Pulkheria Alexandrovna and Raskolnikov, My Mother and Me

Bernard J. Paris
University of Florida

Among the reasons Raskolnikov gives Sonya for having murdered the old moneylender was his desire to save his mother from poverty and his sister from sacrificing herself for his sake. Even if he could have completed his work at the university, "it would only have meant that in ten years' time, or twelve, I might (if all went well) hope to become a teacher or a clerk with a salary of a thousand roubles." Meanwhile his mother "would have withered away with care and grief" and "even worse things might have befallen" his sister. So he decided to get "hold of the old woman's money, to use it for my first years, so that I need not worry my mother, and to launch myself after the university … on a large scale."[1] He then says that he has not been telling the truth and that he murdered in order to find out if he was a man or a louse, if he was capable of violating the traditional morality without conscientious scruples like his hero, Napoleon. "I did not commit murder to help my mother--that's rubbish!" (V, iv, 398-99, 401). Later, however, after saying good-bye first to his mother and then to Dunya, he exclaims, "Oh, if only I were alone and nobody loved me, and if I had never loved anyone! *All this would never had happened!*" (VI, vii, 500). How much influence does his relationship with his family have on his criminal act? Perhaps his need to prove that he was an extraordinary man was more powerful than his need to rescue his mother and sister, but why did he need to be an extraordinary man in the first place?

A great deal of attention has been given to Raskolnikov's relationships with other characters in the novel, some of whom serve as foils or as purer embodiments of aspects of his own personality. From a psychological point of view, his most important relationship is with his mother, but relatively little has been said about it. I was alerted to its significance by a fortuitous circumstance: I spent two weeks with my mother, who was undergoing surgery, while I was working on an essay on *Crime and Punishment* in November of 1976.[2] Rereading the novel while being with my mother made me aware of many parallels between her and Pulkheria Alexandrovna and between her effect on me and Pulkheria's effect on Raskolnikov. Let me hasten to add that there are many differences as well, that my mother had more positive qualities than Pulkheria, and that I have not been driven to crime.

For as long as I can remember, my mother exhorted me to make something of myself, to be somebody, to get to the top. It did not matter what I did as long as I was a great success, though she clearly would have been happier had I become a real doctor and made a lot of money. I pursued a Ph.D. in English not because of a love of literature, but because I performed well in front of literary texts and received praise from my teachers. In graduate school at Johns Hopkins I felt myself to be among the select few and could not imagine how ordinary people could endure their meaningless lives. The fierce competitiveness of the program and the fact that most of the candidates failed exactly suited my neurosis, for it made success all the more glorious. When I stumbled on my doctoral oral and had to retake it in part, I was crushed. I had an extremely difficult time writing the dissertation that was to vindicate me. The dissertation was on George Eliot, and during the terrible four years I struggled to write it, I adopted her philosophy of living

for others and despised the arrogant, ambitious person I had been in graduate school. When I completed the dissertation and was told that it was publishable, I lost interest in George Eliot's philosophy, scorned living for others, and resumed my ambitious course.

The success of my dissertation enabled me to get a better job, in which I had to publish or perish. My anxiety that my writing block would return led me into psychotherapy. I soon found, of course, that I had many other problems. I had had a lonely childhood in which I was alienated from my peers because I was Jewish and smart (my parents were grocers who disliked Jewish customers and always had their stores in gentile neighborhoods) and from my parents because of my antagonism toward their business, in which I hated to work and which was my biggest rival for their attention. My parents were proud of my grades, however, and I relied on academic success to win love and esteem. This did not work with my peers, of course. In my junior year of high school, I let my grades go, joined a Jewish fraternity, and tried to be one of the boys. Love-starved, I met my future wife at the age of fifteen and married at seventeen (we are still together). She meant everything to me during our courtship, but after marriage I became obsessed with my academic ambitions and had little attention for her. Our early years were stormy as a result, and we had marital problems when I entered psychotherapy.

One of the major issues in therapy, therefore, was why I was so driven in my work. My obsession with academic success and my anxieties about it were disrupting my relationships and putting me under so much pressure that writing was a torment. I did not attribute these difficulties entirely to my mother, but she had played and continued to play a major role, and one of my objectives in therapy was to free myself from her influence.

