

Crime and Punishment: Prophecy and Mercy in Dostoyevsky

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Received: June 17, 2017.

Accepted: September 12, 2017.

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the theme of literary prophecy, the existential emptiness and mercy of God present in “Crime and Punishment” which, to some extent, indicate the main themes that would become real in Dostoyevsky’s subsequent work. Literature and prophecy have been partners for quite a long time. Dostoyevsky also writes under a literary prophecy about the world that would surge and whose symptoms were present in the 19th century. “Crime and Punishment” reveals the world without a dialog with God that would increase even further during the 20th and 21st centuries, the world of Raskolnikov. Then again, it reveals its presence and its revelation in Mercy that has its place in the middle of the most stranger situations, the most sordid places, awkward situations for human beings as in the case of Sonia Marmeladov and his father. Dostoyevsky prophetically approaches the human condition when he breaks the dialogue with God.

Keywords: Dostoyevsky, Mercy, Prophecy, Faith, God.

Prophecy and Literature

Dostoyevsky’s literary work will be determined around the greater theme of human relation with God and its social and existential achievement. “Crime and Punishment” oscillates between two large axes in relation to this great subject: prophecy and mercy. Dostoyevsky witnesses a time that would unfold before his eyes, which lead us to say that he had a *prophetic testimony*. The testimony goes beyond the current senses in religious (*martyr*) and judicial (*tertis*) spheres, from the point of view of a philosophy of testimony. The word, as emphasized by Ricoeur is not limited to designate what is seen or heard by anyone, anywhere. It “applies to words, works, actions, lives that as such, confirm, in the heart of experience and history, an intention, an inspiration, an idea that surpasses experience and history” (Ricoeur, 2008:109) and this is the problem of the testimony of the Absolute, that is obviously pertinent only for the conscience that believes in itself, as emphasized by Ricoeur. A hermeneutics of the testimony in this discussion implies in a relation with God that demands a belief in God. The analytical *corpus* in Dostoyevsky involves his life, his written works, his letters, notes, and the memories of those that dwelled with him. It is obvious that it is from this *corpus* that we collect here some elements for analysis. However, what we want to emphasize is the fact that all this forms a set that tells us something (because the testimony is always dialogal) and refers to a vision of the world that, beyond the historical context (Russia, the 19th century, etc.), contains an experience of Christianity (a life surrounded by sufferings, difficulties, concomitantly with a search for faith) and also levels of conscience that are prophetic for they present dimensions of the human experience that we live *today*, in the 21st century. In the 19th century, these dimensions were still unclear, although anticipated by art and philosophy, more specifically, shortly after Dostoyevsky’s death, by thinkers, in the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, like Weber, Simmel, Husserl, Heidegger, Masarik, Musil, among others. However, since they are dimensions of spiritual order, appropriated by

the artist in his literature and life, Dostoyevsky's testimony involves more than his works, memories, etc., or the specificity from someone who "had been there", to recall Ricoeur and the specificities of the act of testifying (Ricoeur, 2007: 172-173). His testimony incorporates a prophetic dimension, of someone who "has been here" (nowadays), and that anticipated the future. He is a witness of his time and the future (our future, our present time) anticipated and narrated by his characters. He had been there and had been here!

Literature and prophecy have been going hand in hand for a long time. The dialogic form, in the Buberian sense of the word (Buber, 1970), on how artists see and relate with the world, permit the aesthetic field to be propitious to prophecy, because it means the opening for other dimensions of conscience that do not correspond to the material reality lived at the present time. If in Russia we have a literary tradition marked by apocalyptic vision, in the Western world we also have some writers who adopted a visionary way of being in the world, and also a strong prophetic dimension in their writings, inspired by the religious Christian sensibility. Among them are Milton, William Blake, Wordsworth, Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Coleridge, Shelley and Yeats (Thoureau, 1999: 8; Doriani, 1996: 7). That has occurred, in recent centuries, despite the destruction and nihilism that have marked the Western intellectual history. Thus, literature and prophecy, rather than being antipodes, may unite and move together. Lewis Hyde emphasizes that

"By "prophetic" I do not mean that he engages in any literal predicting of the future. In the spiritual tradition to which Thoreau was heir, the prophet does not tell us that some celebrity will marry next year, or that the price of oil will soon rise. Rather, the prophet speaks of things that will be true in the future because they are true in all time." (Hide, 2002: 126).

