ALEXANDRA F. RUDICINA

Crime and Myth: The Archet yp al Pattern of Rebirth in Three Novels of Dostoevsky

Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.
—John xii.24, used as a motto in The Brothers Karamazov

THE SALIENT dimension of Dostoevsky’s creativity in his later phase is his obsessive esthetic and metaphysical concern with ultimate violence. Indeed, in his great novels, the prominence and urgency of the theme of murder become the cachet of his creative method. Crime and Punishment, The Possessed, and The Brothers Karamazov embody a reassertion and an elaboration of this compelling concern in terms of both their thematic import and structural pattern. Murder is presented as an act generated exclusively by the rational mind of the murderer. It is a product of pure intellection, a rationally argued “calculated” act of violence; and as such it can be characterized as “le crime parfait” in the sense Albert Camus uses the term in his dialectics of murder—that is, “le meurtre légitimé” as distinguished from “le meurtre de fatalité,” or crime of passion.1

The very urgency with which these works all insist that “le meurtre est la question” (Camus, p. 15) makes us pause to inquire into the dynamics of the organizing pattern around which the themes of crime appear to be structured. This underlying pattern reflects the archetypal scheme of rebirth through transgression followed by suffering, or expiation, which informs the central myth of Christianity, the Fall of Man and his Redemption. And in accordance with the metaphysical esthetics characteristic of his post-exile Weltanschauung,2 his Pascalism—nay, his dread of man’s autarkic intellect3—Dostoevsky constitutes the “crime of reason” as the transgression, but also as a potential felix culpa in his version of the Fall and Redemption as applied to modern man.

Despite the occasional probings of several critics into the themes of rebirth or regeneration in Dostoevsky’s oeuvre, his major fiction has not been systematically explored for the thematic and structural relevance of the archetypal pattern of rebirth. My purpose is to isolate and follow the movement of this pattern in terms of its individuation in each of the three novels under study. I will consider the characters’ existential role only in terms of their involvement in the metaphysical scheme of rebirth.

In the significantly entitled Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky gives his first imaginative statement of what Allen Tate would call “a cosmic extension of the moral predicament.”4 It is a Russian intellectual and, by extension, “man under the aspect of modernity,”5 a “superman,” whom Dostoevsky features as a supreme aggressor in terms of human law and as a metaphysical transgressor against divine and universal order. His act of aggression is presented as “sanctioned” by the “rational” imperative of his intellect, his transgression as an experiment in “uttermost and final freedom.”6 Seeking, thus, to establish his protagonist in his “relationship to God,”7 Dostoevsky will resort to the archetypal scheme.

In his proud and solitary intellection, Raskolnikov contemplates a venture that he presumes will say “a new word.”8 Impelled by a rational “idea,” an “excrasion” of his intellect, he conceives a “logical” crime, claiming the right of an “extraordinary” man (pp. 248–49; Pt. III, Ch. v) to establish his own ethical norms and values. Specifically he asserts that this extraordinary man “may in all conscience authorize himself” to commit crime “if it is necessary . . . for the fulfillment of his ideas” (p. 250).

Raskolnikov’s rational mind breaking loose from the common bonds of humanity, a mind driven by concupiscientia invincibili—that concupiscence of reason that Lev Shestov deems the very cause of the Fall of Man9—will prompt him “to dare” (p. 401; Pt. v, Ch. iv) and “to permit his
conscience to overstep...certain obstacles” (p. 249; Pt. iii, Ch. v). He proceeds to “remove” (p. 249) what he calls a “louse...a useless, vile, pernicious louse” (p. 399; Pt. v, Ch. iv), the old pawnbroker Alena Ivanovna.

The principle of rebirth is set in motion as soon as Raskolnikov assays his “freedom and power” (p. 317; Pt. iv, Ch. iv) by “stepping over the barriers” (p. 402; Pt. v, Ch. iv) and murdering the old moneylender and her half-witted sister, Lizaveta. Perverting the very principle of life, he thus signals his implication in an act of metaphysical transgression. This act is the step of ultimate gravity through which participation in the scheme of rebirth via suffering and expiation will be held out to him.