She was in many ways a stereotypical Jewish mother. As her only son, I was her pride and joy, who was supposed to bring her *naches* (defined by Leo Rosten as "proud pleasure, special joy -- particularly from the achievements of a child" -- 257). My mission in life was to feed her pride, to give her something to brag about. During our Sunday telephone conversations, she always asked me, "What's new?" I translated this as, "What do you have for me to tell my friends about this week?" Since the life of even a successful academic does not feature weekly publications, promotions, job offers, grants, and fellowships, I usually felt that I was disappointing her. When my books were published, she kept looking for me on talk shows, though I had explained to her again and again that my sort of book did not attract that kind of attention. After I developed hypertension, I told her during a visit that she was putting me under too much pressure, that she seemed insatiable, that she was making me ill. She was concerned and apologetic and promised to back off, but on our way to the airport the next afternoon, she asked, "Now, how many books have you published, Bernard? Is it six?" At that time it was three, and she knew it.

I worked on my relationship with my mother in therapy, trying to find ways to fend her off and, above all, to free myself of the inner pressure I felt to try to satisfy her. It was not simply a matter of satisfying her, however, since I had incorporated her expectations into what Karen Horney calls an "idealized image" of myself, what I "should" be, what I had to be if I was not going to feel like a failure. I tried to moderate my need to be a great scholar doing work of world-historical importance. I tried to relax, to be more content with the good things in life that were available to me, not to be so obsessed with the progress of my work and its reception. As a

result of therapy, I was able to write with pleasure, and I became, I think, a better husband, father, and friend. I was not freed, however, from the influence of my mother.

This became clear during my two week visit with her in 1976, a decade after the completion of my most intensive work in therapy. As soon as I entered her hospital room, she introduced me to a nurse as her son the professor, and the nurse immediately reported that in her family there were six generations of Harvard Medical School graduates. This set the tone for my entire visit. My mother showed me off to doctors and nurses, and in her conversations with friends there was a constant exchange of boasts in which I figured prominently. I realized more vividly than ever that she lived in a world in which she was bombarded with stories about the accomplishments of children and relatives and that I was her chief source of ammunition with which to reply. She was fighting to hold her own in a very competitive environment and to score an occasional triumph. Hence her weekly question, "What's new?"

Outside of the hospital, things were much the same. I was staying with my wife's brother and his wife, who had a large family in the area. We went for Thanksgiving dinner to the home of one of my sister-in-law's sisters whose children were exceptionally bright and whose trophies were on display. Her own children, my nephews, wilted visibly in the presence of their cousins, whose parents delighted in telling stories of their triumphs. My nephews were fairly accomplished young men but no match for their higher achieving cousins.

I felt during this period that I had stepped into my unconscious, that it was all around me, objectified in the behavior of my mother, of her friends, of the doctors and nurses who had to let me know how important they were, and of my brother- and sister-in-law's family. Conditioned as I had been, how foolish I was to have thought that I could escape, that I did not have to try to do great things. This experience actually helped me to come to terms with some of my compulsions, to understand and accept them, to forgive myself for having them. I could not have been otherwise.

And all the time I was carrying around *Crime and Punishment*, rereading and brooding upon it. I was struck as never before by the importance of Pulkheria Alexandrovna, by the tremendous pressure she puts on her son, and by her resemblances to my own mother. Early in the novel, Raskolnikov receives a long letter from his mother that tortures him. As he finishes reading it, his face is "pale and convulsively distorted and a bitter angry smile play[s] over his lips" (I, iii). Before receiving the letter, he had been in terrible conflict about his plan to murder Alyona Ivanovna. He had carried out the rehearsal but then had felt "infinite loathing" toward the "vile, filthy, horrible" act he had been contemplating (I, i, 7). Convinced that he could never do it, he suddenly had a social impulse that took him to the tavern where he became involved with Marmeladov. Raskolnikov oscillates both before and after receiving his mother's letter, but her letter pushes him in the direction of carrying out his plan, and it is possible that without it he would not have committed the murder. I found myself oppressed by this letter and more able than ever before to enter into Raskolnikov's state of mind.[3]

In the third sentence of the letter, Pulkheria Alexandrovna writes, "You know how much I love you; you are all we have, Dunya and I, you are everything to us, our only hope and trust." She repeats these sentiments near the end, adding, "If only you are happy, we shall be happy too" (I,

iii, 28, 37). Is it Raskolnikov's happiness that his mother and sister desire? I think not, unless it takes the form of becoming a great man. When his mother writes that he is their only hope and trust, she means that, as the male in the family, he is the only one who can achieve glory in which she and Dunya can vicariously participate.