More recently Michel Houellebecq (2015) who affirms that, in his case, as in scientific fiction or in Orwell and Huxley, books are not prophetic since they cannot foresee anything, but express fear found in the collective unconscious of the societies of the time when they were written.

Would that be the case of Dostoyevsky? Would he reveal only the collective unconscious of men in the 19th century? Would he be a prophet of God? One cannot ignore the social and emotional environment in Russia of the 19th century that indicated a dissatisfaction of people with the czar and the emergency of revolutionary movements occurring simultaneously with the advance of the modernization of Europe, an advance whose acritical and opportunistic incorporation by Russian intellectuals is specially disapproved by Dostoyevsky. Even though this collective unconscious is found in his literature, Dostoyevsky also writes in the context of a literary prophecy that indicates tragic consequences caused by the loss of faith by modern society that is deeply connected in the apocalyptic imaginary present in the Russian literary tradition. It is around this theme – it is man's moving away from God that will constitute the prophetic building of Dostoyevsky's work (as is the case of "Demons" and "The Brothers Karamazov").

Dostoyevsky's theodicy is structured on the Apocalypse of St. John the Apostle and it shows human life on earth as immersed in a vast sea of pain, suffering and sin, whose only absolute light is Christ. His work is a monument to this alert, to this cry that is thrown over

modern man to avoid his/her distance from God. The risks of such distancing only increase pain and despair. Dostoyevsky does not give us any hope over the Earth. In this world, a bearable life only exists with the presence of Jesus Christ. Amidst pain, we also have some sparks of love, but not hope in better times, which for him, are definitely not from this world. With Dostoyevsky we move toward the inevitability of disaster. And, since he is not the herald of the “Death of God”, he is the prophet of tragedy that would survive humanity and proclaim the death of God.

Today in a Western world with growing, multiple and unavoidable violence, (terrorism, urban violence, wars) for which there appears to have no hope or a way out, it is impossible to read this author without being shaken and say: “He was right”.

A Prophet and Madman?

Prophecy and madness always had much in common in the social imaginary. The limits flowed from reason and unreason emerge in the poetic imagination, many of them as resistance to the state of things lived by the artist, somewhat emphasized by Richard Kearney (1991), the need for a poetic of imagination to transcend at the same time the “empire of reason” and the “*asylum* of unreason”. And, it is about this assertive that Tony Trigilio (2000) establishes a parallel between madness and the literary prophecy, assuming that poets like Allen Ginsberg do some kind of revision of the “divine madness” in the anti-psychiatry movement that was typical of the cold war. His hypothesis consists in that it has been created in the Western World a “modern prophecy”, typical of the industrial culture, that demands forms of unethical conscience to the traditional idea of prophetic inspiration. And, although the language of these modern poets is a reinvention of traditional models, inside this language the frontiers between the prophet and tradition and God, the prophet and tradition, and the prophet and the audiences are blurred (Trigilio, 2000: 15). Thus, Trigilio moves toward the articulation between Apocalypse - as unveiling, and at the same time, destruction and construction of new languages – and the poetry of Blake, H. D. and Allen Ginsberg. Following this thought we also have Nick Halpern (Halpern, 2003) who considers that the prophetic poets of our days no longer have a relation with God or even believe in Him. Nevertheless, they emit the prophetic voices of ancient times, although their focus is everyday life from which emerge their prophetic readings of reality.

All of them are contemporaneous visions of secularized prophetic language devoid of any sacredness. For these analysts, we have, in modern and contemporaneous poetry, prophets without God. Would that be the case of Dostoyevsky?