The crime merges with the punishment. As Blackmur has observed, Raskolnikov himself “becomes the very product of his crime” (p. 122).10 The same intellection that has supplied the rationale for his project has also furnished the subtlest, most refined tools for his punishment. The hideousness of his act is essentially brought home to Raskolnikov in esthetic terms.11 Soon enough after the deed Raskolnikov perceives the ironic discrepancy between the regal sangfroid and poise of a Napoleon marching over corpses (p. 250; Pt. iii, Ch. v) and his own messy cowering procedures in the squashing of an old usurer. Recalling how he crawled under the moneylender’s bed for his booty, he pictures Porfiry, the examining magistrate, asking sarcastically: “Does a Napoleon crawl under an old hag’s bed?”12

There is unmistakably lurking in the heart of Raskolnikov a ranking sense of an extreme impropriety of his “private” murderous act. Characteristically he himself acknowledged that he was nothing but an “esthetic louse” (p. 264; Pt. iii, Ch. vi). Here Dostoevsky skirts a Shakespearean projection of the “impulse to formal propriety” discerned by Robert B. Heilman in Othello, who conceived of Desdemona’s murder not as an act of private revenge but as a rite of justice. It is that very propriety—which, in Heilman’s terms, “puts a good face on murder”—that Raskolnikov agonizingly perceives was lacking in his own deed.13

Another aspect of the punishment is his “disease,” which represents, ironically, an unforeseen consequence of his “calculated” act. It will be remembered that in his article dealing with the “right to commit crime” (p. 248; Pt. iii, Ch. v), Raskolnikov made the point that a criminal act is almost invariably accompanied by “a collapse of willpower and reason.” Such disease, he claimed, was the cause of the criminal’s “extraordinary childish heedlessness” that would inevitably lead to his detection. Raskolnikov considered himself immune from such distressing consequences simply because “what he contemplated was no crime” (p. 68; Pt. i, Ch. vi).

But following the deed he collapses into a stupor from which he awakens only to discover in terror his own childish heedlessness, his carelessness in concealing the traces of his murderous deed. Assailed by the suspicion that “everything, even memory, even the simple power of reflection, was deserting him,” he ascribes a punitive, retributive significance to what he apprehends as the onset of madness: “What if it is beginning already? Can this really be the beginning of my punishment?” (pp. 84–86; Pt. ii, Ch. i). As his punishment grows, we follow an increasingly harrowing spectacle of humiliation and gradual disintegration of the hero’s pride—that same pride that had conceived the deed and had incited him to take the dare and overstep the limits.

René Girard in his Dostoïevsky: du double à l’unité speaks of “une passion de l’orgueil moderne” that he sees inherent in the Napoleonic Prometheism underlying the model of “la surhumanité” for Raskolnikov.14 In his words, “Raskolnikov tue, et il tue délibérément afin d’asseoir son orgueil sur des bases inébranlables” (p. 71). Yet not once does his consciousness of the enacted “deed” stir in Raskolnikov a proud vision of himself as the “real ruler,” as that Napoleon in whom, as Girard says, Hegel saw “l’incarnation vivante de la divinité” (p. 97). The man who, obsessed with his own “deification,”15 engaged in a daring experiment—which he deemed emblematic of “freedom and power, but above all power” (p. 317; Pt. iv, Ch. iv)—finds himself unable to make good his claim and pass his test. Trapped in what he calls his cowardice, unnerved by the humiliating realization of the failure of his project, his pride disintegrating, Raskolnikov submits to Sonya’s Christly mediation and gives himself up to the police.

We have dealt with the growth and multiplication of the punishment in which the protagonist has involved himself in his quest for “rebellious
freedom and his arrogance of the right over the life and death of the “Other.” Yet there is no expiatory aspect, no redeeming suffering at this point in his pluridimensional punishment. The awakening of the impulse to rebirth is retarded by his obdurate commitment to his “idea.” Even as he has reached the decision to make a clean breast of his crime to the authorities, he vehemently protests to Sonya that his “deed” was no crime. “Crime? What crime?” he asks. “Killing a foul, noxious louse . . . who sucked the life-blood of the poor, so vile that killing her ought to bring absolution for forty sins—was that a crime?” (p. 498; Pt. vi, Ch. vii).