Raskolnikov's career is so important to his mother and sister that they are ready to sacrifice themselves to facilitate it. Pulkheria sends money, borrowed on her meager pension, and ruins her eyes with knitting to make a few extra roubles. In order to help her brother, Dunya takes her salary in advance from Svidrigaylov, forcing her to remain in his household after he begins to harass her. The self-sacrificial disposition of both women is well-known. Raskolnikov's landlady feels that there is hope of collecting the money he owes "because there is a mama who will come to Rodenka's rescue with her pension of a hundred and twenty-five roubles, if it means going without enough to eat herself, and a sister who would sell herself into slavery for him" (II, iii, 118). Dunya is, indeed, prepared to sell herself into slavery by marrying Luzhin in order to advance her brother's career. When Luzhin complains that she is not treating his interests as more important than those of her brother, Dunya heatedly replies: "I put your interests along side of everything that has until now been precious in my life, that has until now formed the whole of my life, and you are offended because I set too little value on you?" (IV, ii, 289). Rodya has been everything precious, the whole of her life. What a terrible burden for him!

Raskolnikov is supposed to feel gratitude for the sacrifices of mother and sister and to repay them by making them proud. In her letter, Pulkheria at once assures him that she and Dunya are fine, that their sacrifices are nothing, and lets him know how much she has suffered, how Dunya has been humiliated at the Svidrigaylov's, and how odious Luzhin is. He should love Dunya as she loves him: "her love for you is boundless; she loves you more than herself. She is an angel" (I, iii, 36). Raskolnikov feels that the only way he can reciprocate their "love" is by having a glorious career. He is convinced that Dunya has agreed to marry Luzhin because in this way "his happiness may be secured, he may be kept at the University, made a partner in the office, his future provided for; perhaps later on he may be rich, respected, honoured, he may even die famous!" (I, iv, 41). There is a great deal of bitterness here.

There is ample evidence that Raskolnikov has understood his sister correctly, that she was prepared to make an "infamous" marriage for the sake of his future glory. After Svidrigaylov tells her that her brother is a murderer and explains his theory of the extraordinary man, he recognizes that Dunya's distress is not entirely on moral grounds and says, "Calm yourself. He may yet be a great man" (VI, iv, 473). In parting from his sister, Raskolnikov also tries to reassure her: "Don't cry for me: I shall try to be honourable and manly all my life, although I am a murderer. Perhaps one day you will hear me spoken of. I shall not disgrace you, you will see; I may yet prove …". A "strange expression come[s] into Dunya's eyes at the promise of his last words" (VI, vii, 499).

Pulkheria Alexandrovna is even more obsessed than her daughter with visions of Raskolnikov's greatness. This is most evident near the end of the novel in a series of stunning passages to which I had paid little attention before rereading the novel during my visit with my mother. Despite being distraught by Raskolnikov's state and full of foreboding that "some great misfortune" is in store for him, Pulkheria is tremendously excited by his article and tries to convince herself that

he has been so distracted and neglectful because he been busy with new ideas. Although there is a lot that she does not understand, she has read his article three times and tells him that, "however foolish" she may be, she "can tell that in a very short time you will be one of the first, if not the very first, among our men of learning. And people dared to think you were mad! Ha, ha, ha! You don't know, but they really did think that. Wretched crawling worms, how can they understand what true intellect is?" She had been grieved about his living conditions, but she sees that she "was just being foolish again, because you could get anything you wanted tomorrow, with your brains and talents" (VI, vii, 493).

We are looking here, I think, into Raskolnikov's unconscious, into the attitudes he absorbed from his mother in childhood, that have governed him as an adult, and that he has elaborately rationalized in his theory of the extraordinary man. He will be one of the first, if not the very first, among men, most of whom are wretched crawling worms who are unable to appreciate true intellect. With his brains and talent, he should be able to get anything he wants immediately. This corresponds exactly to Raskolnikov's view of himself at the beginning of the novel and helps to explain much of his behavior.

Although Pulkheria understands "that something terrible [is] happening to her son," she cannot relinquish her concern about his career. She asks if he is going far away:

"A very long way."

"What is there there? Some work, a career for you?"

"What God sends … only pray for me …"

Raskolnikov went to the door, but she caught at him and looked into his eyes with an expression of despair. Her face was disfigured with fear.

"That's enough, mama," said Raskolnikov, bitterly regretting that he had ever thought of coming. (VI, vii, 496)

Raskolnikov is bitter because he understands that at least part of his mother's despair derives from the collapse of her dream of glory. Unlike Sonya and Dunya, she is not a source of spiritual support. We do not see her praying for him.

Pulkheria is so excited about Raskolnikov's article because it seems to promise the fulfillment of her dream. She tells him that his father had "twice sent something to a magazine--first a poem (I have the manuscript still, I will show it to you some time), and then a whole novel (I copied it out for him, at my own request), and how we both prayed that they would be accepted--but they weren't!" (VI, vii, 493). With her husband's failure to redeem their impoverished existence through a glamorous achievement, Pulkheria turned to her son, investing him with all her hope and trust. Now he, too, has disappointed her, and she soon becomes deranged.

