bedroom was invaded by the Czar's secret police. He was arrested as a revolutionary conspirator; he was twenty-seven years old. Nicholas I took a malicious interest in the punishment for this crime against the state—the Czar was the state—and personally ordered the mock execution, the last-minute reprieve, the transport to Siberia. Dostoyevsky's sentence was eight years; he served four at forced labor in a prison camp at Omsk and the rest in an army regiment. In Siberia, after his release from the camp, he was married for the first time—a tumultuous widow with worsening tuberculosis. His own affliction worsened: seizure followed on seizure. For the remainder of his life, he would not be free of the fear that he would die while he was in their grip.

And the moment of cataclysmic terror before the firing squad never left him. He was not so much altered as strangely—almost mystically—restored: restored to what he had felt as a child, kneeling with his mother at the reliquary of St. Sergey. He spoke circumspectly of "the regeneration of my convictions." The only constant was his hatred of the institution of serfdom—but to hate serfdom was not to love peasants, and when he began to live among peasant convicts (political prisoners were not separated from the others) he found them degraded and savage, with a malignant hostility toward the gentry thrown into their midst. The agonies of hard labor, the filth, the chains, the enmity, the illicit drunkenness, his own nervous disorders—all these assailed him, and he suffered in captivity from a despondency almost beyond endurance.

Then, in a metamorphosis akin to the Ancient Mariner's sudden love for the repulsive creatures of the sea, he was struck by what can only be called a conversion experience. In the twisted and branded faces of the peasant convicts—men much like those who may have murdered his father—he saw a divine illumination: he saw the true Russia; he saw beauty; he saw the kindhearted serf who had consoled him when the imaginary wolf pursued. Their instinctive piety was his. Their soil-rootedness became a precept. He struggled to distinguish between one criminal motive and another: from the viewpoint of a serf, was a crime against a hardened master really a crime? Under the tatters of barbarism, he perceived the image of God.

The collective routine of the stockade drove him further and further from the socialist dream of communal living. "To be alone is a normal need," he railed. "Otherwise, *in this enforced communism one turns into a hater of mankind.*" And at the same time he began to discover in the despised and brutalized lives of the peasant convicts a shadow of the redemptive suffering that is the Christian paradigm. More and more, he inclined toward the traditional Orthodoxy of his upbringing. He fought doubt with passionate unreason: "if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and that *in reality* the truth were outside of Christ then I should prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth." This set him against his old associates, both radicals and liberals. Years later, when Belinsky was dead, Dostoyevsky was still thundering against "shitheads like the dung-beetle Belinsky," whom he would not forgive because "that man reviled Christ to me in the foulest language."

The culmination of these renunciations was a white-hot abomination of radicalism in all its forms—from the Western-influenced gentry-theorists of the eighteen-forties to the renegades who burst into nihilism in the sixties, when student revolutionaries radicalized the universities. With his brother, Mikhail, Dostoyevsky founded *Vremya* (*Time*), a literary-political periodical intended to combat the socialist radicals. It was in the arena of the monthlies that, under literary cover to distract the censors, the ideological fires smoldered. Though *Vremya* was a success, a misunderstanding led the censorship to close it down. Soon afterward, Dostoyevsky's wife died of consumption; then Mikhail collapsed and died. Dostoyevsky fell into serious debt, went bankrupt, and, in 1867, fled to the hated West to escape his creditors.

With him went Anna, the worshipful young stenographer to whom he had begun to dictate his work, and whom he soon married. Four enforced years abroad took on the half-mad, hallucinatory frenzy of scenes in his own novels: he gambled and lost, gambled and wrote, pawned his wife's rings and gambled and lost and wrote. His work was appearing regularly in the reactionary *Russian Messenger*. Dostoyevsky had now gone over to the other side altogether. "All those trashy little liberals and progressives," he sneered, "find their greatest pleasure and satisfaction in criticizing Russia." It was on this issue that Dostoyevsky broke with Turgenev, with Belinsky, with Petrashevsky—not only because of their liberalism but because he believed that they did not love Russia enough. To love Russia was to love the czar and the debased peasant (who, debased by the czar, also loved the czar); it was to see human suffering as holy and the peasant as holy; it was to exalt the *obshchina*, the Russian village commune, while condemning the French phalanstery; it was to love the Russian church largely through the vilification of all other churches; it was to press for the love of God with a hateful ferocity.

