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## **Rodion Raskol'nikov – “Strongman” between Two Women. Some reflections on *Prestuplenie i nakazanie***

*Prestuplenie i nakazanie* is a novel that abounds in female characters: Rodion's mother, the widow Pul'cherija Raskol'nikova, the pawnbroker Alena Ivanovna and her sister, the irate Katerina Ivanovna, Sonja's stepmother, not to mention the invariably abhorrent egotistical gossipmakers of German extraction, the Lippewechsels, Resslerichs and Darja Francevna, whom Dostoevskij loved so to deride. But the two most important ones are without doubt, Sonja, the leading star of his life, and Dunja, his beloved sister.

Rodion likes to think of himself as the head and breadwinner of the family, although in fact it is the other way around; he is not able to carry on without the money the other members of the family send him. Stressing Raskolnikov's view that his status as superman (*sverchčelovek*) entitles him to transgress the fundamental laws of humanity, Dostoevskij nevertheless gives the reader signs that behind this outer display of force is hidden a profound lack of self-reliance. When comparing himself to the great and daemonic figure of Napoleon, Raskol'nikov even risks making the reader laugh at the disproportions of his comparisons.<sup>1</sup>

Pitted against the figure of Rodion Romanovič are the two main female characters of the novel, Sonja and Dunja. At first sight they appear

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<sup>1</sup> Such “napoleonisms” were common in European literatures during the decades following the emperor's downfall in 1814, which goes to show the efficiency of British propaganda as well as the mixture of fascination and repulsion this enigmatical upstart exerted on the ruling classes of Europe. Hermann in Puškin's “Pikovaja dama” and Julien Sorel in Stendhal's “Le rouge et le noir” are two famous examples. In our time, the great Napoleon's nephew Napoleon III has been drawn into the Napoleonic mythology by the Dostoevskij scholarship. In her article “Raskol'nikov's City and the Napoleonic Plan”, Adele Lindenmeyr argues that Dostoevskij's outlook on St. Petersburg past and present is influenced by Napoleon III and his chief architect Haussmann's succesful plans for the renewal of the French capital. Ms. Lindenmeyr's article was originally printed in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1976. See also: Richard Peace (ed.), *Fyodor Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment. A Casebook*, Oxford 2006.

as diametrical counterparts, but as the action proceeds, it turns out that they share quite a lot of common features, especially as concerns their position within the ideological and formal setup of the novel. They are also introduced to the reader in a similar way, we hear or read about them before they are introduced in person: Semen Zacharovič Marmeladov tells Raskolnikov about Sonja during their conversation in the inn, whereas Dunja is the main theme of Pul'cherija Raskol'nikova's letter to her son Rodion.

Here is how Dunja is introduced to the reader:

“Avdot'ja Romanovna byla zamečatel'no choroša soboju – vysokaja, udivitel'no strojnaja, sil'naja, samouverennaja (...) Licom ona byla pochoža na brata, no ee daže možno byla nazvat' krasavicej. Volosy u nee byli temno-rusye, nemnogo svetlej, čem u brata; glaza počti černye, sverkajuščie, gordye i v to že vremja inogda, minutami, neobykovenno dobre. Ona byla bledna; no ne bolezneno bledna, lico ee sijalo svežest'ju i zdorov'em. Rot u nej byl nemnogo mal, nižnjaja že gubka, svežaja i alaja, čut'-čut' vydavalas' vpered, vmeste s podborodkom, – edinstvennaja nepravil'nost' v ètom prekrasnom lice, no pridavavšaja emu osobennuju charakternost' i, meždu pročim, kak budto nadmennost'.”<sup>2</sup>

Sonja, the prostitute, and Dunja, the proud heir of a family which at least formally belongs to the nobility – what similarities could there be between the two? In fact Sonja also belongs to the nobility, in her capacity of daughter of Semen Marmeladov, but Marmeladov has been sacked from civil service and Sonja forced into prostitution.<sup>3</sup> Thus they are both victims of social degradation. But a similar fall from social position hovers as a menacing threat above the Raskol'nikovs. Since the family's breadwinner is deceased and the son Rodion apparently unable to complete his studies at the university, the women of the family are left to fend for themselves. In their destitution only one remedy seems to remain – the attractive bodies of the families' young women. Sonja is already offering herself for sale on the streets of St. Petersburg. In

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<sup>2</sup> Citations from Dostoevskij's works are made from the edition *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v tridcati tomach*, Moskva 1972-1990.

