

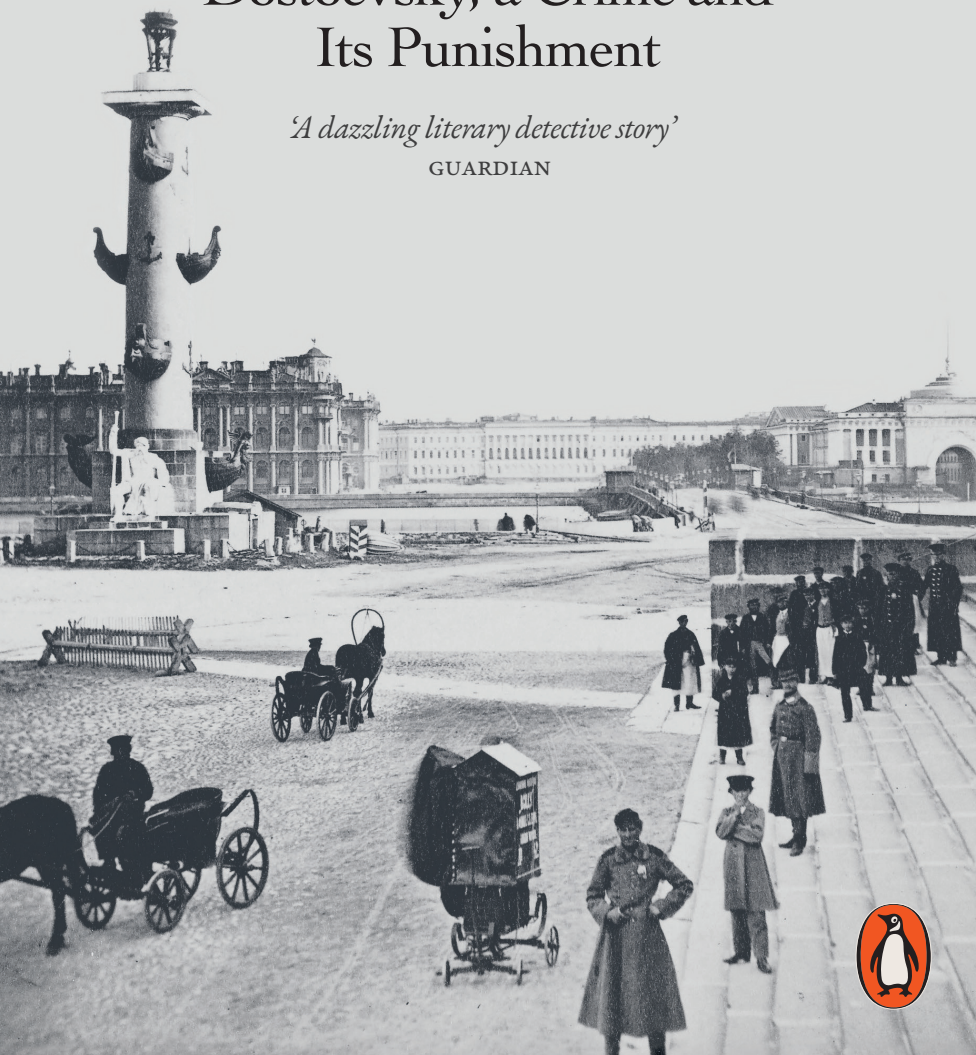
*Kevin Birmingham*

# THE SINNER *and* THE SAINT

Dostoevsky, a Crime and  
Its Punishment

*'A dazzling literary detective story'*

GUARDIAN



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## THE SINNER AND THE SAINT

‘I never imagined anyone could make Dostoevsky richer – deeper – knottier – than he already was. But by revealing the secret background behind *Crime and Punishment*, Kevin Birmingham reveals a depth of thought and feeling that makes this most shocking of novels even more shocking yet’ Benjamin Moser

‘A historical study, a work of literary criticism and, gratifyingly, a double thriller . . . combining scholarly rigour with liveliness, historical breadth with lightness. Sinners and saints, real and fictional, are cast in a sharp new light; big themes come alive in a kaleidoscope of little things’ *Spectator*

‘The biography is stuffed with interesting details – from the uniforms worn by the Russian military to the slang that was used in French prisons – and the story is told in such an urgent fashion that these details dance from the page . . . high-voltage prose . . . this is the fullest account I have yet read of how the author’s interest in murder developed over time. It’s also the fullest account of the parallels between Lacenaire’s own crimes and the imagined career of Raskolnikov’ Guy Stagg, *The Tablet*

‘An absorbing, thickly textured biography of *Crime and Punishment* that develops through fragments and shards . . . Kevin Birmingham has written a bold and rewarding book that will allow readers, whatever their own predispositions, to return to Dostoevsky’s first masterpiece with a renewed and more capacious perspective’ Oliver Ready, *Literary Review*

‘A dexterous biblio-biography about how *Crime and Punishment* came to be born . . . rich, complex . . . it is an audacious effort’ *Los Angeles Times*

‘Immersive . . . a rich, detailed narration of Dostoyevsky’s life, with all of its paradoxes and tortured ambivalences’ Jennifer Szalai, *The New York Times*

‘*The Sinner and the Saint* is a gripping murder mystery – a dazzling literary “howdunnit” that meticulously reconstructs the political ferment that inspired Dostoevsky’s most famous novel. At the heart of it all is Raskolnikov’s real-life double, a charming gentleman murderer whose trial set Parisian society ablaze’ Alex Christofi, author of *Dostoevsky in Love*

‘A page turner about turning pages, *The Sinner and the Saint* not only brings us back into the fevered panic of Raskolnikov as he murders an old woman, his motives a mystery even to his own sputtering mind, but also to real-life characters. Compulsively readable, tautly drawn, and richly researched, here is the brilliant study Dostoevsky and his staggering *Crime and Punishment* so deserves’ Brad Gooch, author of *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O’Connor*

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‘Birmingham’s impressive research combined with a flair for characterising the teeming intellectual debates of the day give absorbing insights into the origins of one of the world’s great novels’ Sue Prideaux

‘Birmingham writes the kind of deeply researched and deeply felt literary biographies for which clichéd rave terms, “immersive” and “reads like a novel” were coined . . . Superb . . . As Birmingham certainly knows, it would take a Dostoevsky novel to do full justice to Dostoevsky, but *The Sinner and The Saint* is a pretty exquisite consolation prize’ Maureen Corrigan, NPR’s ‘Fresh Air’

‘As he unspools the story of how Dostoevsky first encountered the villain Lacaenaire, Birmingham places the author in a culture brimming with tales of criminal intrigue and moral transgression . . . he shows us that Dostoevsky is both the “sinner” and the “saint”, a repentant political criminal who wanted his characters to inspire not fervor but fear – of our worst instincts’ Jennifer Wilson, *The New Republic*

‘I can’t imagine a better guide than Kevin Birmingham. Dostoevsky was both sinner and saint, and this wonderfully pungent book presents his extraordinary life in the most vivid detail imaginable. Birmingham puts you in the room when Raskolnikov brings down the axe; and he puts you there too when the novelist discovers the face of redemptive love’

Michael Gorra, author of *The Saddest Words:  
William Faulkner’s Civil War*

‘Kevin Birmingham has scored a hat trick, delivering three biographies in one book – expertly chronicling the lives of the man who wrote *Crime and Punishment* and the murderer who inspired the tale, and the fascinating evolution of the novel itself. Birmingham’s ingenious braided narrative offers an inspired new reading to those who already know and love Dostoevsky’s masterpiece, and serves as an indispensable guide for first time readers’ Megan Marshall, author of *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Birmingham received his Ph.D. in English from Harvard, where he was a Lecturer in English and in History & Literature as well as an instructor in the university’s Writing Program. He is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce’s Ulysses*. It received the PEN New England Award for Nonfiction in 2015 and the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism in 2016.

KEVIN BIRMINGHAM

The Sinner and the Saint

*Dostoevsky, a Crime and Its Punishment*



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*For Julia and the future*



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# The Sinner and the Saint



## A Bloody Enigma

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There's an evil spirit here." The voice broke through every now and then, among various notes and ideas for the story. A young man, looking back upon his crimes, concludes that an evil spirit compels him. "How otherwise could I have overcome all those difficulties?"

