

## DOSTOEVSKY'S *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT* IN THE LIGHT OF ESCHATOLOGY\*

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This article considers Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* as the subtle elaboration of a complete Christian eschatology. Through the relationship of the two principal protagonists, Raskolnikov and Sonia, readers are drawn into the enigma and lack of closure at the end which is either frustrating or fulfilling, depending on readers' understanding of the Christian doctrine of eschatology. For it is "The Four Last Things" (Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell) that underpin and orient the entire narrative, particularly as they are refracted through the experiences of the two deliberately opposite characters. In his creation of Raskolnikov, Dostoevsky certainly succeeds in conveying all the horrors of Hell (before dying); but it is his creation of Sonia – especially as intimated earlier in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* – that Dostoevsky succeeds in suggesting the greater abiding powers of Heaven to quietly and mysteriously heal. *Crime and Punishment* is thus proposed as an enduring artistic triumph because of its deep underlying sense of a specifically Christian call to ontological consciousness, following as it does in the footsteps of earlier Christian writers such as Dante and Bunyan, who had equally understood the crucial necessity of female wisdom leading the male pilgrim back to his home in the heart of God.

*Keywords:* eschatology; Orthodox Christianity; Dostoevsky; Dante; Death; Judgment; Heaven; Hell.

Рассматривается роман Ф. М. Достоевского «Преступление и наказание» как пример целостной системы христианской эсхатологии. Автор анализирует то, как взаимоотношения Раскольникова и Сони вводят читателя в главную загадку романа – в его незавершенность, которая воспринимается читателем либо с разочарованием, либо с удовлетворением, в зависимости от самого понимания им христианской доктрины эсхатологии. В романе именно так называемые «четыре последние вещи» (смерть, суд, рай и ад) являются основополагающими и руководят развитием фабулы, в особенности в аспекте их отражения

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в двух диаметрально противоположных действующих лицах. В образе и судьбе Раскольникова Достоевскому удалось запечатлеть все ужасы ада (перед смертью), а в образе Сони писатель указывает на гораздо более могущественную силу рая, проявляющуюся в непостижимой способности исцелять страждущих (о чем Достоевский писал раньше в «Зимних записках о летних впечатлениях»). Таким образом, непреходящий художественный триумф «Преступления и наказания» осмысливается как результат глубокого основополагающего христианского призыва к онтологическому сознанию, которым пронизан весь роман. Достоевский идет по стопам более ранних христианских авторов, таких как Данте и Джон Баньян, которые указывали на то, что только женская мудрость может провести мужчину-паломника домой, к сердцу Господню.

*Ключевые слова:* эсхатология; православие; Ф. Достоевский; Данте; смерть; Страшный суд; ад; рай.

Unlike his three other great murder novels, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) is relatively compact and clear to follow. The lines of plot and character are dense but easily separated since everything radiates from and relates back to the center, which is Raskolnikov. It is unarguably a masterpiece which – like all great works of art – owes its power to a certain central enigma that resists definition. Another proof of its peculiarly enduring artistic power is the many imitations it has inspired in both film and literature.<sup>1</sup>

I would argue that the strangeness of *Crime and Punishment* – its persuasive artistic achievement – resides in its acute eschatological sensibility. Indeed, Dostoevsky's awareness of "The Four Last Things" moves and defines this novel more than anything else because in this, his first fully-developed novel since *The Insulted and Injured*, everything reflects the maturing theological temperament of the author. Whereas *The Insulted and Injured* is still derivative of Dickens (specifically *The Old Curiosity Shop*), just like *Poor Folk* is still indebted to Gogol (as Vissarion Belinsky appreciated), *Crime and Punishment* reveals Dostoevsky developing his own distinctive style and voice as a full-length novelist for the first time.

Eschatology is a word of Greek origin that literally means "knowledge of last things." The shorthand version is "The Four Last Things": Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. In considering the eschatological significance of Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*, I would like to proceed by examining the relation of the novel's two principal protagonists – Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov and Sonia Semyonovna Marmeladova – to "The Four Last Things" that define eschatology as a Christian doctrine.

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<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino has gone on the record as saying that the opening paragraphs of *Crime and Punishment* are so strangely exquisite that one can be content to simply copy them out, in admiration of their consummate artistry [Calvino, p. 177-178].