<sup>3</sup> Semen Marmeladov is Tituljarnyj sovetnik, the 9<sup>th</sup> rank of the official Tabel' o rangach (of altogether 14).

Dunja's case, it seems necessary to find her a well-to-do suitor, after the scandalous outcome of her term as a governess of the children of the amorous squire Svidrigajlov, who is constantly making improper passes at her.

Using Rodion Raskol'nikov as his mouthpiece, Dostoevskij emphasizes the enslaved position that was the fate of Russian women of his time. Such are the reflections of Rodion after having read Pul'cherija Aleksandrovna's letter to him:

“Mamaša von pišet, što “Dunečka mnogo mozet snesti” (...) A teper' vot voobrazili, vmeste z mamašej, što i gospodina Lužina možno snesti, izlagajuščego teoriju o preimuščestve žen, vzjatych iz nižety i oblagodetel'stvovannyh muž'jami, da ešče izalagajuščego čut' ne pri pervom svidanii (...) Tjaželo za dvesti rublej vsju žizn' v gubernantkach po gubernijam šljat'sja, no ja vse-taki znaju, što sestra moja skoree v negry pojdet k plantatoru ili v latyši k ostzejskomu nemcu čem opodlit duch svoj i npravstvennoe čuvstvo svoje svjaz'ju s čelovekom, kotorogo ne uvažat i s kotorym ej nečego delat' – naveki, iz odnoj svoej ličnoj vygody (...) Da ved' tut Rodja, pervenec! Nu kak dlja takogo pervenca čotja by i takuju dočer'ju ne požertvovat'! o milye i nespravedlivye serdca! Da čego: tut my i ot Sonečkina žrebija, požaluj čto, ne otkadžemsa! Sonečka, Sonečka Marmeladova, večnaja Sonečka, poka mir stoit! Žertvu-to, žertvu-to obe vy izmerili li vpolne? Tak li? Pod silu li? V pol'zu li? Razumno li? Znaete li vy, Dunečka, Sonečkin žrebij ničem ne skvernee žrebija z gospodinom Lužinym. (...) a so mnoj? ... da čto že vy v samom dele obo mne-to podumali? Ne choču ja vašej žertvy, Dunečka, ne choču mamaša! Ne byvat' tomu, poka ja živ, ne byvat', ne byvat'! Ne prininaju!”

As can be seen from this passage, Rodion Romanovič clearly and succinctly sums up the conditions of womanhood in the Russia of his time. Human bondage was not only a reality for serfs, but for women as well.

This state of affairs is maintained not only by the ruling structures, but by the women themselves, especially those wielding some form of power. Interesting in this connection is the parallel position of Katerina Ivanovna, Sonja's stepmother, and Pul'cherija Aleksandrovna, Dunja's mother. Both of them try to push the younger women into a position of

sexual slavery, in order to safeguard the nuclear families of which they are matriarchs.

This point in the novel is apt to surprise, as Dostoevskij at this time was a markedly conservative writer, who even from time to time made polemical charges at the feminists of his time.<sup>4</sup> Maybe such opinions should rather be connected with Rodion's views than with Dostoevskij's ideological standpoints.

Rodion is sincerely preoccupied with the problems which have beset his mother and sister. But in a certain respect these problems suit him well, because they serve as a pretext to test out his theories of the right of the superman to transgress the normal laws of human society. Since it now all of a sudden has become a must to procure money to help his relatives, the unexpected arrival of Pul'cherija and Dunja to St. Petersburg makes it acutely necessary to put in action an experiment that he has contemplated for a long time.