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was writing in a hardcover notebook. His candle had burned down to a nub, and the hotel staff refused to give him another one until there was nothing left. They had been instructed to ignore him, to stop cleaning his clothes, to stop serving him dinner. Dostoevsky would wander around Wiesbaden in the early evening, pretending to have someplace to eat, and return at night to fill his notebook pages with bits of dialogue and plot overviews and reminders. "Very Important." *"Don't forget."*

There were fully imagined passages and pages of budding ideas. He underlined key words and phrases. He squeezed additions in the margins or between lines. He crossed out entire paragraphs that seemed blunt or excessive. He drew sketches on the pages, as if he couldn't put his pen down even when he wasn't writing. Drawings of churches and foliage. The faces of his characters appear, shouting and smiling and blending into crosshatched shadows with lines of text edging around them. Sometimes the murderer's voice would burst out. "Is it really going to continue eternally, eternally!" the voice shouts. "Oh, how I hate them all! How I would like to take them all and slaughter them all to the last one." He crossed it out.

Dostoevsky was determined to tell a murder story from the murderer's

perspective, and his character couldn't be a monster. He would have flashes of anger, and he would be bitter and proud, but he would be sensitive, compassionate, and bookish. He would want to put ideas into action. He would believe that one bold, extraordinary act could change everything. He would not fantasize about slaughtering people. No. The murderer would be chilling because he wants so desperately to be good. "When I become noble," the murderer says, "the benefactor of all, a citizen, I will repent."

Readers would have to be disturbed but not repulsed so that they could get close to a murderer's mind—closer than they had ever been before—and yet continue reading. There is an evil spirit here, it's true, but a spirit that settles into something insidious and mundane, a slithering way of thinking. "It turns out that I acted logically," Dostoevsky had the murderer conclude. But that wasn't quite right either, and the strange alchemy of reason and bitterness, idealism and darkness—the quixotic and the wicked—became more difficult to handle as time went on.

It was September 1865. For more than a month, Dostoevsky had been staying at the Hotel Victoria in Wiesbaden, Germany, where he had lost all his money at the roulette tables. He wrote to Ivan Turgenev, thinking that a fellow novelist, a fellow gambler, would send money. "I am disgusted and ashamed to trouble you. But except for you I have absolutely no one at the present moment to whom I could turn." He was suffering from a fever that left him shivering at night, and the hotel's proprietor—surely familiar with cases like this—had begun threatening to summon the police. Dostoevsky was trapped in a hotel beside Wiesbaden's railway station, broke, ill, and humiliated. His murder story was his only way out.

Dostoevsky's career until 1865 could not have been more turbulent. In just four years, he had gone from being a literary sensation to a convict in chains exiled to Siberia. He was only twenty-three years old when he was celebrated throughout St. Petersburg as Russia's next great writer while his first work of fiction, a novella called *Poor Folk*, had not even been published yet—it was circulating as a manuscript. A swift downfall followed: rushed stories, negative reviews, rejection from the very people who had lionized him. His involvement in political circles led to his arrest and exile in 1849. He spent four years in a hard-labor prison camp and five years in a Siberian army battalion, and he would remain under surveillance until shortly before his death.

He knew better than anyone the high stakes of being a writer in tsarist Russia. Writers were suspect. All reading material, including newspapers, required prepublication approval from censors. Books were frequently banned, and private presses were forbidden. The path Dostoevsky had chosen was particularly treacherous at mid-century, when Russia found itself caught between the liberalism sweeping Europe and the empire's entrenched authoritarian rule. By the 1860s, disputes about the empire's direction were acrimonious. Russia, Dostoevsky declared in 1861, was becoming a nation divided into "two hostile camps."

Dostoevsky returned to Petersburg in 1859, after a decade in exile, and published his account of Siberian prison life, *Notes from a Dead House*, to great acclaim. He felt resurrected. He used his newfound clout to be his own editor in his own magazine. In less than five years, he and his brother Mikhail founded two journals and watched each of them collapse. One was crushed by debt, the other by order of the tsar.

Now, alone in his hotel room, he was forty-three years old. His wife and his beloved Mikhail had both died the previous year, three months apart. He was fifteen thousand rubles—several years' income—in debt, none of his great novels had yet been written, and he was suffering from powerful epileptic seizures. Each one left him depressed and lost in a mental fog for days or weeks. It was increasingly difficult to write.

"Why has my life ended?" the murderer finally asks himself. The question, Dostoevsky wrote in his notebook, is crucial.

Dostoevsky came to Wiesbaden thinking he could win enough money at roulette to pay off his debts and resume his literary career. It had been four years since his previous novel (*The Insulted and Injured*), and more than a decade since he needed someone else's magazine to serialize his fiction. He had frayed so many ties that he was forced to send the proposal for his new story to Mikhail Katkov, the editor of *The Russian Herald*, a man whom Dostoevsky had accused, in print, of being a mediocre businessman vulgarizing Russian literature. He pitched his story as "the psychological account of a crime." A young man succumbs to "strange, 'unfinished' ideas floating in the air" and decides to murder an old pawnbroker, take her money, and make up for his crime with altruistic acts. He was writing it "with ardor," he told Katkov. It would be around ninety pages long, and he could finish it in two weeks.

He asked for an advance and a quick decision. “In my straitened situation, every moment is valuable.”

Given the circumstances, Dostoevsky was surprisingly optimistic. “The story that I’m working on now,” he wrote to a friend, “may be the best thing I’ve written.” Somehow he knew. What he could not have known, stuck in his hotel, feverish and hungry, was that he was entering the greatest phase of his career. Dostoevsky would write three crucial novels over the next seven years, including *The Idiot* and *Demons*. Then he would embark upon his magnum opus, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Two decades of hardship, contemplation, and experimentation brought the novelist to a spectacular period of creativity in which he wrote four of the greatest novels in Russian literature—in all literature. Together they depict consciousness as the atmosphere surrounding the world of objects and events rather than an interiority embedded within it, and they would become both a resource and a technology for generations of novelists laboring in his reconfigured universe. It began with *Crime and Punishment*, this story of a young man who succumbs to strange, floating ideas and decides to kill a pawnbroker. The murderer didn’t have a name yet, but it was coming—Raskolnikov.

Decades later, it seemed clear that Dostoevsky started a revolution in “the *artistic thinking* of humankind”—that’s how the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin put it. He argued that Dostoevsky’s novels provide “a new artistic model of the world.” His novels are gatherings of autonomous voices interacting with one another beyond the control of an overriding authorial voice. His great subject was self-consciousness, and each consciousness in his novels inhabits its own world. Bakhtin called this innovation the *polyphonic* novel, a form that transcends the simplicity of centuries of monologic art. Humanity, Bakhtin argued, was still incapable of navigating Dostoevsky’s complex terrain.

Even this grand assessment may not capture the fullness of *Crime and Punishment*, because Dostoevsky’s murder story bridges the complexity of consciousness with a stenographic record of empirical facts in the external world. We can see that precarious connection between unfinished consciousness and established facts in the novel’s central plot: a narrative where notions and theories, dreams and hallucinations seep into a criminal investigation, a quest

for material evidence of a crime. The joining of the two worlds characterizes the novel's locale as well, St. Petersburg, the way fog and dust sweep over the cobblestones of the planned city and the way rows of orderly neoclassical buildings contain interiors divided up into warrens of disorienting spaces, dark corridors, windows facing walls, rooms within rooms, doors leading to doors. And the nexus of unfinished consciousness and finished material is evident in the novel's central event: a young man's vague ideas about goodness lead the reader into the middle of a room where blood is pooling around the dead bodies of two women—two autonomous voices turned into appalling empirical facts.

*Crime and Punishment* is a novel about the trouble with ideas. It is not a novel of ideas. It does not showcase or allegorize philosophical positions for readers to consider. It is not primarily the drama of a young man wrestling with ideologies. Nor is it the story of redemption from misguided thoughts and actions—the notion that Raskolnikov repents and finds God is one of the things that nearly everyone gets wrong about *Crime and Punishment*. The trouble with ideas is the way they interact with everything else that's human about us, things that have nothing to do with reason or evidence or theory. Dostoevsky's novel is about how ideas inspire and deceive, how they coil themselves around sadness and feed on bitter fruit. It is about how easily ideas spread and mutate, how they vanish, only to reappear in unlikely places, how they serve many masters, how they can be hammered into new shapes or harden into stone, how they are aroused by love and washed by great rains and flowing rivers. It is about how ideas change us and how they make us more of who we already are. It is about how ideas can do many of these things at once, or different things to different people, or the same thing to everyone around you.

