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Crime and Punishment in Translation: Raskolnikov Redeemed

Fyodor Dostoevsky's masterpiece *Crime and Punishment* is often understood with ambiguity and confusion. Does Raskolnikov find redemption at the end of the novel? Does he make a full conversion to Christianity, or is he only beginning to find his way there? The problem many readers face is an issue of translation: unless they read Dostoevsky in the original Russian, they will lose some of the meaning of the original text. Each translator acts as an interpreter of both word and culture; they must decide which aspects of Raskolnikov's story to emphasize, which aspects to minimize, and which cultural notes are essential for the English reader to understand the plot. It is only in reading multiple translations that the reader can fully understand all of the connotations and implications of Dostoevsky's words. The subtle differences and major similarities help paint a more detailed picture of Dostoevsky's story, which always lingers just beyond the grasp of the English reader. Through my own analysis of four translations of *Crime and Punishment*, it is clear that Raskolnikov does make a full conversion to Christianity by the end of the novel.

He experiences a rebirth and although this rebirth is not detailed in the novel, Dostoevsky is very explicit that this redemption has taken place.

Each translation of *Crime and Punishment* comes branded with a translator's professional style. A homemaker named Constance Garnett penned the original "golden standard" of Russian translation, and her translations remained influential for over 100 years. Her works have since come under heavy fire for inaccuracies of language and tone. One exile of Russia claimed "The reason English-speaking readers can barely tell the difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is that they aren't reading the prose of either one. They're reading Constance Garnett" (Remnick 3). David McDuff provides a reader's note for his translation in which he states, "the translation strives to retain as much of Dostoyevsky's style, syntax, and sentence-structure as possible" while it "also aims to provide as readable a text as possible" (xxxv). Thus, "McDuff's version fosters the reassuring sense that we are dealing with a conventional nineteenth-century novel." (Fanger 5). The husband and wife team of Pevear and Volokhonsky is a relatively new addition to the translation scene, and their efforts have had a polarizing effect on Russian literary critics. Reactions to P&V (as they are colloquially known) have ranged from admirably catching "the tone of the vulgar" in Dostoevsky (Woodcock 2) to "apparently definitive but actually flat and fake on closer inspection" (Morson 1). Pevear and Volokhonsky are famous for their determination to stay true to the era in which Dostoevsky was writing; "they will not use an English word that the Oxford English Dictionary says came into use after the publication of the novel they are translating." (Remnick 6). This has redeemed them in the eyes of readers who seek a loyal or literal translation, but often alienates the readers who value readability in a translation. The

professional debate about 'proper' Dostoevsky translations is passionate and divided, but the variation among translations broadens the popular understanding of *Crime and Punishment*.

Each translation of *Crime and Punishment* emphasizes particular aspects of Dostoevsky's message, and thus reading different translations is essential to a rich understanding of the novel. As Anna Paterson asserts in her article titled *Translation as Editing?*: "[g]oing back to the original and staying as close to it as possible is the task of every translator" (56). Translators are not to work off of some established translation, because no one translation will ever be a perfect rendering. Each translator chooses to emphasize different aspects of the original. What aspects of the original that the translators choose to stay close to depends heavily on the translator in question. Paterson writes, "[w]hat is essential...is to read with proper attention to the tone of the writing" (56); whatever the translator chooses to emphasize, it must be in keeping with the overall message of the author's story. The translator is not rewriting the work; he or she is making it accessible to another audience. McDuff's translation tries to take account of the "general literary context in which the author composed the novel" (McDuff xxxv); he emphasizes the influence of English authors on the Russian work and "attempts to reflect their style, too" (xxxv). Pevear and Volokhonsky's "hope was to be true to Dostoevsky, right down to his famous penchant for repetition, seeming sloppiness, and melodrama" (Remnick 5). They place a heavy emphasis on quasi-literal translation, making the words of Dostoevsky accessible to others. But does this properly translate Russian culture to an English audience? Pevear is quoted as saying, "I've never been curious to see Russia. I'm not curious to see the city of Moscow. Should I be?" (Remnick 13). Can a man with such lack of

interest in Russian society really capture the meaning of Dostoevsky's words for a native English speaker? Pevear's cavalier attitude towards Russia itself flies in the face of understanding the 'tone' of Dostoevsky that Paterson esteems so highly.