I am not suggesting that her derangement results only from the frustration of her ambition or that she has no other concern for her son, but she remains obsessed with his career. After she falls ill,

Dunya and Razumikhin "agreed on the answers they would give to her mother's questions about her brother, and even worked out together a complete story of Raskolnikov's having gone away to a distant place on the Russian frontier on a private mission which would bring him in the end both money and fame." They know what she needs to hear. Pulkheria does not ask questions, however, but produces her own account of Rodya's departure (he is hiding from powerful enemies) and assures Razumikhin that her son will "in time be a great political figure, as was proved by his article and his literary brilliance" (Epilogue, i, 515). She reads his article incessantly, sometimes aloud, all but sleeps with it, and talks about it to strangers. My mother did not read my articles, but when she became manager of a hosiery shop in a mall after retiring from the grocery business, she kept my publications at hand and showed them to teachers from a nearby high school when they came into the store.

Pulkheria falls into long spells "of dismal brooding silence and speechless tears," from which she often rouses herself "almost hysterically" and begins to talk "of her son, of her hopes, of the future. . .". Trying "to give her a moment of pleasure," Razumikhin tells her about a student and his infirm father whom Rodya had helped while he was at the university and about how he "had suffered from burns in saving the lives of two little children a year ago." This brings Pulkheria Alexandrovna's "already disordered mind to a pitch of feverish exaltation," and "in public vehicles or in shops, wherever she could find a hearer, she led the conversation round to her son, his article, his helping of the student, his being injured in a fire, and so on." Finally, she falls ill, becomes delirious, develops a burning fever, and dies. In her delirium she reveals "that she suspected far more of her son's terrible fate that they had supposed" (Epilogue, i, 517). It is the frustration of her hopes, I think, that kills her, more than the suffering of her son. She cannot go on living after her dream of glory has died.

When we appreciate the all-consuming character of Pulkheria's need for her son to become a great man, we can begin to understand her effect upon him and the sources of his ambivalence. He reacts to her letter at the beginning of the novel with "a bitter angry smile" because it puts him in an unbearable position. He is supposed to be their source of protection and glory, but instead they are making terrible sacrifices for him and he is impotent. Their sacrifices make him feel like more of a failure and put him under even greater pressure to fulfill their lofty dreams. He shares his mother's attitude that he ought to be able to fulfill these dreams easily by virtue of his superiority to the crawling worms around him. He has dropped out of school in part because completing his education would only have led to a mediocre career, one that would have enabled him neither to protect them nor to satisfy their craving for glory. Instead he has begun to brood about committing a crime that would permit him to achieve these objectives. But he has powerful taboos against committing the crime and hates himself for even considering it. His mother's letter makes him feel that he must go ahead, and he is full of rage with her as a consequence. When he remembers her injunction to love Dunya, who loves him more than herself, and her statement that he is their only hope, "resentment well[s] up in him, more and more bitter, and if he had chanced to meet Mr. Luzhin at that moment, he would have felt like murdering him" (I, iv). This is clearly a displacement of his rage toward his mother and sister.

There are many evidences of Raskolnikov's rage toward his family. In order to insure that her precious son will "be rich, respected, honoured," and "may even die famous," Pulkheria Alexandrovna is ready to carry her "conscience . . . to Rag Fair" and sell her daughter into

prostitution. Raskolnikov feels that "Sonechka's fate is no whit worse" than Dunya's would be if she married Luzhin; indeed, Dunya's may be "even worse, fouler, more despicable" because with Sonya "it is a question simply of dying of hunger." He envisions his sister's "laments," "curses," and "tears" after such a marriage and his mother's suffering "when everything is clearly revealed." "And what of me?" he asks, "How indeed have they been thinking of me?" (I, iv, 41-42). Under the guise of unselfish love, they subject him to unbearable guilt by proposing to destroy themselves ostensibly for his sake but really to further their own ambitions. "Oh, ignoble natures! Their love is like hate. O how I hate them all!" (III, iii, 223).

It is quite possible that he displaces his rage toward his mother onto Alyona, just as he displaces it onto Luzhin. As a loving son, he usually represses his resentment toward his mother and is mystified when it erupts, but he immediately feels "an irresistible dislike" of the moneylender, who arouses no filial taboos (I, vi, 60). In killing her, he may be symbolically killing Pulkheria. During a spell of near-delirium when he is in the grip of despair and self-hate, he exclaims to himself, "Oh, nothing, nothing will make me forgive that old witch!" He is, in effect, blaming the murder on Alyona. This is followed immediately by thoughts of his mother and sister: "how I loved them! What makes me hate them now? Yes, I hate them, hate them physically; I cannot bear them near me." The connection, I think, is that he blames them for his crime, just as he blames Alyona, whom he hates so much that he thinks he "should kill her again if she came back to life!" (III, vi, 265). He later tells Sonya, "I killed myself, not that old creature! There and then I murdered myself at one blow" (V, iv, 402). He hates his mother and Alyona because both, in somewhat different ways, have led him to murder himself.