This visit gives birth to a series of dramatic scenes described in the typical scandalous manner that appealed so strongly to Dostoevskij the writer. Rodion Raskol'nikov as we know him until now seems peculiarly indifferent to women, his age and gender taken into consideration. Now it turns out that he harbours strong feelings in this field – specifically towards his sister, Dunja. Learning of Lužin and the marriage plans concocted by Pul'cherija and Marfa Petrovna, Svidrigajlov's wife, he immediately shows signs of strong jealousy. Dunja will become the "zakonnuju naložnicu gospodina Lužina" if they marry – certainly an odd way of describing a marriage. There is something incestuous about Rodja's feeling for his beautiful sister. She is the only female character to whom Rodion shows erotic feelings.<sup>5</sup>

And no wonder. The more asexual an impression Rodion makes on the reader, the more erotically charged the portrait of his sister strikes one

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. F. M. Dostojevskij *Forbrytelse og straff*, Transl. Jan Brodal, Oslo, 2002, note on page 383.

<sup>5</sup> True enough, rather late in the novel, Rodion Raskol'nikov suddenly makes mention of a girl whom he asserts was his betrothed, before she died at a young age. This incident does not seem to have affected him particularly, and he even mentions that the girl may have been more inclined to take up the monastic way, than to marry and have children. Thus Rodion's "betrothed" is a figure that hardly need to occupy us much.

as being. A dashing brunette with flashing eyes, she attracts all the men surrounding her: Svidrigajlov, Lužin, Razumichin. Towards the end of the novel Dostoevskij describes with dramaturgical mastery how Svidrigajlov, possessed by her beauty and femininity, yet another time tries to seduce Avdot'ja, and how she, on the verge of yielding, only barely is able to escape from this piquante situation.

Nevertheless there are more features connecting Rodja and Dunja than those separating them. As a matter of fact, Razumichin, Rodja's friend, points out the astounding similarity between the two siblings. Actually, Rodja and Dunja are literary doubles of a type that was quite common in the *belles lettres* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We find other examples as well in Dostoevskij's other works (Svidrigajlov and Raskol'nikov in *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*), as in the works of other European writers of his time (in Russia e.g. in Gogol).

The similarity Razumichin has in mind, is probably mainly physical, but Dostoevskij also emphasizes the common traits of their psyche and intellect. For instance they describe each other as proud (*gordye*); one of the conversations between Rodja and Dunja concentrates on the notion of *gordost'*.

In Dostoevskij however, the quality of *gordost'* is hardly an unambiguously positive one, rather the other way round. In Dostoevskij's hierarchy of values, it is humility (*smirenje*) rather than *gordost'* that occupies the pride of place. In the numerous antipathetic portraits of figures of Polish extraction whom we meet in Dostoevskij's works, excessive pride is one of the main vices.

But Rodion Raskol'nikov is not pure pride, the author has given him other qualities as well, qualities fitting better into Dostoevskij's hierarchy of positive values. In his notebooks, where he jotted down his plans for *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, as well as other works, we find the following character sketch of Rodja: "V ego obraze vyražetsja v romane mysl' nepomernoj gordosti, vysokomerija i prezrenija k obščestvu. Ego ideja: vzjat' vo vlast' èto obščestvo. Despotizm – ego čerta."<sup>6</sup> But Rodja

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Wasiolek even maintains that Semen Marmeladov is Raskolnikov's double; if one accepts this, Rodja simultaneously has two literary *Doppelgänger*, Svidrigajlov and Marmeladov. Who is next? Cf. Richard Peace, op. cit. p. 55.

has his positive side as well. About the other, positive, side of Raskol'nikov, the well-known Dostoevskij scholar Nikolaj Nasedkin aptly remarks: "No v to že vremena, uže po chodu dejstvija, geroj étot po otnošeniju k otdel'nym ljudjam začastuju vystupaet istinnym blagodetelem: iz poslednich sredstv pomogaet bol'nomu tovarišču-studentu, a posle ego smerti i otcu ego, spasaet dvuch detej iz požara, otdaet semejstvu Marmeladovyh vse den'gi, čto prislala emu mat', vstaet na zaščitu Soni Marmeladovoj, obvinennoj Lužinym v vorovstve (...)"<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that Dunja and Rodja are not the only figures in Dostoevskij showing excessive pride. Another one is Nastas'ja Filippovna, the stunning beauty who is pitted against prince Myškin in *Idiot*. In Rodja and still more in Nastas'ja Filippovna, extreme pride works havoc. Nastasja is murdered by the truculent Parfen Rogožin; the punishment for this sin is thus death.