Although one single translation cannot fully grasp the meaning of the cultural and literary background in Dostoevsky, each translation is an important piece to the larger puzzle of understanding. One example of the power of different translations is found in Part III Chapter VII, where Razhumikin is arguing with Raskolnikov's mother and sister. Three translations (McDuff, Garnett, and Coulson) phrase Razhumikin's rants as "talking nonsense." Razhumikin raves, "I like it when they [people] talk nonsense! Talking nonsense is the sole privilege mankind possesses over the other organisms. It's by talking nonsense that one gets to the truth. I talk nonsense, therefore I'm human" (McDuff 241). When read this way, the passage calls into question Raskolnikov's overwhelming desire for one coherent, rational narrative. Razhumikin does not need definitive signs everywhere to recognize truth; he acknowledges that sometimes the truth is found in chaos. P&V, on the other hand, translate Razhumikin's rants as "lying"—which offers a very different understanding of this same passage. Now Razhumikin shouts, "I like it when people lie! Lying is man's only privilege over all other organisms. If you lie—you get to the truth! Lying is what makes me a man" (P&V 202). Rendered this way, the passage underscores Raskolnikov's personal struggle with lies and truth. He is lying to everyone around him, including himself, but this lie will ultimately lead to greater understanding. By the end of the novel, he has confessed his guilt of murder to Russian society. He has also relinquished his own personal lie: he admits that he is not an extraordinary man, which allows him to release his own pride. Raskolnikov's lies become an important part of his spiritual journey

that culminates in his redemption. In my paper, I will rely on four translations of *Crime and Punishment*—David McDuff, Pevear & Volokhonsky, Constance Garnett, and Jamie Coulson—to support my reading of Raskolnikov’s ultimate redemption experience.

The opening scene of *Crime and Punishment* establishes Raskolnikov’s character as erratic and hopelessly rational, a man trapped within his own head. McDuff and Pevear & Volokhonsky lend energy to Raskolnikov’s interior monologue with their writing styles. McDuff writes, “I plan to attempt a thing like this, yet I allow that kind of rubbish to scare me!” (6); P&V offers a similar translation: “I want to attempt such a thing, and at the same time I’m afraid of such trifles!” (3). The words “rubbish” and “trifles” refer to a near run-in with the pawn broker, Alyona Ivanovna, in the previous scene. Both translations are intentionally vague in their allusions to murder, but McDuff’s Raskolnikov seems more proud of himself than his P&V counterpart; “trifle” suggests something less serious, and more of a playful amusement in the situation. “Rubbish,” as used by McDuff, seems more scornful of the near meeting, and Raskolnikov appears self-assured in his own righteousness. Yet by the end of the monologue, all translations show Raskolnikov as a tormented man, one who is confused and questioning his own thoughts: “Why on earth am I going [to Alyona’s] now? Am I really capable of *that*? Is *that* something serious? No, not serious at all...I’m just toying with it, for the sake of fantasy. A plaything! Yes, a plaything, if you like!” (P&V 4). Raskolnikov, by page four, is already in a position to question the validity of his actions on a moral scale. The emphasis on *this* suggests gravity to his plotted actions, which he cannot even bring himself to name as murder. He relies on his burgeoning sense of rationality to explain away any moral misgivings about committing murder. He repeatedly tells himself it is a “plaything” or “game”, a phrase used in three of

four translations. This highlights Raskolnikov's emotional and moral instability, to set up a greater contrast with his converted self at the end of the novel. Dostoevsky uses this first interior monologue to emphasize Raskolnikov's inner struggle between morality and rationality, which remains the driving source of conflict until his redemption at the novel's end.

Raskolnikov is also motivated by random events that seem to have a greater purpose within the narrative he has constructed for himself. He overhears the woman in the marketplace chatting with Lizaveta, and determines the old woman will be alone at seven PM. As a result, he "went up to his room like a man who has been condemned to death" (McDuff 76). All four translations use the phrase 'condemned to death;' it adds a moral gravity to his actions that Raskolnikov will not verbalize to himself. The words have an interesting double meaning to them: 'condemned to death' can imply Raskolnikov feels condemned to *bring* death to Alyona. He is condemned to commit death and murder; he has no other option. In a second interpretation, Raskolnikov's illusion of himself as the extraordinary man will be killed as a result of his actions—this is a foreshadowing of the death of Raskolnikov's 'extraordinary' identity. Despite his initial misgivings, Raskolnikov determines that he cannot hope for a more "obvious step towards the successful realization of [his] plan than the one that had suddenly presented itself just then" (McDuff 77). This statement shows the power of Raskolnikov's rationality. Despite the fact that his body and spirit are having a very negative reaction, as if he is condemned to die, his brain and his will are working to convince himself that this is actually a positive sign for the success of his plan. This tension between spirit and rationale is once again indicative of Raskolnikov's spiritual struggle, which will culminate in his redemption.