In murdering Alyona, he is not only symbolically killing his mother but is showing her what she has done to him and punishing her for it. By murdering Alyona, he kills himself (or at least his "future") and thereby kills Pulkheria Alexandrovna as well. Though only forty-three, she dies not long after. Raskolnikov's crime is an act that he does *for* his mother, *at* his mother, and *to* his mother. He knew in advance that he could not carry it off and what the consequences would be both for himself and Pulkheria. He had almost killed his mother once before, when he became engaged to his landlady's plain, sickly daughter. "Would you not think," Pulkheria complains to Razumikhin, "that my tears, my entreaties, my illness, my possible death from grief … would have stopped him? No, he would have trampled coolly over every obstacle. But surely, surely he loves us?" (III, ii, 207-208). He does love her, but he hates her as well and has a need to torment her, as this episode shows. She presents herself as an easy victim, much as Alyona had done, by her readiness to die of grief. It is difficult to say what might have happened if his fiancé had not passed away. Pulkheria Alexandrovna would have been crushed had her son made a marriage so out of keeping with her conception of his worth.

Not only Raskolnikov's murder of Alyona but also the conflicting side of his personality is influenced by his relationship with his mother and the values and example of his family. Pulkheria's letter reinforces his ambition by reminding him that he is their only hope and trust, but it also urges him to pray to God, to "believe in the mercy of our Creator and Redeemer." Afraid that he "may have been affected by the fashionable modern unbelief," his mother reminds him of his religious upbringing: "Remember, my dear, how, when you were a child and your father was still alive, you lisped your prayers at my knee, and remember how happy we all were then!" (I, iii, 37). She wants her son to be a great man but also a good Christian.

Raskolnikov's childhood was steeped in religious feeling. Once or twice a year his pious family visited the cemetery where his grandmother was buried, paying for a requiem in the old stone church: "He loved this church with its ancient icons, most of them without frames, and the old priest with his trembling head." The cemetery also contained the grave of a younger brother who had died in infancy. Raskolnikov could not remember his brother, but "every time they visited the cemetery he devoutly and reverently crossed himself before the little grave and bowed down and kissed it" (I, v, 52). He was a sensitive boy who disliked the village tavern, pressing closer to his father when they passed it, and who felt so sorry for horses when he saw them being beaten that his mother took him away from the window.

Raskolnikov grew up in an atmosphere in which generosity and self-sacrifice were glorified. Indeed, in Dunya and his mother he has examples of women who are heedless of their own well-being and seem only to live for other people. Dunya even tries to save Svidrigaylov, who astutely tells Raskolnikov that "she is the kind of person who hungers and thirsts to be tortured for somebody, and if she does not achieve her martyrdom she is quite capable of jumping out of a window" (VI, iv, 456). Raskolnikov admires Dunya, though he hates being the object of her sacrifice, and he is drawn to martyrs like Sonya, who turn the other cheek and seem to love others more than themselves. He is a very compassionate person who is compulsively generous and is given to taking burdens on himself. He is attracted to his fiancé not only because it torments his mother but also because she is unattractive and ill: "If she had been lame as well, or hump-backed, I might very likely have loved her even more …" (III, iii, 221). Like his mother and sister, he glorifies sacrifice and derives a masochistic satisfaction from suffering for others.

Pulkheria is extremely proud of this side of her son, which she has done much to cultivate. In her deranged state, she brags not only about his article, but also about his having helped a fellow student and his father while he himself was in poverty and saved two children from a fire, burning his hands in the process. She wants him to be a great man, to be sure, but also to be a very good one. When he apologizes for having given twenty-five roubles for Marmeladov's funeral, she says, "Don't go on Rodya. I am sure that everything you do is right!" When he says that he "may be no good" but that Dunya ought not to marry Luzhin, she becomes extremely distressed: "And why will you persist in saying you are no good? That I cannot bear" (III, iii, 218, 222). And when he does not come to see her, she rationalizes his neglect: "You may have God knows what plans … in your mind, or all sorts of ideas may have sprung up in you; am I to be always jogging your elbow to ask you what you are thinking about?" (VI, vii, 492).