Nikolaj Nasedkin maintains that both the figure of Dunja Ras-kolnikova and that of Nastas'ja Filippovna are modelled on Apollinarija Prokof'evna Suslova, with whom Dostoevskij had a stormy relationship in the years preceding the publication of the novels *Igrok* and *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*. It is interesting to note that Polja Suslova emphasizes the quality of pride in herself:

"Pokinet li menja kogda-nibud' gordost'? Net, ne možet byt', lučše umeret'. Lučše umeret' s toski, no svobodnoj, nezavisimoj ot vnešnich veščej."<sup>8</sup>

Despite their common features, however, Sonja and Dunja appear as opposites. This is effectively borne out in the scenes where some of the chief characters are confronted by the author towards the end of the novel: Pul'cherija Aleksandrovna, Avdot'ja Romanovna, Lužin, Razumichin, Zosimov and Rodion Romanovič himself. Here is Sonja as Rodion sees her for the second time:

"Raskol'nikov ne uznal ee s pervogo vzgljada (...) Teper' éto byla skromno i daže bedno odetaja devuška, očen' ešče moloden'kaja, počti

<sup>7</sup> Cited after N. N. Nasedkin, *Dostoevskij. Ėnciklopedija*, Moskva 2003, p. 408.

<sup>8</sup> Samopožertvovanie as motif had a considerable frequency in Russian literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. also Jan Brodal "Motiv samopožertvovanja v tvorčestve V.M. Garšina", *Scando-Slavica*, Vol. 30, 1984.

pochožaja na devočku, s skromnoju i priličnoju maneroj, s jasnym, no kak budto neskol'ko zapugannym licom. Na nej bylo očen' prosten'koe domašnee plat'ice, na golove staraja' prežnego fasona šljapka; tol'ko v rukach byl, po včerašnjemu, zontik. Uvidav neožidanno polnoju komnatu ljudej, ona ne to čto skonfuzilas', no sovsem poterjalas', orobela, kak malen'kij rebenok, i daže sdelala bylo dviženie ujti nazad..."

At this stage we meet, so to speak, the real Sonja after having been given a fleeting glance of her in her "professional" attire in the scene at Semen Marmeladov's deathbed. Sonja is a "real nature girl": "Vospitanie, kak i predstavit' možno, Sonja ne polučila," her father has told us, and Dostoevskij goes on to furnish us with some other details of her appearance; he writes about her "blednoe i ispugannoe ličiko s raskrytym rtom i s nepodvižnymi ot užasa glazami" and adds: "Sonja byla malogo rosta, let vosemnadcati, chuden'kaja, no dovol'no chorošen'ka, s zamčatel'nymi golubymi glazami".

To a certain extent, then, Sonja may be considered a forerunner of prince Myškin, the absolutely beautiful man (položitel'no prekrasnyj čelovek). In Sonja's relationship to Rodion, the reader is struck by a peculiar passivity on her part. She is exerting her influence on him, she wants him to accept his guilt and expiate, but she uses her influence silently, she rarely takes any extraordinary initiatives or measures, she does not propagate, does not press her case.

Even as late as in the epilogue, the author emphasizes her timidity, describing Sonja's reticence in the relationship between her and Rodja. To a great extent this relationship takes place on a symbolic, or sometimes even ritual plane. Very often the two protagonists seem estranged from each other, but from times to time they are more in conjunction, and partly their relations are the result of mutual initiatives, as for instance their reading of the biblical story of Lazarus and his resurrection from the dead. The same may be said about their mutual exchange of devotionalia, such as crosses, icons and similar objects. This serves to emphasize the strictly orthodox way of Christianity. One would think that some might find their interaction on this point slightly fetishist, drawing the reader's attention away from the real objective: Rodion Raskol'nikov's admission to his guilt and the necessity of redemption. On the whole nothing much is said between them, and definitely no erotic

relation is taking place. This concerns the whole novel, the epilogue included.