After the murder of Alyona and Lizaveta, Raskolnikov's rationality begins to break down further. He is no longer merely trapped within his own head, but now plagued by uncertainty as well. McDuff's eloquent and flowing style fails to capture the choked sense of panic that comes from P&V, Garnett, and Coulson. McDuff writes, "What is all this? Is it still my delirium playing up, or is it real? It seems to be real..." (155). Although the sentence is pretty, the other three translations better emphasize Raskolnikov's disjointed thought process. Compare McDuff's translation with Pevear-Volokhonsky's: "What is it? Am I still delirious, or is this real? It seems real..." (127) and Jessie Coulson's: "But what is this? Am I still delirious, or is all this real? It seems real enough..." (121). The short sentences, with a more abrupt syntax, subtly point to Raskolnikov's mental distress at this point in the novel. Coulson's addition of 'real enough' also underscores this sense of distress that Raskolnikov feels as his world falls apart around him. He is willing to accept even a shadow of certainty to reassure himself that he is not losing his mind. Constance Garnett offers a different beginning sentence that alters the flavor of Raskolnikov's panic: "What does it mean?" (125) he cries to himself. This translation shows that Raskolnikov might be on a deeper quest for meaning, which is more innately spiritual than the simple question of 'What is it?' As Raskolnikov's rationale crumbles around him, and his understanding of reality falls away, he is propelled towards a spiritual quest for meaning that will lead to his redemption.

The breakdown of Raskolnikov's reason oscillates between moments of suffocating confusion, and moments of clarity. Yet, after the murder, his reason is permeated with a new sense of something greater than the physical world. This is apparent in Part II, Chapter VII, where Raskolnikov goes into the city and witnesses an old woman throw herself over

the edge of a bridge. When he revisits the spot where her suicide took place, he experiences a moment of clarity and the reader can see his new integration of the spiritual: “‘That’s enough!’ he said, solemnly and decisively. ‘Begone, mirages, begone, affected terrors, begone, apparitions!’” (McDuff 226). Other translations offer “phantoms” (Garnett) and “spectres” (P&V, Coulson) in place of “apparitions”, but these are all similar in meaning. These phrases suggest a deeper spiritual reality has been plaguing Raskolnikov recently, and his reason attempts to reassert its dominance over spirituality in the face of this reality. The result is an explosion of hope: “‘There’s a life to be lived! I was alive just now, after all, wasn’t I?’” (McDuff 226). Raskolnikov finds hope in life after committing an act of Christian charity—after leaving a large sum of money on the windowsill for the suffering family of Marmeladov without receiving anything in return. It is important that this sense of rejuvenation comes at the heels of charity, and not rationality. Although Raskolnikov tries to rationalize what he is feeling, and banishes all nonphysical entities in favor of “the kingdom of reason and light” (McDuff 226), this banishment is only possible through practicing Christian ideals. Although Raskolnikov does not understand it himself, his reason is slowly being undermined by a deeper spiritual reality that is rooted in Christianity. This is the foreshadowing of his eventual redemption, though he has certainly not been redeemed as of yet.

Part III, Chapter IV of *Crime and Punishment* contains one of the most important discrepancies in the novel’s translation; the team of Pevear-Volokhonsky radically transformed the entire novel by making one small alteration. Raskolnikov is readying himself for a meeting with Zamyotov and Porfiry, who eventually becomes his tormentor. The translations of McDuff, Garnett, and Coulson offer a close approximation of the idea

behind Raskolnikov's panic, expressed in a Russian colloquialism: "I'll have to complain about my lot to this fellow, too" (293), McDuff writes; Garnett offers "I shall have to put on a show for him too" (235); Coulson is perhaps the most blunt, saying, "I shall have to make the most of my illness" (236). However, it is the P&V translation that uses the actual Russian colloquialism: "I'll have to sing Lazarus for him, too," he thought, turning pale, and with his heart pounding, "and sing it naturally" (246). 'Singing Lazarus', as P&V explain in a footnote, means to play up a malady to garner sympathy for oneself; the ultimate goal is to fool whoever one sings to. It is rooted in the parable of the beggar Lazarus and the rich man, from Luke 16:19-31. Raskolnikov intends to play up his own illness or misfortune in front of Zamyotov and Porfiry, so that they do not suspect him of any ill doing. He ties himself to a beggar who suffers on earth but receives his reward in heaven; the suffering of Lazarus is similar to the path of Raskolnikov thus far in the story, and points to his eventual redemption at the end of the novel. As Lazarus was redeemed in heaven, Raskolnikov too will be redeemed.

This colloquialism also ties in to the later scene in Part IV Chapter IV, where Sonya reads the Raising of Lazarus to Raskolnikov at his prodding. By that time in Part IV, he has already been identified with one Lazarus. It is therefore sensible to relate him to the other Lazarus; a Lazarus who is dead physically as Raskolnikov is dead spiritually and morally. Jesus is able to physically raise Lazarus from the dead, and by the end of the novel He raises Raskolnikov from his spiritual death and redeems him. The addition of the 'Lazarus' colloquialism ties Raskolnikov to both gospel stories, and heavily implies that he will experience a full conversion and redemption by the end of *Crime and Punishment*.