This reminds me of my mother who, as she grew old and ill, told me her troubles every Sunday, but often ended by saying, "Now, don't worry about me, Bernard. You need a clear head for your writing." She wanted me to worry about her, of course, but also to get on with my work. There is a similar conflict in Pulkheria between the need for a loving, dutiful son and one with impressive achievements. Pulkheria tries to balance her needs by telling Raskolnikov that he "mustn't spoil" her, that she'll know he loves her even if he can't visit: "I shall read your writings, I shall hear about you from everybody, and from time to time you will come to see me--what could be better?" (VI, vii, 494). She then bursts into tears.

Raskolnikov knows how important it is for his mother that he be both great and good, and he strives desperately to reconcile these imperatives, which he has internalized. It seems that if he is

good he cannot be great and that if he is to be great he cannot be good. No course of action is satisfactory. If he follows his mother's injunction to remember his religious upbringing, not only will he fail to achieve greatness, but he will be unable to lift himself out of poverty in time to save her and his sister from sacrificing themselves. He feels that he must commit the crime in order to do his duty toward his mother and prevent Dunya's immoral marriage. If he commits the crime, however, he will be a sinner in the eyes of his family and will be separated from them by guilt. His mother would be destroyed should she learn of what he had done. He would be violating his own humane and conscientious feelings, moreover, and would loathe himself intensely. He will be damned if he commits the murder and damned if he does not.

Pulkheria is afraid that her son has been corrupted by the fashionable modern unbelief, and Dostoevsky wants us to see that as Raskolnikov's problem. Porfiry diagnoses him as a contemporary intellectual with a one sided-development who has been led astray by abstract reasoning. Believing that he can govern his life by reason alone, he justifies his crime in utilitarian terms, as a matter of simple arithmetic. From a thematic point of view, Raskolnikov illustrates how modern unbelief leads to crime. He gets into trouble because he has left the religious environment of his native village and has come to St. Petersburg, a hotbed of atheistic humanism.

But why is Raskolnikov so receptive to modern ideas, and why do they lead to such an extreme result in him? Dostoevsky does not raise such questions, since they would not serve his ideological purpose, but as a great psychological novelist he provides so much information about Raskolnikov's character, motives, and background that I cannot help asking them. Dostoevsky's psychological realism subverts his thematic intentions, for when we understand Raskolnikov as an imagined human being, he escapes his illustrative role.

Just after his plan has begun to take form in his mind, Raskolnikov overhears a conversation in a public house that has "an extraordinary influence on the subsequent development of the matter." A student is telling an officer that he "could kill that damned old woman and rob her, without a single twinge of conscience." He then presents a utilitarian rationale for such an action: "Kill her, take her money, on condition that you dedicate yourself with its help to the service of humanity and the common good …. What is the life of that stupid, spiteful, consumptive old woman weighed against the common good? No more that the life of a louse or a cockroach--less, indeed, because she is actively harmful. She battens on other people's lives, she is evil." The officer agrees that "she doesn't deserve to live," "but there you are," he says, "that's nature." "But don't you see," replies the student, "nature must be guided and corrected, or else we should all be swamped with prejudices. Otherwise there could never be one great man" (I, vi, 62-63). The conversation ends with the student saying that "of course" he would not kill the old woman himself.

What most impresses Raskolnikov, I think, is the idea that unless we get rid of our prejudices there can "never be one great man." Raskolnikov does not need to be a great man because he has fallen prey to modern unbelief but is attracted to the new ideas in part because they serve his psychological needs. Dostoevsky suggests that these ideas are responsible for the increase in crime and derangement in contemporary society, but in the case of his protagonist he shows them leading to crime when combined with his individual psychology. Atheistic humanism seems to

provide Raskolnikov with a way out of his psychological impasse, enabling him to dismiss the conscientious scruples that block his path to greatness and at the same time satisfy his moral needs by seeing himself as a benefactor of mankind. According to the ethical calculus articulated by the student, he will be doing far more good than harm by killing the noxious old moneylender.

The trouble is that murdering the old woman still *feels* wrong. Raskolnikov tries to explain this feeling as a residue of conventional prejudices, traditional ideas that a truly enlightened man should be able to transcend. He divides the world into ordinary people who are governed by such prejudices and extraordinary ones who, realizing that there is no God, become their own law-givers and are able to step over the old arbitrary barriers without experiencing guilt. Murdering the old woman will not only give him the means to launch his career but will signify that he *is* a great man--if he can do it without conscientious qualms, without feeling that it is a crime. It becomes the means of proving to himself that he is the superior being he needs to be if he is to fulfill his mother's expectations, to actualize his idealized image of himself, and to escape self-contempt.