## Death

Raskolnikov is the bearer of death in this novel. He is heavy with it, haunted by it, both before and after the murders. He turns in circles, always in anguish, always fatigued yet never able to rest. He stewes in an exquisite feverish energy that drains him, an energy entirely driven by his mind. He has a fine mind, a strong mind, but without outlet or issue. He approaches the brink of madness precisely because only a strong mind is able to attack itself (many a man with a weak mind has been spared the curse of madness).<sup>2</sup> His heart has atrophied, shutting down all avenues to the sustaining love and concern of his friends and family in the outside world. His mind holds him prisoner in an unassailable fortress of pride.

Yet his heart continues to beat, and his idealism – the very motive for the murders (however twisted or betrayed by the actual act) – continues to reveal itself in sudden impetuous rushes to spend money like water on behalf of the poor and the dispossessed. Raskolnikov wants to show a largesse that is a reflection of his lofty aspirations and his nobility of soul. He is sensitive, but morbidly so; he is intelligent, but in the manner of a rapier. He really demonstrates what the poet Rabindranath Tagore once observed: “A mind all logic is like a knife all blade: it makes the hand bleed that uses it.”

Raskolnikov is in sore and desperate need of resurrection, for he can only wander aimlessly in the Valley of the Shadow of Death that has claimed him now, in the wake of his terrible deeds.<sup>3</sup> He has been reduced to a living nightmare, a living death, and he banishes himself increasingly from all men's company. He finds himself drawn to the purity and goodness of Sonia, but coldly – with the idle interest of resolving an untenable intellectual enigma – and he seeks to pull her down with him, after his confession of his crimes to her, down into his own relentless undertow of grief and guilt and death.

Sonia is surrounded by death, yet manages to endure and overcome it. From a young age she was left without a mother, so she was forced to find shelter and strength in a faith-filled surrogate: the Mother of God (The Theotokos), Mary the Mother of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Christ delivered mankind from the shackles of death when he descended into Hell, between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.<sup>5</sup> This eschatological doctrine of the resurrection

<sup>2</sup> As noted by the neurologist in the 1946 film *Stairway to Heaven* (dir. Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger). The original title of this British film when it was first released in the U. K. was *A Matter of Life and Death*. The title was altered to *Stairway to Heaven* in order to appear less morbid to North American audiences.

<sup>3</sup> See Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil...”

<sup>4</sup> This Greek word literally signifies “The God-bearer.” In Orthodox terms, she is also simply known as “Our Most Holy Lady.”

<sup>5</sup> This event (also known as the Harrowing of Hell) is depicted in Orthodox iconography as *Anastasis*, which in Greek means “Resurrection.” It is a crucial part of the annual Easter celebration in the Orthodox calendar, commemorated as the time of Saturday evening before the dawn and the renewal of mankind on Easter Sunday. The Easter troparion hymn repeats triumphantly, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs bestowing life.”

of the dead is what Sonia passionately believes, as she shares her reading of the raising of Lazarus with Raskolnikov.<sup>6</sup>

Sonia intuits Raskolnikov's distress with a depth of wisdom that is rare for her years. Although she is just eighteen, she has an old head on young shoulders: she is the daughter of Misfortune, and Misfortune imposes harsh and rapid conditions for learning and adapting to the disappointments of life. Not only does she consent to humiliate herself absolutely in order to put food on the table for her family, in the most degrading yet most accessible profession available to women since time immemorial; she also loses her friend Lizaveta, a kind of sister to her in sorrow, in the violent death inflicted by Raskolnikov's axe. Sonia holds her dissolute but repentant father in her arms before he dies, the victim of a street accident<sup>7</sup>; she also witnesses her stepmother succumbing to tuberculosis, choking as much on bitterness as on illness. Sonia is a survivor because she has died to herself long ago: somehow she has perfectly absorbed and understood that "humility is the beginning of wisdom" and that "humility is endless."<sup>8</sup>

Sonia thus grows into the meaning of the name that she was given (Sofia), which in Greek means wisdom.<sup>9</sup> But she is always quick to acknowledge that whatever wisdom she possesses or enacts comes only and directly from God – «Что ж бы я без Бога-то была?» [Достоевский, т. 6, с. 248].<sup>10</sup> She takes no credit for anything, and thus proves capable of accomplishing anything. Her extreme gentleness and meekness is the exact counterpart to Raskolnikov's extreme agitation and violence. Opposites attract, indeed!