Joseph Frank, Dostoyevsky's biographer, seems certain that Dostoyevsky's conversion "should not be seen as that of a strayed ex-believer returning to Christ," since he had "always remained in some sense a Christian." But the suggestion of a continuum of sensibility may be even stronger than that. After a plunge into the period's dominant cultural milieu, the son of an authoritarian father—authoritarian personally, religiously, nationally—returns to the father. It is common enough that an intellectual progression will lead to a recovery of the voices around the cradle.

In January of 1881, Dostoyevsky, now a literary eminence more celebrated than Turgenev, died of a hemorrhage of the throat. A month later, Czar Alexander II—Russia's earnest liberalizer and liberator—was assassinated. From the last half of the nineteenth century until the Bolshevik defeat of the liberal Kerensky government, in the second decade of the twentieth, revolution continued to overcome reform. In this guise—injury for the sake of an ideal—Raskolnikov lives on. For seventy years, he was victorious in Russia. And even now, after the death of the Soviet Union, auguring no one knows what, his retributive figure roves the earth. If he is currently mute in Russia, he is loud in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East; he has migrated to America.

He survives in the violence of humanitarian visionaries who would seize their utopias via axe, Molotov cocktail, or innocent-looking packages sent through the mail.

Raskolnikov as monster of ruination, reason's avenging angel: here speaks the ideologue Dostoyevsky, scourge of the radicals. But this single clangorous note will not hold. Dostoyevsky the novelist tends toward orchestration and multiplicity. Might there be other reasons for the murder of the old woman? Raskolnikov has already been supplied with messianic utilitarianism, a Western import, carried to its logical and lethal end. On second thought (Dostoyevsky's second thought), the killing may have a different and simpler source—family solidarity. A university dropout, unable to meet his tuition payments, Raskolnikov, alienated and desperate, has been guiltily taking money from his adoring mother and sister in the provinces. At home, there is crisis: Dunya, his sister, has been expelled from her position as governess in the Svidrigailov household, where the debauched husband and father had been making lecherous advances. To escape disgrace and to ease her family's poverty, but chiefly to secure a backer for her brother's career, Dunya becomes engaged to a rich and contemptible Petersburg bureaucrat. In this version of Raskolnikov's intent, it is to save his sister from a self-sacrificial marriage that he robs the old woman and pounds her to death.

Dostoyevsky will hurry the stealing-for-sustenance thesis out of sight quickly enough. By the close of the novel, it seems almost forgotten and surely marginal—not only because Raskolnikov hides the stolen money and valuables and never touches them again but because such an obvious material reason is less shattering than what Dostoyevsky will soon disclose. He will goad Raskolnikov to a tempestuousness even beyond nihilism. Beyond nihilism lies pure violence—violence for its own sake, without the vindication of a superior future. The business of revolution is only to demolish, the anarchist theorist and agitator Mikhail Bakunin once declared. But in Raskolnikov's newest stand not even this extremist position is enough:

Then I realized ... that power is given only to the one who dares to reach down and take it. Here there is one thing, one thing only: one has only to dare! ... I wanted to *dare*, and I killed ... that's the whole reason! ... I wanted to kill without casuistry ... to kill for myself, for myself alone! I didn't want to lie about it even to myself! It was not to help my mother that I killed—nonsense! I did not kill so that, having obtained means and power, I could become a benefactor of mankind. Nonsense! ... And it was not money above all that I wanted when I killed ... I wanted to find out then, and find out quickly, whether I was a louse like all the rest, or a man? ... Would I dare to reach down and take, or not?

A rapid shuttling of motives, one overtaking another: family reasons, societal reasons, altruism, utilitarianism, socialism, nihilism, raw Napoleonic domination. Generations of readers have been mystified by this plethora of incitements and explanations. Why so many? One critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, analyzing Dostoyevsky's frequent ellipses and the back-and-forth interior dialogue of characters disputing with themselves—each encompassing multiple points of view—concludes that Dostoyevsky was the inventor of a new "multivoice" genre, which Bakhtin calls the "polyphonic novel." Some simply

assume that Dostoyevsky changed his mind as he went along, and since he was unable to revise what was already in print—the novel appeared in installments written against deadlines—he was compelled to stitch up the loose ends afterward as best he could. (If true, this would leave most serious Dostoyevsky scholars of the past century with egg on their faces.)