One of the most controversial issues in Dostoevsky criticism is the so-called “epilogue conversion”: in the last two pages of the novel Dostoevsky tells us that Raskolnikov and Sonya are “raised from the dead” through the epiphany of their love, “the dawn of a new future and a perfect resurrection into a new life” glowing in their “white sick faces.” The usual critical objection to this late conversion is to its “suddenness”: it has been charged that the protagonist’s change of heart is neither psychologically nor artistically prepared for in the earlier stages of the novel. More particularly, Ernest Simmons charges that Raskolnikov’s regeneration “under the influence of the Christian humility and love of Sonya” is “neither artistically palatable nor psychologically sound” (p. 153).

In defense of the conversion I must point out that one cannot fail to discern the slow and tortuous but unmistakable rhythm of rebirth that involves in its momentum the half-resisting, half-willing protagonist who vacillates between the polarities of perdition and salvation, embodied respectively by Svidrigailov and Sonya Marmeladova. Significantly it is the famous scene in which “the murderer and the harlot . . . had come together so strangely to read the eternal book” that most compellingly foreshadows Raskolnikov’s resurrection. Raskolnikov asks the saintly prostitute, “Where is that about the raising of Lazarus? Find it for me.” And Sonya, reading to him from the Gospel of Saint John about the “blind, unbelieving Jews who were so soon, in an instant, to fall to the ground . . . believing” in Lazarus’ resurrection, intuits that “he, he who is also blind and unbelieving, he also will hear in a moment, he also will believe.” As she reads further—“And he that was dead came forth”—she exults in anticipation of Raskolnikov also rising from the dead (pp. 312–15; Pt. iv, Ch. iv).

Philip Rahv expresses impatience with “such intimations” at the close of the novel as promise that Raskolnikov’s “ultimate reconciliation and salvation” will come to pass “in a new story” (Rahv, pp. 22–23). Yet it may be plausibly argued that in activating the archetype of rebirth as crystallized in the Christian myth of Fall and Redemption, Dostoevsky was conceptually as well as artistically bound to stay within his particular frame of reference. Deferring to an indefinite future Raskolnikov’s emergence into “perfect resurrection” and limiting himself to mere intimations of an “undreamed-of reality,” Dostoevsky fundamentally follows the Christian myth, with its promise of man’s redemption.

In The Possessed, Dostoevsky reasserts even more consistently and integrally his concern with reasoned and doctrinaire violence. The Possessed came into being as Dostoevsky’s committed creative act of counterchallenge to the ideological challenge presented by the notorious Nechaev case (1869) involving a spectacular political murder by the famous revolutionary terrorist. Motivated by the same will to transcend time-and-space reality that he felt in Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky again employs the archetypal mythic scheme of rebirth through transgression and suffering in shaping his apocalyptic vision of the revolutionary turbulence in Russia of the 1860’s. Impelled, however, by the exigencies of the complex thematics of his “novel-pamphlet,” as he called it, the novelist evades away from the single movement of the pattern of rebirth employed in Crime and Punishment.

In the world of “devils and demons” and “petty devils” of The Possessed, the rhythm of the rebirth pattern reveals itself as a peculiar modification or alembrication of the original archetypal scheme. It is even justifiable in terms of a “demonic” inversion of the “apocalyptic” or divine world, which occurs in the novel, to speak of a reversal or subversion of the pattern of redemption in connection with the protagonist. It is from the same perspective that Girard describes the world of The Possessed projected as “l’univers de la haine,” a parody of “l’univers de l’amour divin.” He finds both Stavrogin and the whole “galaxy” of the “possessed” whom Stavrogin envelopes and “sucks”
into the vortex of dissolution to be all involved “en quête d’une rédemption à rebours” (Girard, p. 96). Indeed, as I hope to show with regard to Stavrogin, one may appropriately speak of a distinct “quest” or “will-to-damnation” inherent in his spiritual torpor which comes to counteract and arrest his initial impulse to rebirth.

The Prince of the possessed, “cet être prestigieux,” as Jacques Madaule styles Stavrogin,29 is haunted by the memory of his ugly crime, a callous and deliberate act of violence, a “debauchery” which brought little Matryosha to suicide while he waited cold-bloodedly in the next room for the thing to be finished.30 As Stavrogin presents his confession of the crime to Bishop Tikhon, we find him at what John Cowper Powys calls “a mystical bifurcation,” at which it is still possible to choose between “serving our way to Jesus” and sinning away from Jesus.31 It is here that occurs what Blackmur appropriately terms “an abortion, a failure in birth in the life of a great sinner” (pp. 176–77). Although he declares himself to be in quest of “infinite suffering” to atone for his transgression (p. 439; Pt. II, Ch. ix), Stavrogin refuses to do the penance suggested by Tikhon. Nor will he publicize his confession. In thus delaying to “undertake the burden”—as if no mere existential expiation could slake his thirst for metaphysical torment—Stavrogin casts aside his final chance of making his involvement in the scheme of rebirth a positive one.32 Viewed in these terms his careless breaking of the ivory crucifix at Tikhon’s by “twisting it around in his fingers . . . [until] suddenly he snapped it in two” takes on an unmistakable symbolic dimension (p. 433; Pt. II, Ch. ix).