## Judgment

Raskolnikov is godless, so he fears no consequences to his transgressions. Indeed, he feels himself to be so superior that he has convinced himself that he will get away with it. He has even elaborated an entire theory justifying the "extraordinary" few's violation of the law at the expense (and sometime service) of the ordinary masses.<sup>11</sup> As a law student, he enjoys the free play of such ideas for their own sake which – in the case of his

<sup>6</sup> Part IV, chapter 4 of *Crime and Punishment* features the entirety of the Lazarus story (John 11 : 19-45), as haltingly and rapturously read out loud by Sonia to Raskolnikov in hopes of his conversion.

<sup>7</sup> Semyon Marmeladov announces the overarching eschatological theme of the novel as soon as chapter 2 of Part I when he confesses to Raskolnikov his belief that "we shall understand all" and "all shall understand" when the soul of the dying and contrite sinner is received by Christ. Marmeladov's entire speech is a gloss on Psalm 50, particularly line 19 ("A broken and contrite heart, Lord, Thou shalt not despise").

<sup>8</sup> See the last line of Psalm 110 ("The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom") as well as midway through T. S. Eliot's poem "East Coker," from *Four Quartets*.

<sup>9</sup> Another echo of the Orthodox liturgy: frequently the deacon invokes "Wisdom" before Mass begins.

<sup>10</sup> "For what would I be without God?" [Dostoevsky, 2001, p. 257]. This is Sonia's rhetorical question during Raskolnikov's first interview with her. See again Part IV, chapter 4 of *Crime and Punishment*.

<sup>11</sup> See Part III, chapter 5 of *Crime and Punishment*.

own particular personality, history, and circumstances – gratify and mirror his own inflated image of himself as someone clever and powerful enough to count himself among the extraordinary.

But as time wears on, even Raskolnikov cannot sustain the fantasy of such an identification. «Пошел ли бы Наполеон или нет?» [Достоевский, т. 6, с. 321].<sup>12</sup> He admits to Sonia that his “experiment” of testing his mettle amounts to a failure. His identification as “extraordinary” had been undermined right from the start, poisoned by fear and self-loathing. His first nightmare<sup>13</sup> clearly warns him that he is not cut from the same cloth as “Solon, Mohammed, or Napoleon” who are ready to “wade through blood.” And so Raskolnikov becomes his own judge, jury, and executioner. He tortures and judges himself, and he feels that is sufficient and even unjust, given the uncomprehending masses that are indifferent to his suffering – for all of: «истинно великие люди... должны ощущать на свете великую грусть» [Там же, с. 203].<sup>14</sup>

Raskolnikov is a rebel, a romantic, and a recluse who is too proud to submit to the yoke of the society that has (he feels) spurned and wasted his truest gifts, scattering them into obscurity and persecuting him into the most grinding poverty. He will do anything to save his beloved sister Dounia’s honour from the soiling encroachments of Luzhin and Svidrigailov, and yet he needed to do practically nothing to safeguard her happiness since Dounia (very reasonably and naturally enough) finds her salvation in the person of Razumihin in the end. All is still well in the world; Raskolnikov’s murders served no one and nothing in terms of justice. But (sadly and terribly) perhaps those same murders still served something, if only in terms of finally breaking down Raskolnikov’s pride and bringing him to the threshold of redemption and salvation.

As for Sonia: once she becomes aware of the gravity of Raskolnikov’s crimes, she holds him accountable. She stands in silent witness, crying out on behalf of the slain ones without a voice, as the very emblem of Raskolnikov’s nascent Christian conscience. She does not berate or harangue him. With incredible strength, courage, and depth of love, she forgives the murderer and embraces him, recognizing only his misery: «Нет, нет тебя несчастнее никого теперь в целом свете!» [Там же, с. 316].<sup>15</sup>

Sonia in her goodness could have been construed as some kind of cartoon, too good to be true, except that Dostoevsky takes infinite care to portray her realistically in accordance with his earlier astute observations about human nature. In *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (1863), Dostoevsky writes a brilliant “Essay on the Bourgeois” that begins by considering

<sup>12</sup> “Would a Napoleon murder and rob an old woman?” [Dostoevsky, 2001, p. 326].

<sup>13</sup> See Part I, chapter 4 of *Crime and Punishment*.

<sup>14</sup> “The really great men must... have great sadness on this earth” [Dostoevsky, 2001, p. 206, 210]. This is the rather dreamy way in which Raskolnikov concludes the exposition of his ideas “On Crime” to Porfiry Petrovich in Part III, chapter 5 of *Crime and Punishment*.