Near the end of *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov has a fever dream that he considers prophetic: a plague “from the depths of Asia” would one day sweep over the entire planet. The first symptoms of infection with the “microscopic creatures” are a form of madness: “Never, never had people considered themselves so intelligent and unshakeable in the truth as did these infected ones. Never had they thought their judgments, their scientific conclusions, their moral convictions and beliefs more unshakeable.” The plague spreads throughout cities and countries, causing anxiety, weeping, the beating of breasts. No one can agree on what is good or evil. No one understands

anyone else—“each man thought that he and he alone possessed the truth.” Violence breaks out. Meaningless, spiteful murders. Armies arrayed against foreign enemies start destroying themselves on their way to battle: “The ranks would break up, the soldiers would fall upon one another, stabbing and cutting, biting and eating one another.” Every collective venture disintegrates. Trades and agriculture cease. The economy halts. Alarms ring out constantly in the cities, summoning people nowhere, to nothing. Raskolnikov sees the world ravaged by fire and famine and disease, and he can’t stop thinking about it. But the plague of dead certainties—the ideas “floating in the air”—were not from Asia. They were from Europe.

When people invoke nightmares of morbid individualism destroying civilization, they are usually defending broad cultural resources—a tradition, perhaps, or a regime, a language, a religion. But Raskolnikov fears for the most elemental human capacities: the ability to work together, to establish shared values, to agree upon basic facts—the things we need just to inhabit the same world and to take care of one another. All of that is vulnerable to an infectious idea. The infection goes so deep, in fact, that even the plague’s end still carries the germ of individualism. “Only a few people in the whole world could be saved,” Raskolnikov dreams, “they were pure and chosen,” people destined “to renew and purify the earth.” Raskolnikov wants to explore the limits of ideas, but their boundaries are often further off in the distance than we will ever see. To protest, to be altruistic, to seek change is to pursue an idea to an unknown continent. It may also return you to your point of origin irrevocably changed, perhaps ruined, perhaps renewed.

When Dostoevsky’s novel was taking shape in Wiesbaden, he began thinking about how he could begin the story much earlier, before the crime takes place instead of months or years later, as he had originally planned. He kept circling closer, until Raskolnikov’s crimes were no longer an awful memory or an offstage event but something the reader experiences directly, a brutal act unfolding in an excruciatingly detailed scene. We watch Raskolnikov hide the ax inside his coat. We follow him up the dark stairwell. We see the old woman’s arm clutching the door handle as he jerks her door open. Dostoevsky wanted the reader to see her hair, her skinny legs, her yellow wallpaper. He wanted the reader to experience Raskolnikov’s second thoughts, his mistakes and confusion,

the way his plan tips sideways, how one victim becomes two, the frustration of bloodstains, and the sudden pounding on the door while he is still inside with the warm corpses.

Dostoevsky must have told himself that there is virtue in imagining something so awful so vividly, like standing on the edge of a cliff and picturing what it would be like to leap into the abyss. The French call the compulsion *l'appel du vide*—the call of the void. It's the desire to experience the awful magnitude of such a small step, to glimpse another world of consequences just for a moment, perhaps to ensure that you will never actually do it.

Dostoevsky had long thought about what it would be like to take that step into the void. The first stirrings of the evil spirit in *Crime and Punishment* happened years before his feverish nights, trapped in his hotel. It began with an irresistible curiosity. He sought out the stories of fellow convicts in Siberia and listened to the way they killed people. Fictional murders, from that point on, seemed cartoonish. He hunted for accounts of murders in newspapers. Russian periodicals often covered homicides in Europe, partly because reporting on domestic crime was difficult and partly because such stories were easy to find in the European press—especially in France, where broadsheets featuring violent crime circulated by the hundreds of thousands, usually untouched by government censors. Macabre stories soon spread to other formats, including daily newspapers, monthly serials, and volumes of collected stories. Dostoevsky got hold of one such collection around the beginning of 1861, when he and his brother were looking for material for their first magazine. He began reading Armand Fouquier's *Causes célèbres de tous les peuples*, which chronicles the stories and trials of dozens of infamous criminals. That's how Dostoevsky first learned about the 1835 trial of the infamous poet-murderer Pierre-François Lacenaire, an extraordinary and horrifying incarnation of evil.

Lacenaire was slender, almost delicate. He was born into a wealthy merchant family that lost its entire fortune just as he was coming of age, and the catastrophe untethered him. He deserted from the army twice, traveled to Italy and Switzerland, and settled eight disputes with dueling pistols, or so he claimed. He claimed to be thirty-three when the double murder happened, but

official records indicate he was only thirty. What was clear was that Lacenaire quoted Horace and Sophocles, that he wrote poetry and songs, and that straitened circumstances did not diminish his sense of style. He wore a blue frock coat with a velvet collar and maintained a carefully trimmed mustache. He did not think of himself as handsome so much as a man with “remarkable features”: gray eyes, high forehead, cleft chin, strong nose. Prison registers noted a scar on his right forehead. His hair was fine, though already starting to gray, which he attributed to incessant study and reflection. Lacenaire had vast plans. He felt possessed by a fever, a “fixed idea to *resist*,” as he described it, and a compulsion to commit swift, powerful acts.

Lacenaire’s plans involved killing a man named Jean-François Chardon, whom he knew from prison. Everyone called him “Aunt Madeleine”—“aunt” was a common term for men like him, men of “infamous habits,” men who consorted with other men. Chardon had been convicted of theft and indecent assault and had recently been getting into blackmail and scams. He wore religious garments, posed as “a brother of the Charity of St. Camille,” and pocketed the donations. Lacenaire heard that there was a large amount of money hidden in his apartment. Gold coins, silverware, and ten thousand francs in cash. Chardon lived with his mother, a sixty-six-year-old widow, so both of them would have to be killed. “Who were Chardon and his mother?” Lacenaire asked. They were nothing, useless. He would use a three-edged file—good for sharpening saws, for getting between the teeth. Lacenaire bought one, sharpened it, and fitted it with cork on one end for a better grip.

He recruited a partner named Victor Avril, another former prison mate. In the early afternoon of December 14, 1834, the two ex-convicts turned down a dark alleyway, the passage du Cheval Rouge, and walked up a muddy stairwell. The handrail was a greasy rope. Lacenaire pounded on the door, but there was no answer. When they walked back out into the alley, they saw Chardon standing there in some state of undress and holding a brush.

“We just came from your place.”

“In that case, come on up with me,” Chardon told his visitors.

Some words were exchanged when they entered the two-room apartment, and suddenly Avril began strangling him with his bare hands. Lacenaire pulled out his file and stabbed him repeatedly from behind, then from the front. Chardon collapsed and kicked open a cabinet filled with dishes. It is so

difficult to choke someone to death—Chardon was still moving when Avril grabbed an ax hanging on the door. He swung for his skull and finished him off.

Lacenaire rushed into the bedroom and found the widow sick in bed. He stabbed her face, her eyes repeatedly. He struck her so forcefully that the opposite end of his sharpened file split through the cork and sliced his finger. He piled pillows and sheets on top of her and then went for the large armoire where the money was. He heard a nearby clock strike one as he forced the lock open, and the only things inside were some silverware and five hundred francs. There was supposed to be ten thousand.

Lacenaire started grabbing clothes—a large brown coat with a black fur collar for himself and a black silk hat for Avril. They wrapped the silverware and some more clothing in a pink vest they found. On their way out, they spotted an ivory statuette of the Virgin Mary, which also seemed worth taking. Just as they were leaving, two men appeared on the landing to see Chardon. Lacenaire tried to pull the door closed, but it was stuck on the mat. Chardon's body was visible through the doorway as he calmly informed the visitors that Chardon was unfortunately not at home.