After the murder, Raskolnikov finds himself behaving in just the ways he had predicted for the ordinary man. He feels guilty, goes to pieces, gives himself away, and seeks punishment. He hates himself for what he has done and hates himself for hating himself, since that shows he is not the Napoleonic figure he had aspired to be. He oscillates between impulses to make peace with his conscientious side by confessing and efforts to hold onto his claims to be an extraordinary man by denying that he has committed a crime. He has committed a blunder, perhaps, or a criminal offense, but not a violation of moral law, the existence of which he must deny. Raskolnikov can give up neither his need to be good nor his need to be great, and since there seems to be no way in which he can reconcile these needs, he is driven to the verge of madness.

Raskolnikov's psychological conflicts continue after he goes to prison and eventually make him physically ill. In a dream he has during his illness he finds a way out of the bind into which first his mother's contradictory demands and then his own inner conflicts have put him. In his dream the whole world is condemned to fall victim to the pestilence of unbelief, a pestilence in which people regard themselves as "the sole repository of truth" and are unable to agree on "what was evil and what good." They go mad, kill "one another in senseless rage," and fall into chaos and cannibalism. All are "destined to perish, except a chosen few, a very few," who, founding "a new race of men and a new life" will "renew and cleanse the earth." When Raskolnikov recovers, he cannot shake off "the impressions of his delirious dreaming" and is distressed that "this ridiculous fantasy" lingers in his memory. But he soon finds himself "seized and cast" at Sonya's feet. "Restored to life," he takes out the New Testament from which Sonya had read to him of the raising of Lazarus, and the idea flashes through his mind that her beliefs can now become his (Epilogue, ii, 523-24, 526-27).

Raskolnikov's dream shows him how to reformulate his search for glory in such a way that he can be both great and good. In his article, ordinary men were believers while extraordinary men were those who saw that the traditional morality had no foundation and that each person was a law unto himself. In his dream he envisions the consequences of the spread of his atheistic

beliefs. Here ordinary men are unbelievers while the "chosen handful of the pure" are presumably those who have preserved religious truth. Having worked out the solution to his problem unconsciously, he finds himself embracing Sonya and her beliefs, thus becoming one of the chosen few. He no longer has to violate the traditional morality in order to be great, since he can become great by being one of the handful who prepare the way for the renewal and cleansing of the earth by upholding the teachings of Christianity. Had she lived long enough to see Raskolnikov's vision for himself fulfilled, his mother would have been proud.

While my understanding of my relationship with my mother sensitized me to Raskolnikov's problems, it was my analysis of another aspect of my experience that influenced my interpretation of his solution. As I have already indicated, in graduate school I was in some ways a more innocuous version of Raskolnikov. Influenced by my mother, I had a dream of being one of the first, if not the very first, among our men of learning. Like many of my fellow students, I felt that my talents should exempt me from the expectations governing ordinary mortals. Some of them stole books and records on the grounds that these things should be in the hands of those who could properly appreciate them. I did not do that, but I felt that most other people were considerably less important than I was, and I neglected or exploited them accordingly. In my mind, I was doing my parents and my wife a favor by allowing them to finance my education, since that would give meaning to their lives. My dream of glory came crashing when, for reasons I came to understand in therapy, I went blank during my doctoral oral and had to retake two fields. What happened after that has certain parallels with Raskolnikov's "conversion."

I felt under enormous pressure to write a magnificent dissertation in order to restore my pride and vindicate myself. This pressure made the dissertation almost impossible to write, and I frequently despaired of completing it. Confronted with the prospect of a humiliating failure, I became a convert to George Eliot's Religion of Humanity, in which the emphasis was on giving value to our lives by living for others rather than for our own selfish objectives. Like Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, I was looking for something that "would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self" (Prelude, 3). My importance to others, rather than ambitious triumph, became the meaning of life, and I sought to be a good husband, father, and friend. My dissertation developed a proselytizing tone, as I preached my new gospel. George Eliot had the answer to the value problems of modern man, and I was proclaiming her truth to the world. Even if I did not complete the dissertation, I would exemplify her teachings by my life. I was still trying to work eighty hours a week, I might note, and was largely deluding myself.

I somehow finished the dissertation, which was very well received, and promptly lost my enthusiasm for George Eliot's beliefs. This puzzled me greatly until I read Karen Horney's *Our Inner Conflicts*. In this book, Horney describes three defensive strategies--moving toward, against, and away from people--and the constellation of character traits, behaviors, and beliefs that accompanies each solution. The aggressive solution (moving against) describes me in graduate school and Raskolnikov before his conversion. The compliant solution (moving toward) describes Raskolnikov and me after our conversions. Sonya exemplifies an extreme form of the compliant solution, and George Eliot glorifies compliant attitudes, values, and character traits. Often, both the aggressive and compliant solutions co-exist in the same person, with one being predominant and the other subordinate. Since they are so opposed to each other, the individual is

torn by inner conflicts. Raskolnikov's mother and mine wanted contradictory things of us, fostering both sets of trends.