<sup>15</sup> “There is no one – no one in the whole world now so unhappy as you!” [Dostoevsky 2001, p. 323]. This heartfelt cry comes in Part V, chapter 4 of *Crime and Punishment*.

the maxim of the French Revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. He examines the first two terms and he finds them wanting. Why? Because a new revolutionary freedom and equality before the new law ends up not fulfilling its promise: they more often than not prove to be dissatisfying, illusory, and self-defeating because the first two terms in the original socialist formula become fatally compromised by the infamous French bourgeois preoccupation with money. This leaves only brotherhood as something still worth seriously examining. Now Dostoevsky asserts a startling claim: «Сделать братства нельзя, потому что оно само делается, дается, в природе находится» [Достоевский, т. 5, с. 79].<sup>16</sup>

One can also put it another way: the discovery of true brotherly love is like Grace, something that can happen if we can set ourselves aside and allow ourselves to be receptive to the discovery. Such a gift of grace is always at odds, however, with: «Начало личное, начало особняка, усиленного самосохранения, самопромышления, самоопределения в своем собственном Я» [Там же].<sup>17</sup>

And an insistence on individuality very rapidly becomes a language about rights, and as soon as one demands rights, no brotherhood results [Dostoevsky, 1985, p. 60-61]. So we are now at an impasse: what is to be done?<sup>18</sup> («Что ж, скажете вы мне, надо быть безличностью, чтоб быть счастливым? Разве в безличности спасение?» [Достоевский, т. 5, с. 79]<sup>19</sup>).

Dostoevsky offers a resounding "No" in answer to his own questions. He also offers a stunning summation of all of Sonia's idealized attributes *avant la lettre* by explaining the following response to the difficulty of experiencing true brotherhood:

Напротив, напротив, говорю я, не только не надо быть безличностью, но именно надо стать личностью, даже гораздо в высочайшей степени, чем та, которая теперь определилась на Западе. Поймите меня: самовольное, совершенно сознательное и никем не принужденное самопожертвование всего себя в пользу всех есть, по-моему, признак высочайшего развития личности, высочайшего ее могущества, высочайшего самообладания, высочайшей свободы собственной воли [Там же, с. 79].<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> "Brotherhood cannot be created, because it creates itself, is given, exists in nature" [Dostoevsky, 1985, p. 60]. Emphases added.

<sup>17</sup> "The principle of Individuality, the principle of isolation, of intensified self-preservation, of self-seeking" [Dostoevsky, 1985, p. 60].

<sup>18</sup> "What is to be done?" was the title of a famously influential socialist novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky published in 1863 – the same year as the publication of Dostoevsky's *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*.

<sup>19</sup> "Must one lose one's individuality in order to be happy? Is salvation to be found in the absence of individuality?" [Dostoevsky, 1985, p. 61].

<sup>20</sup> "My reply is no, on the contrary, not only should one not lose one's individuality, but one should, in fact, become an individual to a degree far higher than has occurred in the West. You must understand me: a voluntary, absolutely conscious and completely unforced sacrifice of oneself for the sake of all is, I consider, a sign of the highest development of individual personality, its highest power, highest self-possession and highest freedom of the individual will" [Dostoevsky, 1985, p. 61].



This is the language of paradox: one should strive to become an individual by not asserting one's individuality in the narrow conventional or earthbound sense. The task is to approach a higher plane that redefines the individual in relationship to others. It is the work of heroes and saints to overcome themselves joyously and selflessly on behalf of the collective.

But, Dostoevsky warns, even here there remains a danger:

Тут есть один волосок, один самый тоненький волосок, но который если попадается под машину, то всё разом треснет и разрушится. Именно: беда иметь при этом случае хоть какой-нибудь самый малейший расчет в пользу собственной выгоды [Достоевский, т. 5, с. 79–80].<sup>21</sup>

The stain of self-interest must be vigilantly eliminated so that no trace of vanity may be gratified.