By this gesture, Stavrogin reasserts his rejection of his prerogative to assume the cross, which stands as the Christian arch-symbol of expiatory and redeeming suffering.

In terms of Dostoevsky’s use of the traditional cross symbolism, Stavrogin’s avoidance of the burden of the cross involves his fatal forfeiture of his metaphysical role, that of the bearer of the cross, symbolically alluded to in his name.33 In this light Stavrogin has incurred both an existential and metaphysical guilt over the perversion and wasting of his own humanity and over his implication of the “Other” in his spiritual dissolution. As he himself acknowledges in his letter to Dasha in the Epilogue: “the only thing that has come out of me is negation without strength and without generosity” (p. 691; Pt. III, Ch. viii). Having descended into the immense abyss of dissolution he cannot ascend. Admitting his guilty involvement, indeed his deliberate connivance, in the murder of his wife, the crippled fool, and her brother, Stavrogin constitutes himself his own judge and proceeds to self-extirmination.

In Dostoevsky’s Christian esthetics, in which suicide exemplifies the deadly sin of despair of ever receiving Divine Grace, Stavrogin’s self-destruction signals his total elimination from the scheme of redemption. Through his betrayal of his metaphysical destiny, finally symbolized in his suicide by hanging like Judas—parody of a sacrificial self-immolation—Stavrogin enact an inversion of salvation, or that rédemption à rebours of which Girard spoke.34

The principle of rebirth, displaced from the fulcrum of the novel, will thus operate obliquely. It now emerges in connection with two other characters, Shatov and Stepan Trofimovitch.35 It is not Stavrogin, “the great sinner,” whose impulsive to rebirth was arrested in the inertia of his sin, but Stepan Trofimovitch—this misfit of a liberal, with his “shifting but unarrestable momentum,” as Blackmur has said—who is offered preferential treatment in Dostoevsky’s scheme of redemption. Blackmur speaks of “a devastation, a vastation, a rehabilitation” that the old liberal and westernizer undergoes before he achieves his apotheosis (p. 182). This purgation and renewal Stepan Trofimovitch experiences by gradually “stripping” himself of his “evil attributes,” that is, all that was “western” in him, his flippant freethinking and his mild contempt “pour notre Sainte Russie” (p. 38; Pt. I, Ch. i), during his “ordeal” along “la grande route”36 (p. 649; Pt. III, Ch. vii; see pp. 647–80).

In the words of Julius Meier-Graefe, Stepan Trofimovitch assuredly emerges at the end of the novel “glorified” by his “prophetic vision” of the destinies of Russia.37 It is the Gospel parable on the Gadarene swine from St. Luke viii.32–37 which the Gospel peddler Sofya Matveevna reads to him as he falls delirious that induces his vision. Listening to the passage that relates the miracle of Jesus’ exorcizing the evil spirits from a possessed man, Stepan Trofimovitch comes to apprehend, by way of “une comparison,” his “great, dear, sick”
Russia, afflicted with “all the festering sores,” inhabited by “all the demons and the petty devils,” and on the brink of spiritual dissolution, as the “sick man” of Gadara. In his hallucinatory state, Stepan Trofimovich envisions the sick man Russia as ultimately recovered and restored to health—like the man of Gadara—through the mediation of Jesus, and seated at the feet of Jesus (pp. 670–71; Pt. iii, Ch. vii). The old liberal’s spiritual regeneration, initiated through his birth into Russianess, expands and grows through his apprehension of and his willingness to atone for his own guilty implication in the spread of the “demonic possession” of nihilism.