If our predominant strategy fails, we may embrace our subordinate solution. Thus when I could not write my dissertation, I adopted George Eliot's philosophy of living for others. Raskolnikov oscillates between the two solutions all through the novel, but after he goes to prison he realizes at some level that his aggressive solution cannot work, he has a dream that shows him another path to glory, and he embraces the compliant Sonya and her beliefs. The enthusiastic reception of my dissertation made me feel that *my* aggressive solution *could* work, and I resumed my ambitious course. Hence my loss of enthusiasm for Eliot's Religion of Humanity.

When I asked earlier why Raskolnikov was so receptive to modern ideas, I said that although Dostoevsky does not raise this question, he presents Raskolnikov in such psychological detail that I cannot help asking it. I would not ask this question in the absence of psychological detail, since there would be no way of answering it, but the question really comes from my understanding of my own experience, which has predisposed me to assume a psychological basis for beliefs.

Self-analysis can be a valuable critical tool. I do not think that I could have come to my understanding of Raskolnikov's relationship with his mother, of his conversion at the end, and of the connection between his beliefs and his psychology without having analyzed similar phenomena in myself.

There are dangers, of course, in understanding literature through our own experience, since we might engage in naive identification and fail to discriminate between the characters and ourselves. One of the values of literature, after all, is that it gives us a sense of what it is like to be other people confronting a different set of circumstances and living in a different world. Our ability to engage with what is different, however, inevitably depends on finding some point of likeness. The more facets of ourselves we are aware of, the more kinds of other people to which we can respond. The knowledge we derive from self-analysis should discourage naive identification, since it involves distance from raw experience and a critical perspective. We need a point of likeness for entry, but the greater our self-awareness, the more conscious we will also be of difference. Ideally, we want to be close enough to the characters to be able to enter into their experience and to have enough psychic distance to keep them separate from ourselves. Although there are parallels between Pulkheria and Raskolnikov, my mother and me, there are many dissimilarities as well, and I have tried not to conflate the two relationships. Using my understanding of my relationship with my mother as a starting point, I have tried to do justice to the specific ways in which Pulkheria Alexandrovna and Raskolnikov drive each other crazy.

Notes

1. I am using the Jessie Coulson translation of Crime and Punishment as published in the first edition of the Norton Critical Edition of Crime and Punishment. To make it easier for readers to find the quoted passages in other translations or in other editions of this translation, I shall include part and chapter as well as page numbers in the text.

2. This essay, "The Two Selves of Rodion Raskolnikov," was published in Gradiva 1 (1978), 316-328. There is a serious printing error, corrected in the following issue, that garbles several pages of the text. Drawing on this essay, I discussed Crime and Punishment again in "A Horneyan Approach to Literature," The American Journal of Psychoanalysis 51 (1991), 324-332. These two essays analyze Raskolnikov's character structure and inner conflicts in terms of the psychoanalytic theories of Karen Horney and are complementary to the present discussion. They make some of the same points about Raskolnikov's relationship with his mother that I shall make here, but this essay is in many ways a fresh reading of the novel, since I did not grasp the dynamics of the relationship in detail until I was invited to write on the topic of self-analysis in literary criticism.

   For other discussions of Raskolnikov's relationship with his mothers, see Wasiolek 1974, Kiremidjian 1975, 1976, and Breger 1989. I arrived at my view of the relationship independently, but I find much to agree with in Breger.

3. There is a good discussion of Pulkheria's letter in R. D. Laing, Self and Others (Penguin Books, 1971 [1961]), 165-173. Laing reports that "when this letter was read to a group of eight psychiatrists, all testified to feelings of tension in themselves" (p. 166). My analysis of the letter is compatible with Laing's.

Works Cited

Breger, Louis. *Dostoevsky: The Author as Psychoanalyst*. New York: NYU Press, 1989.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Trans. Jessie Coulson. Norton Critical Edition. Ed. George Gibian. New York: W. W. Norton, 1964.

Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. Ed. Gordon Haight. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956.

Kiremidjian, David. "Dostoevsky and the Problem of Matricide." *Journal of Orgonomy* 9 (1975): 69-81.

----. *Crime and Punishment*: Matricide and the Woman Question." *American Imago* 33 (1976): 403-433.

Rosten, Leo. *The Joys of Yiddish*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968.

Wasiolek, Edward. "Raskolnikov's Motives: Love and Murder." *American Imago* 31 (1974): 252-269.

This essay was published in *Self-Analysis in Literary Criticism*, ed. Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, NYU Press, 1994, pp. 111-129.