When Dostoyevsky worked on “A Writer’s Diary”, he hired an editor called Varvara Timofeeva. The 23-year-old young woman who was determined to have a literary career had some conflicts with the writer, however after a certain period she became some sort of his listener inside the publication. Her memories of connivance with Dostoyevsky are described by Joseph Frank and it is worth reading his descriptions of some of those moments.

During her first meeting with the writer, contrary to her expectations, what she found was a “very pale” man – a yellowish paleness, unhealthy – showing that he was very tired and maybe sick (...) with a gloomy face, exhausted (...)” (Frank, 2007: 69). He was seen by Timofeeva’s populist friends as a man who had “delusions, hallucinations, and epileptic

seizures [...] a monomaniac idea [...] an obsession” (Frank, 2007: 79). After a very difficult relation when Dostoyevsky had explosions of rage and was always angry, Timofeeva became some sort of his confidant. Once, before the European and Russian political scenery, he declared: “They [presumably Timofeeva’s radical friends] have no idea that soon everything will come to an end– their entire ‘progress’ and chatter! They do not have the slightest suspicion that the Antichrist has already been born [...] and is coming”. (Frank, 2007: 79).

In his writings, André Gide would highlight the ailing side of Dostoyevsky and the impact on his genius: “inspired on his own case Dostoyevsky reflects on his works, an unhealthy state that he carries with himself for some time and like his characters, he suggests a different rule of life”. (Gide, 1935: 115-116).

Raskolnikov’s dream

Thus, “Crime and Punishment” is like prophecy where we can read Raskolnikov’s dream. Dreams as narrative prophetic elements are manifested at various moments in Dostoyevsky’s work. Here we want to refer to the dream that Raskolnikov has in prison:

“He was in the hospital from the middle of Lent till after Easter. When he was better, he remembered the dreams he had while he was feverish delirious. He dreamt that the whole world was condemned to a terrible strange plague that had come to Europe from the depths of Asia. All were to be destroyed except a very few chosen. Some new sorts of microbes were attacking the bodies of men, but these microbes were endowed with intelligence and will. Men attacked by them became at once mad and furious. But never had men considered themselves so intellectual and so completely in possession of the truth as these sufferers, never had they considered their decisions, their scientific conclusions, their moral convictions so infallible. Whole villages, whole towns and people went mad from the infection. All were excited and did not understand one another. Each thought that he alone had the truth and was wretched looking at the others, beat himself on the breast, wept and wrung his hands. They did not know how to judge and could not agree what to consider evil and what good; they did not know whom to blame, whom to justify. Men killed each other in a sort of senseless spite. They gathered together in armies against one another, but even on the march the armies would begin attacking each other, the ranks would be broken and the soldiers would fall on each other, stabbing and cutting, biting and devouring each other. The alarm bell was ringing all day long; men rushed together, but they were summoned and who was summoning them no one knew. The most ordinary trades were abandoned, because everyone proposed their own ideas, his own improvements, and they could not agree; The land too was abandoned. Men met in groups, agreed on something, swore to keep together, but at once began on something quite different from what they had proposed. They accused one another, but at once began on something, fought and killed each other. There were conflagrations and famine. All men and all things were involved in destruction. The plague spread and moved further and further. Only a few men could be saved in the whole world. They were a pure chosen people, destined to found a new race and a new life, to renew and purify the Earth, but no one had seen these men, no one had heard their words and their voices” (Dostoevski, 1994: 585)⁵⁹.