A British academic, A. D. Nuttall, offers a psychiatric solution: Raskolnikov is in a state of self-hypnotic schizophrenia. Walter Kaufmann invokes existentialism, drawing Dostoyevsky into Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's web. Freud speculates that Dostoyevsky expresses "sympathy by identification" with criminals as a result of an Oedipal revolt against his father. Harold Bloom, sailing over Raskolnikov's inconsistencies, sees in him an apocalyptic figure, "a powerful representation of the will demonized by its own strength." "The best of all murder stories," Bloom says, " 'Crime and Punishment' seems to me beyond praise and beyond affection." For Vladimir Nabokov, on the other hand, the novel is beyond contempt: he knew even in his teens that it was "long-winded, terribly sentimental, and badly written." As for Dostoyevsky's religion, it is a "special lurid brand of the Christian faith." "I am very eager to debunk Dostoyevsky," Nabokov assures us.

Is this a case of the blind men and the elephant, or of the novel as Rorschach test? There is something indeterminate in all these tumbling alternatives—in Raskolnikov's changing theories, in the critics' clashing responses. Still, all of them taken together make plain what it is that Dostoyevsky's novel turns out not to be. It is not, after all, a single-minded polemical tract fulminating against every nineteenth-century radical movement in sight—though parts of it may pass for that. It is not a detective thriller, despite its introduction of Porfiry, a crafty, nimble-tongued, penetratingly intuitive police investigator. It is not a social-protest novel, though it retains clear vestiges of an abandoned earlier work on alcoholism and poverty in the forlorn Marmeladovs, whom Raskolnikov befriends: drunken husband, unbalanced, tubercular wife, daughter driven to prostitution.

And it is not even much of what it has often been praised for being—a "psychological" novel—notwithstanding a startling stab, now and then, into the marrow of a mind. George Eliot is what we mean, in literature, by psychological; among the moderns Proust, Joyce, and James. Dostoyevsky is not psychological in the sense of understanding and portraying familiar human nature. "Crime and Punishment" is in exile from human nature—like the deeply eccentric "Notes from Underground," which precedes it. The underground man, Raskolnikov's indispensable precursor, revels in the corrupt will to seek out extreme and horrible acts, which gladden him with their "shameful accursed sweetness." But Raskolnikov will in time feel suffocated by the mental anguish that dogs his crime. Suspicions close in on him; a room in a police station seems no bigger than a cupboard. And soon suffering criminality will put on the radiant robes of transcendence. Led by the saintly Sonya Marmeladova, who has turned harlot to support her destitute relations, Raskolnikov looks at last to God. The nihilist, the insolent Napoleon, is all at once redeemed—implausibly, abruptly—by a

single recitation from the Gospels, and goes off, docile and remorseful, to serve out his sentence in Siberia.

Nabokov gleefully mocks Dostoyevsky's sentimental conventions: "I do not like this trick his characters have of 'sinning their way to Jesus.' " But Dostoyevsky sees no treacle, and surely no fault, in the idea of redemption through suffering. It came to be the bulwark of his credo. He believed in spiritual salvation. He had been intimate with thieves and cutthroats; he had lived among criminals; he himself had been punished as a criminal. Even as he was writing "Crime and Punishment," he was under the continuing surveillance of the secret police.

The secret police, however, are not this novel's secret. Neither are the ukases and explosives of that czarist twilight. Murder and degradation; perversity, distortion, paralysis, abnormal excitation, lightning conversion; dive after dive into fits of madness (Raskolnikov, his mother, Svidrigailov, Katerina Marmeladova); a great imperial city wintry in tone, huddled, frozen in place, closeted, all in the heart of summertime—these are not the usual characteristics of a work dedicated to political repudiations. "Crime and Punishment" is something else—something beyond what Dostoyevsky may have plotted and what the scholars habitually attend to. Its strangeness is that of a galloping centaur pulling a droshky crowded with groaning souls; or else it is a phantasmagoria, confined, churning, stuttering. Petersburg itself has the enclosed yet chaotic quality of a perpetual dusk, a town of riverbank and sky, taverns, tiny apartments cut up into rented cabins and cells, mazy alleys, narrow stairways, drunks, beggars, peddlers, bedraggled students, street musicians, whores—all darkened and smudged, as if the whole of the city were buried in a cellar, or in hell.

This irresistible deformation of commonly predictable experience is what fires Dostoyevsky's genius. Nabokov dislikes that genius (I dislike it, too) because its language is a wilderness and there are woeful pockets of obscurantist venom at its center. But in the end "Crime and Punishment" is anything but a manifesto. Citizenly rebuttal is far from its delirious art. In the fever of his imagining, it is not the radicals whom Dostoyevsky finally rebukes but the Devil himself, the master of sin, an unconquerable principality pitted against God.

Cynthia Ozick

Dostoyevsky's Unabomber

A new kind of crime is on the American mind—the philosophical murderer who acts out of what he sees as principle. With Raskolnikov, the Russian novelist anticipated it.

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