“It’s us, us and the others—my son Peter and those around him; and we’ll hurl ourselves from the cliff into the sea and I’ll be the first perhaps, and all of us, mad and raving, will drown and it will serve us right because that’s all we’re fit for” (p. 671; Pt. iii, Ch. vii). The inveterate freethinker’s redemptive ascent culminates in his apprehension of the urgency of man’s need for “the infinite and the limitless” as he hails the “Great Idea, the eternal limitless Great Idea,” in the “profession de foi” of his last hours (p. 680).

Stepan Trofimovich’s deathbed regeneration takes on special symbolic significance when seen in terms of the governing metaphor of the novel expressed in the text from St. Luke. Significantly, it is the same passage from St. Luke—the second and principal motto of The Possessed—that announces in parabolic terms the whole thematic tension to be developed in the novel: the “demonic possession” of the “sick man,” his recovery through the agency of Jesus, and the self-destruction of the “possessed.” In his personal spiritual rebirth, Stepan Trofimovich may be seen to reenact the part of the man of Gadara healed by Jesus. By the same token, the old liberal and freethinker prefigures, and preenacts, as it were, the Russian intellectuals’s spiritual recovery and regeneration through the workings of the “Great Idea” and the “Great Will.” Thus it is Stepan Trofimovich, along with Shatov, the recanted nihilist, who fulfills the theme of spiritual recovery through his “regeneration.” In this perspective we recognize, with Blackmur, that Stepan Trofimovich’s apotheosis provides an éclaircissement of “the text of the swine.” We must challenge Blackmur, however, when he holds that “Stavrogin’s death could not give” any clarification of St. Luke’s text (Blackmur, p. 182). To the contrary, we find Stavrogin assuming in the novel’s emblematic configuration a function opposite from, yet complementary to, that of Stepan Trofimovich. Both a symbolic agent and a vessel of demonic possession, Stavrogin through his act of self-annihilation reenacts the part of the Gadarene swine hurling themselves to self-destruction. The very method which Stavrogin elects to effect his ultimate awesome act, that of choking himself with the noose, duplicates symbolically the choking of the possessed swine in the lake. It is thus clear that both Stepan Trofimovich’s apotheosis and Stavrogin’s self-extinction provide the éclaircissement of the biblical motif, that is, the novel’s controlling metaphoric statement. On the archetypal level proper, Stephan Trofimovich’s ascension in rebirth and Stavrogin’s quest for damnation yield two polarized imperative exempla which shape the contrapuntal configuration of this particular version of the pattern of rebirth.

Dostoevsky’s last novel, The Brothers Karamazov, is generally seen to present his final integral statement and his vindication of “the ways of God to men” in the face of the rebellion of the modern mind which refuses assent to evil and suffering in the world. Significantly, as Sigmund Freud has stressed, it is parricide, that “principal and primal crime of humanity” and “the main source of the sense of guilt,” that Dostoevsky chose as the fulcrum of the plot. Much has been made in modern Dostoevsky scholarship of the common involvement of the three Karamazovs and their bastard brother Smerdyakov in the violent death of their father. Blackmur, for instance, writes that the murder of the old Karamazov is “prepared” and “ripened” by all of his sons. Ivan, the doctrinaire proponent of the formula, “Everything is lawful” (p. 312; Bk. v, Ch. v), provides, as it were, a metaphysical rationale for the “right to crime,” which will be translated into practice in its “flunky” version by Smerdyakov. Dmitri ripens himself into a potential murderer through his sexual rivalry with his father, thus triggering the very dynamics of the crime. Alyosha, for his part, ripens the crime through his neglect of filial duty, involved as he was with the death of Elder Zosima, his spiritual father. On a wider level of meaning, the involvement in parricide extends far beyond the Semejka
("the little family," here used pejoratively) of Karamazov. Lise Hohlakov points up the tacit connivance of the denizens of Skotoprigonensk (the cattle pen) in the murder of the old Karamazov and their secret complicity with Dmitri, who stands trial for the crime. "Listen, your brother is being tried now for murdering his father and everyone loves his having killed the father," she tells Alyosha (p. 709; Bk. xi, Ch. iii).29 Quoting Thomas Mann, who regards the parricide as "anonymous and communal," Blackmur stresses the crime's "anonymity," which suggests the universality and mythical relevance of the criminal deed (p. 198).