Например: я приношу и жертвую всего себя для всех; ну, вот и надо, чтоб я жертвовал себя совсем, окончательно, без мысли о выгоде, отнюдь не думая, чтоб вот я пожертвую обществу всего себя и за это само общество отдаст мне всего себя. Надо жертвовать именно так, чтоб отдавать всё и даже желать, чтоб тебе ничего не было выдано за это обратно, чтоб на тебя никто ни в чем не изубыточился [Там же, с. 80].<sup>22</sup>

Now the religious dimension of Dostoevsky's insight into the problem becomes more evident. By her pure generosity of feeling, completely devoid of "the hair of self-interest," Sonia disarms Raskolnikov and demonstrates how much she is his sister. For it is only "the principle of intensified self-preservation" that prevents the spirit of true brotherhood from existing between people, as Dostoevsky put it. Sonia never cares for her own safety or well-being: this is why and how she incarnates, in a mysteriously meaningful way, the healing power of true brotherhood. She is crucial in Raskolnikov's ultimate transformation because she practically descends from Heaven as an emissary to conduct Raskolnikov out of his own Hell. Sonia follows in the illustrious literary footsteps of Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1321), a work of Christian genius with which Dostoevsky was certainly familiar. But Sonia differs from Dante's Beatrice in that she has to embrace all of the contempt of the world in order to exercise her salvific effect. That is why she must join the ranks of the prostitutes (the lowest of the low among women) to be able to transcend both her own estate and Raskolnikov's. Like Saint Paul, she seems to say to Raskolnikov:

<sup>21</sup> "There is a hair, one very, very thin hair but, if it gets into the machine, all will immediately crack and collapse. It is the following: there must not be in this case the slightest motive of personal gain" [Dostoevsky, 1985, p. 61].

<sup>22</sup> "I should sacrifice myself wholly and irrevocably, without consideration of gain, not thinking in the least that here I am, sacrificing my entire self to society and in exchange society will offer the whole of itself to me. One must, in fact, make one's sacrifice with the intention of giving away everything, and even wish that nothing be given to you in exchange and that no one should spend anything on you" [Dostoevsky, 1985, p. 61–62].

"We [the fools for Christ] are as the refuse of this world, the offscouring of all... We are reviled: and we bless. We are persecuted; and we suffer it" (I Corinthians 4 : 13; 12).

Sonia is thus for Raskolnikov the vehicle of and the catalyst for moral resurrection by reason of her totally unassuming yet totally dedicated personal example. She leads him to the quiet judgment seat of God, so that Raskolnikov can eventually realize and recover a certain spiritual stillness within himself, a kind of equilibrium of soul, to prepare and to fortify him for the acts of atonement he must begin to make for his crimes. She commands him only once, with a zealous conviction and with a loving emphasis on holding only the good of his own soul in mind, to bow down to everyone and to confess openly that he is a murderer: «Тогда Бог опять тебе жизни пошлет» [Достоевский, т. 6, с. 322].<sup>23</sup> As a woman of faith, she knows that Raskolnikov will eventually hear "the still small voice" of God within him as much as from without, and respond to that call to contrition as he must. For "all things to men are not possible, but for God all things are possible"<sup>24</sup> – even the softening of Raskolnikov's hardened heart.

## Hell

Like no other literary character, Raskolnikov is the proof of "living hell" as his own creation. He can never leave the fact of his crimes behind him: he drags the terrible memory of them everywhere (even into his sleep) at the same time that he is constantly invested in keeping the fact of his own involvement in the crimes an airtight secret. Were he to have died *in flagrante delicto*, and were one to imagine him plummeting to the feet of the monster Minos who would then assign his place in Dante's *Inferno* according to the number of times his tail wound around him, one could expect to meet Raskolnikov – probably and most logically – among the thieves in the seventh ditch of the ten chasms of Fraud<sup>25</sup>. For although he was a failed thief who never even profited from the money that he stole from the pawnbroker («И ограбить-то не умел, только и сумел, что убить!» [Достоевский, т. 5, с. 117]<sup>26</sup>), theft was still his primary motive in resorting to such desperate action in the first place. Raskolnikov considers his violence excusable along the same lines as Robin Hood or Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, redistributing the clot of wealth through the veins of the larger suffering body of need.

Сто, тысячу добрых дел и начинаний, которые можно устроить и поправить на старухины деньги, обреченные в монастырь! <...> Убей ее и возьми ее деньги, с тем чтобы с их помощью посвятить потом себя

<sup>23</sup> "Only then will God send you life again" [Dostoevsky, 2001, p. 330].

<sup>24</sup> See I Kings 19 : 9–18 (the experience of Elijah in the wilderness) and Mark 10 : 27.