As soon as they left, Lacenaire and Avril went to the Turkish baths a few streets away on rue du Temple, where couples could stroll in a verdant garden and where the two murderers could wash the blood off their hands and scrub the stains from their clothes and shoes. They were sporting their newly acquired apparel when they proceeded, later that night, to a basement café frequented by criminals. Lacenaire waited while Avril sold the loot. He got two hundred francs for the silverware and twenty for the coat. The merchant offered only three francs for the Virgin, so they threw it into the Seine. Then they ate dinner and went to the Théâtre des Variétés to watch a comedy show. Afterward, at around 11:00 p.m., Avril went to a brothel, and Lacenaire went home. "That was a great day for me," he said later, thinking back. "I breathed again."

The press tended to treat criminals as a biologically inferior class degraded by ignorance and poverty. But Lacenaire was different. He was handsome, stylish, and polite. He intended to study law. He wrote poetry and published an article about the criminal justice system that even Alexis de

Tocqueville cited. The collapse of his family's fortunes ended Lacenaire's studies prematurely, and he turned to forgery and petty theft. The Chardon murders were intended to net enough money to bankroll a bigger, more profitable scheme: to rob banks by luring collecting clerks into dark apartments, rented and furnished for the purpose. He would stab them and take the money and banknotes in their satchels.

The public's fascination with Lacenaire began with his trial. Press accounts noted his cheerful demeanor whenever he entered the courtroom. He described the murders with calm precision, and at one point he stood up to pantomime his stabbing technique for the jury. But more often he seemed indifferent to the proceedings. During the ninety-minute reading of the thirty indictments, he rested his head on his hand or on the bar of the dock. Reporters always remarked upon his appearance—his beautiful features, his tufted sideburns, the way his blue frock coat flattered his slender figure, the way the arteries in his neck beat visibly. The “Don Juan of Murder” was one press epithet. The “Swan of the Scaffold” was another.

Women filled the benches after obtaining many of the tickets reserved for the public. “Beautiful ladies!” one periodical exclaimed in alarm. They listened to hours of gruesome testimony while wearing silk dresses and pink hats, “shamelessly imperturbable.” Their captivation was an ominous sign. Surely a nation is in peril, a writer for *La France* argued, when “women, whom the law of Christianity has elevated to the role of pure and consoling angels, prostitute themselves with such passion to applaud the dramas of cynicism and blood.”

The publication of Lacenaire's memoirs, written in the weeks before his beheading, made him even more appealing to some. “I come to preach the religion of fear to the rich,” he wrote, “for the religion of love has no power over their hearts.” He insisted his crimes were an attack upon the foundations of an unjust society, a campaign of vengeance against the wealthy on behalf of the downtrodden citizens of France.

Crowds lined the procession route through Paris one Saturday morning when a rumor spread that Lacenaire was about to be executed. A week later, he was guillotined in front of several hundred people. A wax likeness of his head drew crowds when it was displayed in the Museum of the Academy of Medicine—the murderer's own hair and whiskers were attached. People

wanted to get as close as possible, to probe the wound, and Dostoevsky was no exception.

Lacenaire's celebrity suggested that the vainglorious murderer was an eruption of something deep within bourgeois society rather than some extrinsic menace. Dostoevsky considered the story important enough that he helped translate Fouquier's account into Russian and devoted fifty pages to it in the second issue of his magazine *Vremya* in February 1861. Fouquier noted Lacenaire's "incomplete and superficial" education and emphasized that something about his nature was "essentially incomplete." This, according to Fouquier, is why things went wrong. A toxic mixture of "ferocious materialism," bitterness, and base cravings induced a feverish delirium that led this man to murder. And yet the most disturbing fact was that instead of recoiling at his depravity, many Parisians were somehow enchanted. *L'affaire Lacenaire* swept Paris decades earlier, but it remained, Fouquier wrote, "a bloody enigma."

Dostoevsky intended to solve it. He wrote in *Vremya* that Lacenaire "is a remarkable personality, enigmatic, frightening, and gripping." Though decades in the grave, he merited the present tense. There was something perpetually disturbing about the way his vanity fused with certain base instincts, though Dostoevsky would not elaborate. Stories like this, he told his subscribers, are "more exciting than all possible novels because they light up the dark sides of the human soul that art does not like to approach." But why not approach it?

The following spring, in 1862, Dostoevsky was devouring Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. The novel had just been published, and he was reading two volumes a week. He had always loved Hugo, and *Les Misérables* would become one of his favorite novels. It was during Dostoevsky's reading of the third volume that Lacenaire burst forth like a shade from hell. A chapter depicts society as an ever-changing surface resting upon a network of subterranean mines—a "venous system of progress." An economic mine, a religious mine, a philosophical mine, and so on. Civilization depends upon all of them, the narrator says. Each one is filled with centuries of laborers—Rousseau, Diogenes, Calvin—perpetually toiling beneath the surface, altering the civilization above. But beneath the deepest mines lies a dark chasm counteracting that progress. It is a pit where monsters reside, where creatures harbor a

“terrifying blankness,” and where “the eyeless self howls, hunts, gropes, and gnaws.” Whatever is left of humanity here is slowly transforming into Satan. “From this cavern,” the narrator announces, “comes Lacenaire.”

By the time the poet-murderer emerged briefly in *Les Misérables*, he had been lurking around French literature for years. Lacenaire’s memoirs had imprinted his image indelibly into the culture. He inspired characters in novels by Stendhal and Balzac. Baudelaire admired him. Flaubert marveled at his “strange, deep, bitter philosophy,” the way he dragged morality through the mud. “I love to see men like that, like Nero, like the Marquis de Sade.”

How had society produced such a person? Some blamed simple greed. “Poverty is hell; wealth is paradise,” Lacenaire declared in prison. But money was never a sufficient explanation. He did not have to kill in order to steal, after all, and killing was always part of his plan. Nor did greed explain Lacenaire’s joy, his willingness to do it all over again. “Killing without remorse is the greatest happiness,” he said.

The problem was larger than greed. A writer for *La France* argued that Lacenaire’s violent crimes were less harmful than “the doctrines and instructions he has left to people of his kind,” and they were everywhere. “How many unpunished Lacenaires are now occupying, let’s say frankly, the top ranks of today’s society?” His doctrines were pervasive. Several newspapers described Lacenaire’s poetry as a versified defense of “egoism and materialism,” twin philosophies that liken people to machines programmed only to seek gratification. A lead article in *Le Temps* claimed that to observe Lacenaire at trial was to see a man putting “systemic egoism” into practice, which would compel people to abandon principles for passing tastes, to weaken laws with whimsical interpretation, and to clamor for individual rights at the expense of community. An article in *La France* was more direct: Lacenaire’s godless materialism signaled the ascendancy of a new “revolutionary philosophy.”

The term “revolutionary” was not used loosely in 1830s France. The French Revolution did not end in the 1790s. Instead, it set in motion decades of upheavals that spread across Europe. Europeans were living in an age of revolutions. The unrest spread easily because the French Revolution was about more than regime change. It was about changing ideas—ideas about what it

means to be a nation, what it means to have rights, to be free, to be sovereign. Ideas about democracy, republics, and constitutions that had been disputed by eighteenth-century philosophers suddenly became pressing issues in the streets. King Louis-Philippe came to power in his own three-day revolution in 1830, but the July Monarchy, as it was called, switched out one royal house for another and established a reign of political stasis, bourgeois economic appeasement, and, at best, incremental change. It had no place for revolutionaries.

There was good reason to think of Lacenaire as a political threat. He composed republican songs and aspired to write for a republican journal, *Le Bon Sens*, that openly opposed the king. But one of the most chilling details was that while Lacenaire waited to murder one of his victims, he was calmly reading Rousseau's *Social Contract*. "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains." The opening sentence alone would have drawn him in. Many French readers thought of Rousseau as the Jacobins' philosopher, the favorite of Robespierre, who hailed him as "divine." Rousseau's rejection of absolute monarchy, his secularism, his conviction that the people are sovereign, and his arguments for a government that serves the general will seemed partly responsible for the Reign of Terror, when the revolution devolved into an emergency government that arrested people en masse and guillotined seventeen thousand people in order to start French history all over again, to reset the calendar to Year One.