Now we are confronted with what Ralph Matlaw describes as the "mythical construct" in The Brothers Karamazov, or a combination of separate myths coalescing in a complex total structure (pp. 20–22). The relation of the two central myths is best described as an integration of the myth of parricide into the scheme of rebirth. Parricide, which plays so prime a role in the compositional strategy of the work, is also assigned a no less magisterial function in the novel's conceptual design. As the very core of Dostoevsky's cosmic scheme, parricide develops into a most potent felix culpa, able to elicit from the transgressor all his potential for metaphysical involvement.

It is here that Dostoevsky, anticipating Freud, comes closest to intuiting the submerged import of "primal crime," that consummation of the murderous filial urge, as the source or generator of the "universal guilt" and of the "need for expiation" latent in mankind.30 Is it not that primeval hatred that breaks through Ivan's famous outburst at the trial: "They all desire the death of their fathers"? (p. 834; Bk. xii, Ch. v). One may very well wonder whether Dostoevsky subconsciously gave Dmitri the role of a vicarious atoner for the blood spilt in the timeless primordial crime that recurs in the murder of his father. It is in Dmitri, the potential and alleged parricide whose hand was "stayed" as though "God was watching over [him] then" (p. 476; Bk. viii, Ch. iv), that the principle of rebirth, working through sin and suffering, finds its profoundest expression.

Mitya had long felt uneasy qualms about the "filthy morass, in which he had sunk of his own free will." But though he "thirsted for that reformation and renewal," suffering did not function as a redeeming force in his early dreams of a "different reformed and 'virtuous' life" (p. 443; Bk. viii, Ch. i). Rather it was through a mutual renewal by the regenerative power of love that Mitya anticipated the "beginning of a new Grushenka and a new Dmitri free from every vice" (p. 446). Only when Elder Zosima prophetically bows down at his feet at the family gathering in his cell does Mitya first experience a sudden shattering intimation of great suffering to come.

"Bowimg down to him—what did it mean," he wondered in deep anxiety (pp. 84–85; Bk. ii, Ch. vi). It is only when he stands so close to parricide—the most awesome transgression in Dostoevskian and religious terms—that Mitya is initiated into suffering and finally granted access to the participation in Dostoevsky's scheme of rebirth. Made to undergo a preliminary investigation at the inn at Mokroe, where he was arrested in the midst of the orgy (p. 538; Bk. viii, Ch. viii), Mitya is exposed to three stages of mortification and humiliation which are significantly entitled: "The Sufferings of the Soul: The First Ordeal"; "The Second Ordeal"; and "The Third Ordeal" (pp. 555–85; Bk. ix, Chs. iii, iv, v).

Going thus from one ordeal to another he becomes "stripped bare," as Richard Sewall put it, both morally and physically.31 The personal shame and degradation that Mitya undergoes create in him a state of preparedness for his initiation into suffering for mankind's common guilt. The revelation of universal guilt is granted Mitya in the epiphany of a dream-visions of "the suffering babe."32 Here we come upon what is a characteristically Dostoevskian-Christian, but also mimetic, substitution of the common guilt for the suffering of the innocent babe for the primordial mythic guilt of parricide. The burning pity that Mitya feels in his dream for the pitiful, starving babe and his mother with her milkless breasts consumes the old man in him, shaking him out of his absorption in a destructive self-will and eliciting a new "readiness" for expiatory suffering. "Well, gentlemen, I don't blame you. I am ready... I understand that there's nothing else for you to do," he tells the investigating magistrate who informs him of his committal (p. 617; Bk. ix, Ch. ix). Explicitly asserting his involvement in the "guilt of all," he contends, "we're all cruel, we're all monsters, we..."
all make men weep, and mothers, and babes at the breast” (p. 617).

Even on the very eve of his trial, Dmitri reasserts his guilt for the suffering of all, as well as his willingness to atone by his own suffering: “Brother,” he says to Alyosha: . . . “It’s for the babe I’m going. Because we are all responsible for all. For all the ‘babes,’ for there are big children as well as little children. All are ‘babes.’ I go for all, because some one must go for all” (pp. 719–20; Bk. xi, Ch. iv).