True enough, Sonja gives her ultimate proof of devotion to Rodja by following him to Siberia, after he has received the sentence of several years of penal servitude. But here it perhaps should be added that in the Russia of Dostoevskij's days, there was nothing unique in this. Many of the wives of the Decembrists followed their husbands in banishment to Siberia after emperor Nicholas I had crushed the rebellion, and so did many of the wives of the Polish resurrectionists after the Polish rebellions of 1830 and 1863. Following one's spouse was not any *podvig* of sorts in Dostoevski's Russia.

Is Rodion Romanovič Raskol'nikov a strong man, a commanding personality? It is certainly of the utmost importance for this literary character to be strong, resilient, coping; superior to all other people. In other words, a strong character. Dostoevskij, relating the famous dream of the mare in the very beginning of the novel, hints that the whole work could be assessed in a framework made up of categories as strong and weak, innocent and guilty, losing and conquering. Rodia seems to have realized early in his life, what it means being helpless, beaten, victimized.

Qualities like stubbornness, ruthlessness, and truculence, may be used to describe him. He takes on a burden which is more difficult to carry than what most other people have to face. Rodja has guts and stamina, and does not easily give in. But he seems unable to adopt a purpose and carry it through when it means flouting all that is established. He vacillates, and does not possess sufficient control over his emotions. Dostoevskij himself has emphasized this flaw in the protagonist's character, by giving him the family name Raskol'nikov, derived from Russian *raskol* = slit, schizm. One might say that Raskol'nikov is not a strong man, it is his ambition which is strong.

We sense this vacillation in the details of Rodja's relationship with Sonja as well. She evokes his pity and sympathy, and he responds to this, but as often he is scolding her and treating her in the most unfriendly manner, even to the point of calling her a great sinner. As late as in the epilogue, Dostoevskij fails to be unambiguous on the question of the reality and credibility of Raskolnikov's conversion. When he at last does give us some more certainty and clarity on this point, it turns out that



Rodja's alleged conversion may be as much a conversion to Sonja and her love of him as it is a real confession of sin.

In my article "Raskol'nikov – the Unrepentant Sinner" (*Poljarnyj vestnik*, Vol. 8) I have tried to show that the outcome of the novel is not necessarily that of Rodja's conversion (in some respects rather the other way round). If one accepts such an interpretation, Raskol'nikov carries through his purpose, and gives a proof of strength. He then will turn out to be an apostate from the accepted Christian system of values, a strong man, at least in his own view.

But, as we know, it is the general consensus – and probably rightly so – that Dostoevskij generally subscribed to the Christian system of values in its orthodox version (*pravoslavie*). Then it may be argued that such a central protagonist of Dostoevskij's literary world must in the end conform with the author's ethical system. Consequently it will be possible to take a view which differs from the one the present writer has proposed.

Christianity is a religion of paradox: Whosoever shall seek to save his life, shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it. (Luke 17, 33). Rodion has got a chance to complete his conversion and reverse his views. So if Raskol'nikov is successful in changing his views and adopting their Christian counterparts, passing from apostacy to fidelity, he might be said to emerge victorious and consequently a strong man as well, in spite of his failure to become a napoleonic superman.

Support for such a view is the fact that *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* displays a system of self-sacrifice (*samopožertvovanie*) – even the terrible Rodion Romanovič presents the money he has received from his old mother to Sonja. So he, as well as some of the other bad guys, turn out not to be so bad after all. Thus Dostoevskij seems to give the reader a free choice; he allows us to select a good or a bad Raskol'nikov: one reader may prefer to put most stress on the coherence of the novel's psychological description, thus preferring the apostate Raskol'nikov, another to apply Dostoevskij's general ideological stance to the task of interpretation, thus making it possible to go for the newly converted Raskol'nikov, who has abandoned all his evil ways and from now on is going to wander on paths of the righteous.

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