Rousseau was no firebrand. He believed that individuals are free only when they submit to a community's welfare, and that the general will expresses what's best for the whole, not the sum of selfish interests. But by the 1830s, all this was obscured by overzealous readers and isolated passages from the book that Lacenaire could not stop reading. "The State, set on fire by civil wars, is born again, so to speak, from its ashes, and takes on anew, fresh from the jaws of death, the vigour of youth."

Newspapers seized upon Lacenaire's interest in *The Social Contract* when it was revealed during his trial. It was "the symbol of his life," one declared. The underlying fear of the age of revolutions was that it might encourage righteous violence and principled murder. If one can rightfully take up arms against an unjust government, then surely one could take up arms against an unjust society. If one could kill a king for one's country, then why not kill a banker? Lacenaire's crime spree was captivating because it seemed to be the revolution's next rational step.

The Don Juan of Murder collapsed the distinctions between political and nonpolitical violence. He fused the evil of the murderer with the romance of the assassin. “The social structure must be attacked,” Lacenaire wrote, not from the top—not by attacking the king—but at its foundations, “its morals.” His principles, he insisted, will “cultivate the seeds of discontent” already sown throughout France. His principles “will arm those who suffer against the fortunate of this century who indulge.” And the sight of his beheading would activate those principles among a select few people in the crowd. He was adamant. Once, when a skeptical visitor was ushered out of his prison cell by the guard, Lacenaire rushed to the cell door and shouted, “Ah, sir! you believe that Lacenaire’s death will not make apostles! . . . You will see! you will see!”

People sometimes think of Dostoevsky as writing novels from the top down, beginning with an ideology he wished to explore and then looking for ways to dramatize it. But he almost always worked from the bottom up, starting with intriguing personalities, a voice, a handful of clear details, memorable scenes or circumstances. The story of Lacenaire—that “enigmatic, frightening, and gripping” personality, that voice and image—was impossible for Dostoevsky to forget, and his Frenchness was particularly useful. France epitomized the age of revolutions, the confidence and rationalism of the Enlightenment, and much of what emerged from it—materialism, industrialization, bourgeois comfort and self-regard. If this was the type of criminal such a society produced, what would happen if Russia followed?

*Crime and Punishment* was a sensation from its first installment in the January 1866 issue of *The Russian Herald*, and it captivated a country in crisis. Europe’s age of revolutions arrived belatedly in Russia in the 1860s. An era of reforms (the abolition of serfdom and the liberalization of the economy, the justice system, and education) met a wave of radicalism that crashed on April 4, 1866, when a man walked up to Tsar Alexander II with a loaded pistol and tried to assassinate him. Russia’s liberal trajectory suddenly reversed as the ensuing surge of nationalism renewed suspicion of all foreign influence, including westernizing reforms, and the tsar began reasserting authoritarian control.

Russia’s 1860s crisis was about its future, and so it was ultimately about

ideas—which ideas to dismiss or overthrow and which to keep or revive. The nation was divided between those who wanted Russia to be more western oriented and those who wanted its future to be a stronger version of its past. Everyone insisted that they alone possessed the truth.

Mid-century philosophies widened Russia's divisions. The "egoism" that 1830s Parisians saw in Lacenaire referred to the single-minded pursuit of selfish needs. By the 1860s, egoism had become an extreme version of enlightenment individualism. It was a radical skepticism in which one's self is the only thing that undeniably exists and therefore the only thing that undeniably matters. A philosopher named Max Stirner, well known to Dostoevsky, took up the banner of egoism in the 1840s, and his message was clear: whatever you are and whatever you want is good. "We are perfect altogether," Stirner wrote, "and on the whole earth there is not one man who is a sinner!" Everything impinging upon the self—morals and laws, gods and states—was a pernicious fantasy that must be destroyed. Stirner weaponized egoism. Violence, revolution, and crime became virtues. Crime, in fact, was *better* than revolution. "A revolution never returns," Stirner wrote, "but a mighty, reckless, shameless, conscienceless, proud *crime*—does it not rumble in distant thunders?" Reading Stirner was like reading an evangelist spreading the good word of Lacenaire's life years after his execution.

And his crimes did rumble in distant thunders. By the twentieth century, Lacenaire came to represent the radical artist undermining bourgeois society. André Breton thought of him as a surrealist. Albert Camus called him "the first of the gentleman criminals." Michel Foucault claimed he was a Jacobin born too late and that he had a permanent place in "the paradise of the aesthetes of crime."

In the hands of revolutionaries, skepticism and aesthetics can become great tools of destruction and recreation. The Russian radicals of the 1860s were just beginning to use skepticism to clear away large swaths of received wisdom, traditions, and beliefs. An enlightened individual need not simply *believe* in anything. But something was changing. That skepticism was beginning to tilt slightly, as if someone had placed a small weight on the far scale. "*Believe* in nothing" became "Believe in *nothing*." This became known in Russia—and then beyond—as nihilism. Nihilists want to sever all ties, Dostoevsky wrote

to Katkov in 1866, to “immediately construct paradise on a tabula rasa.” A blank slate. Nothing. All modern revolutions, Dostoevsky believed, wanted, at their core, to reset the calendar to Year One.

It seemed as radical as one could get. But what if there were one further step? Something else to wipe away? *Crime and Punishment* is disturbing—particularly for a nation in crisis—because it is a book that travels the dark road between violence and uncertainty. Many novels are violent, of course, and all novels rely upon uncertainty, but in Dostoevsky’s novel the violence and uncertainty were more disturbing and elemental than readers had normally encountered. The murder scene’s gruesome detail is intrusive—the most certain of things. But then the story shifts to a criminal investigation conducted by an investigator who seems strangely dismissive of the cornerstone of his entire enterprise. “Evidence, my dear, is mostly double-edged,” he tells Raskolnikov. Every clue cuts in opposite directions and leads to contradictory conclusions. His skepticism doesn’t subtract. It multiplies. Double-edged evidence provides a key insight into Raskolnikov’s case, into the swerves a life can take and the way a desire to be altruistic can lead to an ax and nothingness. And does the investigator even have any evidence? The uncertainty began with Dostoevsky’s early drafts—his revisions to the murderer’s voice, nature, and motives, to the plot and the narrative mode. It seeps into the final version of the novel and persists even in the story’s ending, which gestures to a way out for Raskolnikov without ever making it there. The novel doesn’t resolve. It halts.

*Crime and Punishment* is a murder mystery, though the mystery is not who killed the pawnbroker and her sister. The mystery is why. The answer seems easy at first, but as the story progresses it starts slipping away, almost imperceptibly, until it becomes clear that Raskolnikov is a mystery even to himself.

That is the further step. A downtrodden person is most apt to rely upon himself to determine the truth, to grab an ax, and to change the world when everything appears false, when constraints and values seem vaporous, when skepticism shrinks the knowable world down to oneself and the radius of one’s own perceptions. Yet Dostoevsky’s novel reminds us that no perception is too small to lose its double edge. Who we are is not a thing to rely upon. We investigate ourselves and find that we are irrational, contradictory, and opaque. We do not want what we want. We are our own doubles. We are divided

within ourselves. Raskolnikov's name (*raskol* in Russian) means a schism, a split. Coming to terms with that split—that doubling and doubt—is a remedy to the plague of dead certainties not because it abolishes the truth but because it is the premise of its discovery.

Several scholars have discussed Lacenaire's influence upon the creation of Raskolnikov, including Dostoevsky's biographers Joseph Frank and Leonid Grossman. Grossman noted that Dostoevsky's image of a murderer had been developing since his time in Siberia, but it acquired new dimensions after the novelist studied Lacenaire. The character forming in his mind became more than just a fearless and amoral Siberian convict. He was now bourgeois, elite, mysterious—a "romantic titan," according to Grossman, though "exaggerated and monstrously distorted."

And yet he was much more than a monstrous distortion. To understand Dostoevsky is to inhabit a world of angels and demons, to take the soul and evil spirits as seriously as the mind and the ego. More than a century of Dostoevsky scholarship is devoted to these matters, but no book provides sustained attention to what Lacenaire meant to Dostoevsky, to how his years-long consideration of the French murderer shaped his understanding of both the nature of evil and the way it was evolving amid the century's new ideas and tribulations. Nor does any book capture how the lives of these two men—the poet-murderer and the convict-novelist—faintly resemble each other. Even a slight recognition was enough to keep the novelist circling back.