<sup>25</sup> See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Canto III of *Inferno* (for Minos) and Canto XVIII (for the thieves) [Dante].

<sup>26</sup> "He did not know how to rob; he could only murder" [Dostoevsky, 2001, p. 120]. This is Razumihin's opinion of the criminal (see Part II, chapter 5 of *Crime and Punishment*).



на служение всему человечеству и общему делу: как ты думаешь, не заглядится ли одно, крошечное преступленьице тысячами добрых дел?.. – да ведь тут арифметика! [Достоевский, т. 5, с. 54].<sup>27</sup>

Utilitarian sentiments have long been the prerogative of well-intentioned thieves; indeed, Raskolnikov might have been merely collecting a tax that was overdue from a hoarding scourge. So there were no illusions in his mind about which circle of Hell he would be consigning Alyona Ivanovna: the third circle of incontinence for the hoarders and spendthrifts, of course, since her stinginess he thought spoke for itself. Of course, Dante's Minos would have had to sort out that sin from the piety of the old pawnbroker, whose well-saved money was partially and prudently spent on advance prayers for the repose of her immortal soul.

But Raskolnikov does not fall on his own axe like Saul after all the homicidal mayhem. And so, by staying alive, he saves himself from the terrors of Hell. Certainly he was tempted by suicide, which would have led him directly to the most poignant place of all in Dante's *Inferno*: the forest of bleeding and weeping trees. But Raskolnikov chooses life at every turn, in spite of himself: «Только бы жить, жить и жить! Как бы ни жить – только жить! <...> Экая правда! Господи, какая правда! Подлец человек!» [Там же, с. 123].<sup>28</sup> He chooses life in full knowledge of the terrible misery of such a choice, if made in stubborn isolation and cowardice – and yet Raskolnikov is given a chance to redeem himself.

One can imagine Jean Val Jean from *Les Misérables* (1862), another desperate thief but with no blood on his hands, going straight to the Hell of Dante's thieves if Victor Hugo had chosen to kill him off suddenly, perhaps while struggling to survive the galleys as a convict. Many convicts die in the course of their imprisonment, so that the bitterness of their crimes remains forever with them. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? The whole folklore of ghosts around the world turns on this lack of resolution, this want of justice, and (most importantly for Dante and for Dostoevsky alike) the entire disavowal of all blame for their acts. All souls in Dante's *Inferno* feel their situation is unjust because they refuse to recognize their own passionate collusion in their own misery. "Everyone in this prison is falsely accused, and everyone in this prison is innocent."<sup>29</sup> As it is in prison, so it is in Hell: no one is sorry and everyone would do the same thing all over again. Through their suffering sinners, Dante and Dostoevsky both show us that there is no grandeur in sin – just sordid stubbornness.

<sup>27</sup> "A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on that old woman's money that will be buried in a monastery! <...> Kill her, take her money, and with the help of it devote oneself to the service of humanity and the good of all. What do you think, would not one tiny crime be wiped out by thousands of good deeds? <...> It's simple arithmetic!" [Dostoevsky, 2001, p. 54]. As proclaimed by some disgruntled students and overheard by Raskolnikov, lending further fuel to his homicidal fire: see Part I, chapter 6 of *Crime and Punishment*.

<sup>28</sup> "Only to live, to live and live! Life, whatever it may be! <...> How true it is! Good God, how true! Man is a vile creature!" [Dostoevsky, 2001, p. 127].

<sup>29</sup> This is a wry and oft-repeated remark among the prisoners in the 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption* (dir. Frank Darabont).

## Heaven

Raskolnikov is vouchsafed only one glimpse of heaven in the very last pages of the Epilogue, when he begins to see the true folly of his actions (and all of their mixed motivations) in the light of his new relationship to Sonia. Many cynical commentators have broadcast their dissatisfaction with Raskolnikov "caving" in the end, calling such a conversion of his heart "unbelievable" or a piece of "cheap sentimentality" because his whole character has been so resolutely defined and developed in a materialistic direction before (see, for example: [Dostoevsky, 1989]). There is certainly something to be said for such a response to the ending of Dostoevsky's novel: many readers report a sense of being manipulated or betrayed alongside Raskolnikov himself, who (such readers feel) should remain above being taken hostage by religion.