Dmitri’s spiritual awakening is shared by Grushenka. It is a new and chastened Grushenka who attends Dmitri on his road to Calvary. From the simple role of a partner in the mutual renewal through love, Grushenka is elevated to the role of a participant in the communion of suffering into which Mitya has been initiated. Grushenka even anticipates Dmitri’s own achieved readiness to atone when she assumes her whole share of guilt for the murder of the old Karamazov. “It was my fault! Mine! My wickedness!” she cries out, seeing Mitya arrested. “He did it through me. I tortured him and drove him to it . . . It’s my fault, mine first, mine most, my fault” (p. 555; Bk. ix, Ch. iii).34

We are now at a convenient vantage point, with a long view over Dmitri’s progressive engagement in the expiatory journey, to ask precisely how far Dostoevsky’s protagonist is allowed to go along the path leading to rebirth? In this ultimate esthetic statement, how intent was the novelist upon rebirth or salvation as the final stage of his protagonist’s metaphysical involvement?

On the eve of his trial, Mitya, moved by a “burning compassion,” reaches out to the “highest” in his ascent to rebirth as he ecstatically reads himself to descend in atonement to the “lowest.” In the very “bowels” of the earth he will, as he tells Alyosha, intone “a glorious hymn to God” (p. 720; Bk. xi, Ch. iv). But just at the point where the redeeming principle of suffering seems to attain in Dmitri its highest manifestation, we become aware of what may be seen as Dostoevsky’s moderation in his portrayal of the hero’s rebirth or salvation.35 Indeed, no sooner does Dmitri exult in anticipation over his Gloria in Excelsis than he recoils from that awesome expiation which would deny him Grushenka. “And without Grusha what should I do there underground with a hammer” (p. 725).

In an earlier scene, “Goldmines”—comic, yet ironically prophetic—Dmitri is presented with an icon by Madame Hohlakov who, instead of lending him the three thousand rubles he had sought to borrow, ceremonially “dedicates” him in the Russian custom to “a new career” as a “gold-finder” (pp. 467–71; Bk. viii, Ch. iii). The very fact that it is not a cross but only “a tiny silver icon on a cord, such as is sometimes worn next to the skin with a cross,” is very significant. We recall that before surrendering himself to the police Raskolnikov solicits and accepts a cross from Sonya. By accepting Liza’s cross from Sonya, he is consciously enacting his acceptance of the path to Calvary. He says himself “This, then, is a symbol that I am taking up my cross.”36 For Dmitri to accept a cross from Madame Hohlakov as Raskolnikov did from Sonya would mean his acceptance of the “martyr’s cross,” a burden which might prove intolerable. In this light Dmitri’s being given a mere tiny icon, an object traditionally regarded as a symbol of consecration or sanctification rather than of the suffering implied by the cross, symbolically suggests that no martyr’s cross is to be urged on him.

Dostoevsky indeed stops short of a complete apotheosis of salvation in his last novel. Dmitri’s ascent to rebirth is far from being completed. Indeed his quest for martyrdom may well become diverted.

But even though “Dmitri-as-Christ falters badly,” as put dramatically by Richard B. Sewall, he has made “a permanent advance” (pp. 114–16). Indeed, the new moral and spiritual dimension in his character will keep him from plunging again into the abyss of “Karamazovian baseness” (p. 312; Bk. v, Ch. v). All told, Dmitri may be seen as a clear-cut case of “positive” involvement in the regeneration process (Matlaw, pp. 20–22).

Ivan’s case, however, presents a more complex issue, in terms of both his implication in the crime and his involvement in the scheme of rebirth. Moved by a physical revulsion similar to Dmitri’s, Ivan licenses the murder in emotional terms: “One reptile will devour the other. And serve them both right, too” (p. 168; Bk. iii, Ch. ix) he tells Alyosha after the old Karamazov nearly had his brains dashed out by Dmitri. On the other hand, by his formulation of the theory “Everything is lawful,” he succinctly dissolves all the moral norms
and absolutes, thus obliquely providing a theoretical sanction for the murder of his father.

It is important, then, to realize that whereas Mitya's venture into freedom in the form of a murderous impulse against his father borders on the subhuman, it never reaches out into the superhuman. In Dmitri's rebellious urge there is no dimension of self-deification. But Ivan's arrogation of unlimited liberty in his doctrine approximates those presumptuous claims of boundless freedom made by Raskolnikov and Kirilov, who were impelled by their "obsession" with their own "deification" (Berdyaev, p. 99). In this light Ivan's involvement in an act of ultimate violence against the father emerges as an impelling paradigm, a potent exemplification of metaphysical aggression.27