Dostoevsky was planning to write an article "about instincts and Lacenaire" in August 1864, a year before he began working on *Crime and Punishment*. He was apparently still thinking about the base instincts he mentioned in his commentary on Lacenaire's trial. Something about those instincts—perhaps more than Lacenaire's grievances and boundless vanity—now seemed central to the story and complicated enough to merit sustained discussion. Dostoevsky never wrote that article (his magazine didn't last long), so his thoughts about Lacenaire kept forming until they began to materialize in his Wiesbaden hotel room the following year.

Dostoevsky routinely borrowed ideas from real life, though he never simply transposed them onto his fiction. Raskolnikov is not Lacenaire in Russian

clothes. Dostoevsky did not pluck Lacenaire out of 1830s Paris and set him down in 1860s St. Petersburg. Lacenaire was raw material for Dostoevsky's craftsmanship and genius. And so if we want to understand *Crime and Punishment* fully, then we must understand Lacenaire, a man who despised cruelty and unfairness throughout his life and who saw nothing but a cruel and unfair world, a man who, on the eve of his execution, remained wholeheartedly committed to "the doctrine of nothingness." Lacenaire showed the novelist how a man of certain instincts and circumstances could fashion himself into an ideological murderer in France so that Dostoevsky could imagine how a similar murderer could come to life in Russia. Clear differences between the French model and the Russian novel emerged: Raskolnikov's flashes of remorse, certain details of his philosophy, and the type of person he targets—not an ex-convict or a bank collector but a pawnbroker, a woman. The most important difference would be another woman, Sonya Marmeladova, who urges Raskolnikov to confess and rejoin society.

This book stages the drama of a great creative act decades in the making. It focuses on the most crucial elements of *Crime and Punishment* rather than surveying all of its narrative strands. The staging juxtaposes real lives with Dostoevsky's fictional characters, historical events with Raskolnikov's dramatic scenes, so that we can more clearly see how the novel came to be what it is and how Dostoevsky's fictional world called out to his turbulent times.

The story behind *Crime and Punishment* is instructive in ways that an argument about the novel could never be. It is crucial to imagine and experience what went into the novel's creation—the people, events, and travails that influenced it, the painstaking drafts and revisions that produced it—in order to grasp the finished work of art. This will not surprise anyone who knows Dostoevsky, for he believed that to comprehend something is to *feel* it, to have the idea enter one's flesh and blood, be it a plague or a life-giving force. In fact, the hope of conveying something more thorough than any analysis and more compelling than the most impassioned argument is why Dostoevsky chose his treacherous path in the first place. And when we follow the journey toward the completion of this monumental novel, we learn not just about the nature of Dostoevsky's creativity but about creativity in general—its slumbers and pains, its necessities, compulsions, and sudden fits.

Dostoevsky hammered at the idea of Lacenaire over and over again,

reshaping, revising, altering his image. Raskolnikov commits suicide in some drafts. In others he redeems himself by heroically saving people from a great fire. Hélène Cixous, the feminist writer and scholar, marveled at this arduous process of creation. “What I love best are Dostoevsky’s notebooks,” she wrote, “the crazy and tumultuous forge, where Love and Hate embrace, rolling around on the ground in convulsions which thwart all calculation and all hope: no one knows who will be born of this possessed belly, who will win, who will survive.”

This is the story of who survives. It is about the characters who finally emerge in Dostoevsky’s novel, and the people who helped inspire them. The heat of Dostoevsky’s forge came from his own tumultuous life, and the first of his great novels borrowed more from his experiences and thoughts than perhaps any of his novels before it. As Raskolnikov was taking shape, he was becoming a bit more like Dostoevsky. And so we cannot fully understand the meaning and the making of *Crime and Punishment* until we understand Dostoevsky’s life, his own vanity and anxiety, his sense of guilt and evil, his ideas and ambitions, his great anger, and his great moral drive. We must see how Dostoevsky himself became a criminal, how he tried to enact his own revolutionary philosophy, how he was pursued by investigators, and how he stood on a platform waiting to die, as Lacenaire did, clutching at his life’s final moments one winter morning. He, too, felt like the victim of misfortune. He was battered by a long Siberian exile, chronic illness, debt, the deaths of the people closest to him, and he still had no family of his own.

Yet he could not complete *Crime and Punishment* in time without help. A stenographer named Anna Grigorievna Snitkina would finish the novel with him, guiding him by listening, by being his first reader and his first critic. He needed her. They would work together on every novel he would ever write, and he would never be alone again.

The weight of all these years made Raskolnikov’s story more urgent for Dostoevsky. Writing it was a way to survive and to return home to Russia, but it was also a path out of loneliness, a way to make sense of himself and what was happening in Russia. Writing *Crime and Punishment* made Dostoevsky the writer he always knew he could be.



# PART I



I'll tell you of myself that I have been a child of the age, a child of disbelief and doubt up until now and will be even (I know this) to the grave. What horrible torments this thirst to believe has cost me and continues to cost me, a thirst that is all the stronger in my soul the more negative arguments there are in me.

—*Fyodor Dostoevsky*



*One*

## The Dead Leaves

The boy's peculiarities bewildered the officers and the other engineering cadets. They noticed his awkwardness during drills and his refusal to join in on pranks. His gray eyes were deep set and penetrating. At night, the noisy cadets would scramble back to their quarters while a drummer would make his rounds and beat the cadence for lights-out, and Dostoevsky would be off somewhere else, bending over his notebook at a desk by a cold window embrasure in one of the castle's quieter corner chambers. The drum taps would echo off the imitation marble walls. The original statuary was gone. The carpets were gone. The old rosewood and mahogany floors had been pulled up and replaced with parquet after the imperial family fled.

The Engineers' Castle was originally intended to be a refuge. In 1797, Tsar Paul I, inspired by premonitions, ordered five thousand men to construct a safe residence for himself and his family, only to be strangled by his former Guards officers in his bedroom forty days after moving in. The walls were still wet. The tsar's suite was sealed up, the moats filled in, and the maps of secret vaults burned by the architect. The castle decayed for twenty years before it was renovated to house St. Petersburg's Academy of Engineers. What remained was an architectural jumble—Renaissance, Corinthian, Baroque—on jasper brick foundation stones. Ionic columns and arched windows, obelisks and niches, a dormant throne room, and ghost stories after lights-out. Sometimes, after pretending to go to sleep, Fyodor Mikhailovich would sneak

back to the embrasure in his undergarments, a blanket over his shoulders, and write stories by a small, warm lamp.

Dostoevsky's mother had died of tuberculosis when he was fifteen. Her health deteriorated until she no longer had the strength to comb her hair. After she died, his father began drinking and carrying on full conversations with his wife's ghost—"my little dove," he called her. *Moy golubchik*. She had been affectionate. "The greatest pleasure in my life is when you're with me," she once wrote to her husband. She must've been the only one to call him an angel.

Fyodor had spent childhood summers with his mother in Darovoe, the family's small estate south of Moscow. He loved the wild berries, the birds and hedgehogs, and the smell of dead leaves. He spent so much time in one forest area that they called it "Fedya's Grove." Those summers with his mother were a refuge from his tempestuous father. Fyodor wrote her a letter when he was thirteen: "When you left, dear Mama, I started to miss you terribly, and when I think of you now, dear Mama, I am overcome by such sadness that it's impossible to drive it away, if you only knew how much I would like to see you and I can hardly wait for that joyous moment."

Dostoevsky arrived at the Engineers' Castle about a year after his mother's death. "I can't say anything good about my comrades," he wrote to his father. Three years later he wrote to Mikhail, his older brother, with his opinion unchanged. "I've grown very sad being all alone, my dear brother. There's no one to talk to." He despised the hierarchies and hazing rituals. The senior students poured buckets of water down the newbies' collars. They'd force mama's boys to shout obscenities and mock their embarrassment. They'd pour ink on someone's paper and force him to lick it up. They replicated the commanders' corporal punishment in after-hours punches, kicks, and whippings. If you went to the infirmary, you were told to say you fell from a ladder.