The final sentences of all four translations are nearly identical, and with some analysis it is clear that Raskolnikov has been redeemed in the theological understanding of the term. P&V writes: "He [Raskolnikov] did not even know that a new life would not be given him for nothing" (551). Coulson and Garnett both use similar phrasing: "new life would not be given". This apparent use of the conditional phrase might set up the reader to think that Raskolnikov has not received this new life yet. However, this is an instance of *would* as the past tense of *will*; the absence of a hypothetical scenario in the first half of the sentence dictates this meaning. Therefore, the new life has *already been given* to Raskolnikov. He has already been redeemed. The sentence is not conditional, but instead complete. McDuff's translation is more direct and clear on the matter: "[Raskolnikov] did not even know yet that his new life had not been given him gratis, that he would have to purchase it dearly, pay for it by a great heroic deed that still lay in the future..." (656). A reader might be tempted question if Raskolnikov has made a true redemption, but Dostoevsky is quite clear: the new life has "been given him" already. He already possesses it; Raskolnikov has experienced Christian redemption. Even his character reflects this by the end of the epilogue. Raskolnikov, infamous for his random outbursts and crazed, incessant questions, comes across as muted and calm. Dostoevsky notes that "a certain thought flickered through his mind" (McDuff 656) as he wonders if he will share Sonya's Christian convictions. There is no distraught panic, no demanding questioning, and no "rambling" that he attributes to himself in Part I. Raskolnikov is truly a changed man.

Just one page previously, Raskolnikov comments on this phenomenon himself. As he lies at Sonya's feet, he realizes that "he had recovered, and he knew it, felt it completely with the whole of his renewed being" (McDuff 655). It is when he feels this love for Sonya

that he recognizes his redeemed life and the possibilities of that life. He is now in union with himself: he experiences knowledge with the whole of his being. A division of self, as previously mentioned, characterizes Raskolnikov earlier in the novel. His driving source of conflict is the struggle of the rational against the spiritual and the moral. Here he is presented as a unified whole, without any attempt to explain or over-think what has happened to him. His mind knows it, and his body accepts it, and there is no contrast between the reason and the spirit any longer. This inner peace can only be brought about by a radical spiritual transformation, such as redemption.

Regardless of when in the novel the redemption happened, various details indicate that Raskolnikov has already received a new life; has already been transformed in some small way through his redemption. Raskolnikov recalls that “even his crime, even his sentence and exile, now seemed to him, on this first impulse, now seemed to him something alien and external, as though none of it had ever happened to him” (655). For the old Raskolnikov, this might have been a sign of a pending psychotic break. But for the new Raskolnikov, this is a sign of grace flowing through him upon his spiritual redemption. These things seem alien and foreign to him because he has washed his soul clean; he has been saved. McDuff closes the novel with these words:

But at this point a new story begins, the story of a man’s gradual renewal, his gradual rebirth, his gradual transition from one world to another, of his growing acquaintance with a new, hitherto completely unknown reality. This might constitute the theme of a new narrative—our present narrative is, however, at an end. (656)

P&V and Garnett also emphasize the gradual nature of this renewal, rebirth, and transition.

Coulson replaces “transition” with “progress”, but otherwise his ending is the same.

Raskolnikov could not undergo a process of renewal, rebirth, or discovering new realities, without some previous grace from God. To suggest that Raskolnikov has not yet been redeemed is to suggest that he is capable of renewing and rebirthing himself on his own terms, under his own power; this is impossible within the Christian religion. God and Christ are the only redeemers of humanity, and for Raskolnikov to be renewed he must have first been redeemed. Dostoevsky states that Raskolnikov already has a new life—meaning Christ has redeemed him.

When reading an author who wrote in a language so foreign in structure and culture from English, it is essential that readers experience different renderings of the literature. Dostoevsky experimented with words, syntax, and sentence variation to create this unique story of redemption. Each translation is one person's interpretation of *Crime and Punishment*, but one translation in isolation will never capture the full beauty of Dostoevsky in Russian. "Meanwhile," writes Donald Fanger in *The Limits of Eloquence*, "the real Dostoevsky, the Dostoevsky absent from all the translations, can be at least dimly descried by juxtaposing them: behind the windows of their discrepancies, that movement in the semidarkness is his" (Fanger 7). It is through juxtaposing four different translations of Dostoevsky—translations that variously emphasize word-to-word accuracy, English readability, and rendering the spirit of a text—that a reader comes to understand the completion of Raskolnikov's redemption as Dostoevsky intended.

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