Having Ivan established as a double "transgressor" within Dostoevsky's metaphysical scheme of redemption, we can explore the possibility of his positive development through the subsequent stages of that scheme. "God frets" Ivan: that is the secret that Elder Zosima guesses behind Ivan's specious argumentation. It is this anguished "fretting" of the "martyr" in Ivan that signals a "lofty heart capable of such suffering; of thinking and seeking higher things" (pp. 79–80; Bk. ii, Ch. vi),28 and betokens his potential growth and maturation in the experience of rebirth. We find Ivan first awakening to his guilt when Smerdyakov, disclosing his own role in the perpetration of the murder, presses upon him the revelation—that it was he, Ivan, who was "the only real murderer," while Smerdyakov was "only his instrument" (pp. 758–62; Bk. xi, Ch. viii). Ivan's resolution to give evidence against himself, at Mitya's trial even after Smerdyakov's suicide, fills Alyosha with a glad premonition that "God will conquer" (p. 796; Bk. xi, Ch. x).

In Ivan's descent into the cleansing void of death, emblematized by his submersion into the oblivion of his mental illness (which parallels Mitya's prospective descent into the "bowels of the earth"), lies cradled his birth into a new life. His very disease becomes the sign and symptom of his awakening. As Alyosha rightly intuits, Ivan's illness is "the anguish of a proud determination. An earnest conscience." And his final reflection as he watches his brother's deep sleep, "He will either rise up in the light of truth or... he'll perish in hate," affords once again a prefiguration of Ivan's possible recovery (p. 796). Although Ivan's participation in the scheme of redemption is not presented as a completed pattern, its potentiality and fulfillment have been clearly envisaged.

There remains Smerdyakov, Fyodor Karamazov's natural son, his flunky and his actual or factual murderer. The connotation of his name ("the stinker") obviously makes him an embodiment of what Berdyaev labels "Smerdyakovism," that "mean and subaltern expression of nihilist revolt" of which Ivan represents the "philosophical manifestation" (Berdyaev, p. 152). This implicit symbolic charge is ultimately weighted by Smerdyakov's actualization of the crime dialectically sanctioned by his learned half-brother. The role that he enacts in the parricide as the "true" son of Fyodor Karamazov is awesomely burdened by its association with Judas' betrayal of Christ. Smerdyakov, as George Steiner observes, betrays the old Karamazov for a specific sum of money just as Judas did Christ. This close link with Judas, who hanged himself after his betrayal of Christ, is confirmed by Smerdyakov's own self-destruction by hanging after his realization that "all is not lawful." Like Stavrogin's, Smerdyakov's heinous offense is not transmuted into a felix culpa. His consequent elimination from the scheme of redemption reiterates that other potent exemplum of negative involvement provided by the protagonist of The Possessed. Thus, as a paradigmatic counterstatement to Dmitri's explicitly and Ivan's potentially positive involvement, it completes the total configuration of the archetypal pattern of rebirth in The Brothers Karamazov.

Seen in this light, the three great novels emerge mythically dignified, and restate the perennial relevance and significance of the redemptive archetype. The timeless archetype of rebirth is accorded once again a new and modern moment and urgency in Dostoevsky's God-bearing but also God-struggling Russia. Modern man fallen through the concupiscence of his reason may yet be reborn like the corn of wheat that dies.

University of California
Berkeley
Notes


10 See also Paul Evdokimov, Dostoevsky et le problème du mal (Valence: Imprimeries Réunies, 1942), p. 135.


15 See Berdyaev, Dostojevsky, p. 99.

16 See Berdyaev, p. 77.

17 Crime and Punishment, Epilogue, Ch. ii, pp. 526–27. See also Evdokimov, Dostojevsky et le problème du mal, p. 25.


21 Dostojevsky (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1946), p. 82. “Sinning our way to Jesus” is Powys’s paraphrase of D. H. Lawrence.


26 See Blackmur, p. 182. See also Mochulsky, Dostojevsky: His Life and Work, p. 443; Flekser (Volyńskij), Kniga velikogo gnaza, pp. 121–24; Evjokimov, Dostojevsky et le problème du mal, pp. 370–71.


31 See Ivanov, Dostojevsky: Freedom and the Tragic Life, p. 84.


34 A. L. Flekser (Volyńskij), Carstvo Karamazovyx (S. Petersburg: Tipografia M. M. Stasyulevich, 1901), pp. 80–82.

35 Flekser, pp. 14–22.

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