The academy's cruelty seemed exacerbated by careerism. Dostoevsky was irritated that boys of fourteen were plotting out their entire lives—scheming about how to ascend the ranks and make the most money. He, meanwhile, was indifferent to rank, squeamish about violence, outraged by bullying, pensive and sensitive and shy. He was the least soldierly cadet in the company. He executed drills awkwardly and disliked standing at attention. His shako—a tall, cylindrical military hat—did not impress. His dress coat with epaulets

and high collar was ill fitting. His rifle and knapsack, according to one company member, seemed to weigh him down like fetters. After all the drills, lectures, and exams, he had hardly any time for himself, hardly any time to read and write. "They're squeezing the life out of us," he told Mikhail.

Dostoevsky had little aptitude for the subjects that mattered most, like geometry, trigonometry, and algebra ("I can't stand mathematics") or artillery theory (he borrowed someone else's notes) or fortifications ("such nonsense"). Ten rooms in the castle displayed meticulous clay and wood models of fortresses from Riga to Siberia that sat next to local soil samples and their corresponding bricks. This was meant to inspire. Dostoevsky spent countless hours drawing plans for bastions and guard towers, and yet, he confessed to his father, "I don't draw well."

He excelled at the subjects that mattered least, the "intellectual subjects," he called them: history and catechism, Russian literature, French and German. He read Goethe's *Faust* and everything by E.T.A. Hoffmann. The few friendships he had were built around discussions of literature. One cadet remembered Dostoevsky pursuing his best friend down a hallway and shouting out one final point about Schiller. The academy's French instructor introduced him to Racine, Corneille, and Pascal as well as contemporary French literature. He read French novelists whenever he could. He tore through most of Victor Hugo and everything from Balzac that he could find. He wrote to his father that it was "*absolutely essential*" that he subscribe to a French reading library, ostensibly to read the great French "military geniuses." "I'm passionately fond of military science," he assured his father.

Finding ways to please his father became second nature. Dr. Dostoevsky was self-righteous, demanding, and quick to condemn his children's inadequacies. He had recently acquired hereditary nobility for his service as a medical doctor, and he groomed his two oldest sons to be military engineers, despite their wishes, because state service provided the best opportunity for upward social mobility. The plan quickly faltered. Mikhail Mikhailovich was rejected from the Academy of Engineers for health reasons, and five months after Fyodor declared his great fondness for military science, he informed his father that he had failed to be promoted. He listed his examination scores but neglected to mention his dreadful performance in formation drill. He had to

repeat his first year at the academy—all those lonely days counted for nothing. He confessed to Mikhail the shame he felt as well as his anger. “I’d like to crush the entire world at a single stroke.”

Mikhail was all Dostoevsky had. Fyodor was only twelve when Dr. Dostoevsky sent his two oldest sons away to an exclusive Moscow boarding school. Mikhail was one year older and had dark blue eyes and hair covering his ears. He was reserved, like his brother, but he was calmer, more optimistic, and almost never angry. He adjusted more easily to life away from home—the other boarders used to mock Fyodor for lagging behind Mikhail academically. The brothers were inseparable until Mikhail, following his rejection, was sent to another academy in Revel (now Tallinn, Estonia). Fyodor suffered the academy alone. “Dear Brother,” Fyodor wrote after explaining his lack of promotion, “it’s sad to live without hope . . . I look ahead, and the future horrifies me.”

Both brothers dreamed of being writers. They discussed literature and philosophy. Mikhail sent Fyodor poems, often about their childhood—“The Walk,” “Vision of Mother,” “The Rose.” Fyodor sent voluble, neatly written letters featuring rapturous flights and painful despairs. When he ran out of space on the page, he wrote lines vertically in the margins. The brothers cataloged their after-hours reading. Fyodor shared his thoughts about Byron and Pushkin, Shakespeare and Homer. He admired Homer’s “unshakable certainty in his calling.” Sometimes there were long silences between his letters, but Fyodor reassured his brother, “I was never indifferent to you; I loved you for your poems, for the poetry of your life.”

Dostoevsky needed someone to hear his midnight-embrasure ideas. “It seems to me that our world is a purgatory of heavenly spirits bedimmed by sinful thought,” he wrote to Mikhail. To be human is to be trapped somewhere between heaven and earth and to struggle to merge the two. “But to see only the cruel covering under which the universe languishes, to know that a single explosion of will is enough to smash it and merge with eternity, to know and to be like the last creature . . . is awful!”

In June 1839, Dostoevsky received the news that his father had been murdered by his own serfs. It happened near their Darovoe estate, and the details were murky. Rumors circulated that one of the peasants lured him into

the neighboring serf village by pretending to be sick, at which point twelve to fifteen men finished him off. His body had been dumped in a roadside field. The motive was also unclear, but it was easy to imagine. The previous year's harvest had been so bad that the peasants used their own straw roofs to feed their livestock, and conditions deteriorated from there. A severe winter had given way to a drought, and Dr. Dostoevsky was so frequently drunk that he was barely capable of managing himself, let alone an estate. It's unlikely he stored enough grain for an emergency, and his distrustful, irascible nature probably frayed tensions. Tales of peasants revolting against their masters circulated widely throughout Russia, and memories of full-scale rebellions were vivid. The image of murderous serfs always hovered on the edge of the Russian landowning consciousness.

The two doctors who examined the body claimed that Dr. Dostoevsky had died of apoplexy, but rumors of murder spread from the neighbors to Dostoevsky's grandmother and then to the rest of the family. While the details were kept from the younger children, the oldest boys knew. Fyodor found out first, and he broke the news to Mikhail in a letter. The local officials who investigated, however, found no evidence of murder. The family saw this as a cover-up. It didn't take much to pay off the right people. The official cause of death might have encouraged the suspicions because "apoplexy" could refer to a heart attack, a stroke, or a cerebral hemorrhage as well as to traumatic apoplexy—the effusion of blood when something cracks your skull—or *apoplexia suffocata*, when you are hanged, drowned, or strangled. And if there *were* a murder, a cover-up would have been better for everyone. A murder like this—a crime against serfdom—would have meant that any serf involved, even tangentially, would have been exiled to Siberia, diminishing the estate's value for the seven Dostoevsky children, who were now without parents.

Whatever happened in Darovoe, it made Dostoevsky an orphan at seventeen. He hadn't seen his father since the doctor had consigned him to the academy two years earlier. His letters home revolved around urgent monetary requests: for new boots, for a new shako (everyone had their own shako, but his was academy issued), for brushes and paint, for pens and ink, for more books ("How will I spend time without books?"), for a trunk (everyone had his own trunk). He was in debt to various people. He borrowed money to mail his father a letter requesting more money. "Send me something right away.

You'll extract me from hell. Oh, it's awful to be in extremity!" At one point he itemized his expenses in a postscript: his necessities cost thirty-six to forty rubles. He insisted that he needed twenty-five by June 1. That was his last letter to his father.

If there were some mercy to the family's tragedy, it is that it liberated Dostoevsky from the academy's nettling smallnesses. Two months after their father's death, Fyodor wrote to Mikhail that he was studying human nature in earnest. "Humanity is a mystery. It needs to be unraveled, and if you spend your whole life unraveling it, don't say that you've wasted time." Death spurred the young man to reckon with larger things. "I'm studying that mystery," he wrote, "because I want to be a human being."

Dostoevsky graduated from the Academy of Engineers in August 1843 and entered active service as a second lieutenant in the Drafting Room of the St. Petersburg Engineering Corps. A year later, he announced that he was retiring, citing "family reasons." He sent a formal notification to his family regarding his late father's estate: "*I renounce my entire allotment . . . for 1000 silver rubles.*" Dostoevsky wanted half of the money immediately and half in monthly installments. He threatened legal recourse if it came to that.

The fact that he was demanding a somewhat modest sum—not much more than the average bureaucrat's annual salary—might have emboldened him. He renounced his estate in a letter to his brother-in-law, Peter Karepin, who had begun managing the family's affairs. Dostoevsky considered him mercenary, vain, and "stupid as an ox." He informed Karepin that he needed the money to pay off mounting debts—the interest payments alone were onerous. The twelve hundred rubles he claimed he owed in August 1844 climbed to fifteen hundred in September. But retiring from the Engineering Corps to pay off debt made no sense to Karepin. State servitors were protected from creditors during their service, so retiring would only empower his lenders. Dostoevsky was adamant: "Although the two ideas don't square, that's the way it is."