And yet, the truth of reconciliation – when it is profound and life-altering – is indeed experienced as sudden, like a gift, with nothing willed or predictable about it at all. After all of his sufferings, which from an Orthodox Christian point of view are necessary prerequisites to winning any meaningful insights about life, Raskolnikov is opened to the operation of Grace. He has not earned any special dispensation from God as the result of his own efforts – no, quite the contrary. Finally, and only towards the very end, Raskolnikov's ego is worn down – by the hardships of prison and by the forced proximity to inmates hostile to him as an "unbeliever." For a long time his pride has still continued to torture him in prison, thus isolating him even more – until one day he is mercifully and suddenly broken down and taken out of himself at last. It is something out of his control because Grace happens to any of us when we are least expecting it. The descent of Grace is, however, often preceded by a long period of spiritual preparation. Flannery O'Connor in her March 10 letter from 1956 to Eileen Hall said that "It's almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace in fiction. We almost have to approach it negatively. As to natural Grace, we have to take that the way it comes – through nature. In any case, it operates surrounded by evil" [O'Connor, p. 988].

It has been said that "God prunes the ones He loves," in the same way that a gardener prunes a plant, which suffers the loss of branches in order to become stronger and more whole (see: [Spiritual Sayings of the Optina Elders]). Well, Raskolnikov has been pruned, and only after such pruning can he finally hope to bear fruit and rejoin the human community again. "But that is the beginning of a new story," as Dostoevsky sagely tells us. More than that: in his *Notebooks to Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky wrote a sentence that sums up the movement and purpose of Raskolnikov's story. If heaven is understood as an ideal experience or attainment of happiness for human beings, then happiness is bestowed on us as an intimation of divine things, beyond the merely human frame of reference. In relation to this question of happiness that heaven touches, Dostoevsky wrote that: «Человек не рождается для счастья. Человек заслуживает свое счастье, и всегда страданием» [Достоевский, т. 7, с. 155].<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> "Man is not born for happiness; man earns his happiness, and always by suffering" [Dostoevsky, 1989, p. 663].

## By Way of Conclusion

The very question mark that hangs in the reader's mind at the end of *Crime and Punishment*: – “Will even Raskolnikov truly be saved?” – surely echoes a question in relation to the reader: – “Will even I be counted among the saved as well?” The acutely and excruciatingly private experience of every human soul *in extremis* (on the threshold of death) is a mystery and a drama swathed in silence. Delivery from death into life is the stubborn hope of every human soul because, as Dostoevsky memorably observed: «Без высшей идеи не может существовать ни человек, ни нация. А высшая идея на земле *лишь одна* и именно – идея о бессмертии души человеческой» [Достоевский, т. 24, с. 48].<sup>31</sup> The story of every human soul's passage on this earth thus (if it acknowledges God at all) must encompass or resemble a pilgrimage, or a homecoming.

In that greatest and most paradigmatic account of the perils and joys of a pilgrimage, namely *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–1684) by John Bunyan, the reader cannot help but be struck by the openness of the ending – an openness that recalls Raskolnikov's sudden permeable turn in the Epilogue, and which critics have complained is out of keeping with Raskolnikov's character. “Should it be my lot to go that way again,” Bunyan's narrator says, “I may give those that desire it an account of what I here am silent about.” [Bunyan, p. 328]. Indeed, the suggestive promise of this final line can only be a deliberate echo of the closing lines of the Gospel of John: “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written” (John 21 : 25).<sup>32</sup> The open ending is an eschatological signature because it is a token of more ineffable glories to come. It is as Dag Hammarskjöld said: “For those who have faith, the last miracle shall be greater than the first” [Hammarskjöld, p. 195]. But of all of this one cannot openly or commonly speak. Immediately after confessing his personal credo in a letter from Omsk to N. D. Fonvizina (February 15 – March 2, 1854) Dostoevsky wisely wrote, «но об этом лучше перестать говорить» [Достоевский, т. 28, с. 176].<sup>33</sup> Why? The answer, I believe, was captured best by the poet W. H. Auden when he simply but eloquently said “Orthodoxy is reticence” [Auden, p. 315].

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<sup>31</sup> “The immortality of the human soul is the *one* sovereign idea that the human being cannot live without” [Dostoevsky, 1993, vol. 1, p. 734]. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>32</sup> This conclusion is prefigured by the ending of the immediately preceding chapter: “And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20 : 30–31).

<sup>33</sup> “But it is better to stop talking about this” [Selected Letters, p. 68].

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