He told only Mikhail his real reason for leaving the Engineering Corps. "I'm finishing a novel," he wrote, and it is "rather original." His job had become meaningless. Sometimes he hired clerks to do his work, ensconced

himself in his room, and wrote for hours, smoking his pipe. He developed a cough and a hoarse voice. He stopped responding to his flatmate's questions. It didn't seem healthy. His desk was covered in scraps of writing and full manuscript pages. "Letters spilled from his pen like gems, precisely rendered," his flatmate recalled. Dostoevsky called his novel *Poor Folk*. Telling Mikhail about it made it real. "I'm extraordinarily pleased with my novel," Dostoevsky wrote. "I can't get over it. I'll surely get money from it."

He had reasons to be optimistic. The success of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* made it clear that Russians wanted stories about the lives of those around them, and Gogol's characters were so delightfully disturbing. "It will be a long time before we will be able to cope with them," Dostoevsky wrote years later. Surely his own novels could make money as well. But getting started as a writer proved difficult. He tried writing a few plays, none of which survive. To earn money, he devised various translation schemes to serve Russia's interest in western fiction. Mikhail translated German texts, and Fyodor translated French. He believed translations were a sure path to fortune. "Why is Strugovshchikov already famous?" he asked Mikhail. All of his calculations had optimistic bottom lines—sometimes several thousand rubles. "Just wait and see, they'll come flying at us in swarms when they see the translations in our hands. There will be plenty of offers from booksellers and publishers. They're dogs."

Dostoevsky thought that a door was opening for him, briefly, and that he had to make a run for it. That meant grasping for opportunities, but it also meant abdicating responsibility for his younger brothers and sisters. "You alone will save them," he told Mikhail after their father's death. "My own goal is to be on my own." He had fantasized for years about being a "free, solitary, independent person" and pursuing a calling like Homer. Renouncing his father's estate was a way to detach himself.

Perhaps melodrama would persuade Karepin to grant him his independence. "I need *to eat*," Dostoevsky reminded him, "because *not eating* is unhealthy." He became more histrionic over time. "I am alone, without hope, without help, handed over to all the calamities, all the trials and tribulations of my horrible situation—destitution, nakedness, humiliation, shame." Dostoevsky was playing a common cultural role (Russians have five words for an aristocratic spendthrift), and he was indeed living beyond his means. He attended plays, ballets, and the opera, paying as much as twenty-five rubles per

ticket. He gambled at cards with friends. He patronized prostitutes. He took advances on his salary to reimburse moneylenders—they were everywhere in Petersburg. He paid back money that he borrowed from his brother Andrei with money he borrowed from Mikhail. Paying off past expenses meant incurring immediate privation. “For Heaven’s sake,” he wrote to Andrei while asking for a few rubles, “I haven’t had any firewood for three days now.”

Karepin ignored Dostoevsky’s pleas for three years. By 1844, Fyodor had already taken more than his share of the modest estate. Bit by bit, he had been receiving money for expenses and interest payments on his debts. At this point, Karepin told him, he was stealing from his six siblings and disrespecting his father’s memory. Fyodor knew quite well that his father wanted his sons to be engineers—his younger brother Andrei had not yet finished his own engineering studies—and that he had sacrificed to launch them on respectable careers. And now, after his parents’ unfortunate demise, Fyodor Mikhailovich wanted to betray those sacrifices to *tell stories*, to indulge in “*the pathetic daydreams and fantasies of errant youth*.” That was unconscionable.

Dostoevsky expected objections like this from such a pedestrian man. “Karepin drinks, fucks, shits, drinks vodka, has a rank, believes in God,” he wrote to Mikhail. He knew nothing about literature. “He says that Shakespeare and a soap bubble are the same thing.” His brother-in-law had no business speaking for his own father and withholding what belonged to him. So when Karepin said it was impossible to give him any more money, Dostoevsky told him to borrow it. If he didn’t get the money one way or the other, he would take on further debt at ever-higher interest rates, and the estate would be liable. “What the consequence will be, you can judge for yourself: trouble for everyone.” So finally, after years of badgering, Karepin relented and sent Dostoevsky five hundred silver rubles.

Dostoevsky sensed that he was severing family connections, but he convinced himself it was his only choice. “I even consider this risk noble,” he wrote to Mikhail, “this imprudent risk of changing my situation, risking my whole life for a shaky hope. Perhaps I am mistaken,” he admitted. “But if I am not?”

## *Two*

# The Devil's Streetlamps

**D**ostoevsky described the capital of the Russian Empire in various ways. St. Petersburg is a gambler waking up with empty pockets, shivering in the damp cold, ready to pick a fight with a stranger so he can run away from this Indo-Germanic swamp forever. St. Petersburg is a society woman irritated by something that happened at last night's ball. St. Petersburg is a spendthrift son of an old-fashioned father—an arrogant, freethinking egoist, eager to instruct his elders and always in a hurry. St. Petersburg is a tubercular girl who's suddenly strong and laughing; her "eyes gleam with such fire," but only for a moment. Years later, Dostoevsky would settle on another description: "the most abstract and premeditated city on earth."

Petersburg's wide streets are called prospects. They radiate out in straight lines across canals and a flat terrain that makes it easy to survey the city's palaces and monuments, the arches and columns, and all the buildings topped by statues of warriors, angels, and personifications. Petersburg is built on an archipelago at the mouth of the Neva River. It is a horrible place for a city. Pontoon bridges and rowboats linked the municipal islands. When the river's branches froze—and they were frozen for nearly half the year—the bridges were removed. Petersburgers marked pathways across the ice with lanterns and scattered hay, and they covered the thinner spots with planks. In springtime, snowmelt turned the streets to mud. In summer and fall the city was so waterlogged that puddled side streets harbored swamp grass, ducks, and algae.

Petersburg was indeed built on an “Indo-Germanic swamp,” as Dostoevsky called it, and the swamp was poised to take it all back.

The Neva flooded almost annually. During the flood of 1824, the river rose thirteen feet in a matter of hours, sending furniture, coffins, and carriages through the squares. Navy cutters swept through the streets to rescue survivors clinging to trees and roof beams. Waterborne diseases like cholera, typhoid, and malaria were endemic. The entire region’s soil was too poor to grow food, so staples had to be imported. The land couldn’t even support the city’s buildings. The tsar’s men unloaded barges carrying sixteen-foot oak beams and drove the timber vertically into the spongy ground to create foundations solid enough for construction. The whole city sits on top of an underground forest.

It was common to think of St. Petersburg as unreal, “abstract and premeditated,” an idea made manifest on the reluctant earth. The idea was Peter the Great’s. He wanted to make Russia a European empire not just by reforming the country but by moving the capital from landlocked Moscow to a west-facing coastal city that could be both a command center for an imperial navy and a seaport for global trade. Russia did not have such a city, so he decided to make one. When Peter first surveyed the archipelago (the Isle of Stones, the Isle of Goats, the Isle of Brushwood), he saw a future of palaces, barracks, and cathedrals for his empire. He ordered more than a hundred thousand serfs, criminals, and prisoners of war to drain marshes, drive foundations, and pave roads. Tens of thousands died from disease, exposure, and inadequate provisions to make Peter’s abstract city a reality.

The best place to see westernizing Russia as it wanted to be seen was on Nevsky Prospect, Petersburg’s widest thoroughfare. One could admire stately palaces lining the canals, the Imperial Public Library beside a two-story merchants’ arcade, confectionery shops nestled between large churches. Compact Petersburg had more street life than sprawling Moscow. Women paraded down the wide granite sidewalks in Parisian dresses and plaited hair, and men held forth in musk-lined overcoats with beaver collars. Some people mixed Russian and western styles—silk caftans gathered at the waist, nankeen trousers tucked into high calfskin boots. Goods were advertised on trilingual signs (Russian, French, and German), and shopkeepers painted images for unlettered patrons: gentlemen’s gloves or bonnets on faceless women or passably rendered fruits promoting watermelons, Crimean apples, and wineberries.