Once a definite separation from Christ is completed, this illness, the anomie pest, would surge as the social disintegration expressed in the imaginary of the Tower of Babel, because this is the myth that we find in Dostoyevsky, and it is in this myth that the world has been immersing so rapidly that it has lost the perception of the illness it faces. The great drama of

⁵⁹ There seems to be a relationship between Dostoyevsky and Swedenborg. Themes like heaven, hell and destruction are also found in the latter. See discussion in Milosz (1975).

a highly individualistic and pluralistic society is that nobody will get along with one another; everyone will concentrate, above anything, on fighting for their own rights. The “political correctness” cliché will not contain hate, on the contrary, it will disseminate even more, because all truth will fall under the cloak of relativism— this is Dostoyevsky’s trichinella. The “dictatorship of relativism” (Seewald and Pope Benedict XVI, 2010: 27) the disappearance of all and any Truth (Keyes, 2004; Oxford, 2016) that might join men together, the surge of truths that are joined for a short and provisory period, but that after a very short period are torn apart and throw man against one another once again.

They will further separate from one another, and all that under the empire of the law, under the cloak of judicial reasoning. And they will become so weak, thinking they are strong in their rights and their struggle for these same rights, that they will not perceive the surreptitiously arrival of the enemy: mutual destruction from the infinite division between men, each one holding its own truth, and finally, the arrival of the enemy that will bring death and destruction in the name their God. Few shall survive. They are not seen or heard while the process of destruction advances. Later on, in the 20th century, Yeats in his poem “The Second Coming” will also prophesies:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (Yeats, 1992: 93).

In the eroded center and with the vanished truths resurfaces the Myth of the Tower of Babel under the cloak of blood and fire.⁶⁰

In the midst of prophecy

We live in the 21st century, in the heart of his prophecies hidden under the literary cloak, but not less revealing of the future that is here now. In its initial sense, prophecy means the word inspired by God. Above all, it was revelation and admonition, not necessarily a prevision of future events. Therefore, we could talk about a literary prophecy:

“Like the Biblical and Qu’ranic prophets, the literary prophet considers the historical events of the past in the context of the present, then provides the critique, the warning, and/or the challenge to her or his audience about the deleterious societal conditions and the need for human reformation” (Watson, 2009: 1).

The Prophet, as a mystical individual, continues to speak of the unknown dimensions for our senses. They are voices that echo way far, “from the abyss”, as expressed by Martin Buber (Buber, 1995: 10). All of them, invariably, lead to the great *leitmotiv* of Dostoevskian prophecies which is the loss of Faith in God and its consequence for humanity and the world.

The root of Dostoyevsky’s prophecy is that for him, faith collides with reason. This perception, typical in an intellectual tradition that did not know, like the West, the Renaissance,

⁶⁰ We cannot forget that the friendship and influence between Dostoyevsky and Vladimir Solovyov which impacts on his vision of Antichrist, a theme not to be covered by this article.

will soak up the thinking of other Russians like Solovyov, Shestov, Florensky, Berdyaev, Solzhenitsyn, Tarkovsky etc. It is impossible for them to coexist faith with an unlimited scientific knowledge. Under this bias, the problem of evil in the modern world lies, above all, in the distance from the dialogue between God and man, in the eclipse of God, to use the Buberian expression (Buber, 1957). Raskolnikov is thus the prototype of evil, which in Dostoyevsky's work would reach its perfection with Stavrogin of "Demons". His literary trajectory is an unveiling and deepening of the problem of evil. If Raskolnikov still opens to salvation by love, Stavrogin is the expression of the complete closure of the human being in himself and the evil that dwells in him.

More recently, will be Andrei Tarkovsky who shall restore the Russian apocalyptic tradition revealing that, as mentioned before, the artist has the capacity of, in line with the Absolute, to open the doors of perception for visions over the future dimension. In 1984, during a retrospective of his films, Tarkovsky made an intervention, inspired by Dostoyevsky, known as "Poetry of the Apocalypse", where he throws a light over the apocalyptic reading undertaken by his work. He considered the "Book of Saint John the best poetic work ever created on Earth. He is a phenomenon that in his essence expresses all laws established for man by heaven" (Tarkovsky, 1984). The moment of the Apocalypse is not a conventional moment, as a result, one is not permitted to know when it will happen, "it may happen tomorrow, it may happen a thousand years from now". Consequently, as said by Tarkovsky, no conclusions can be drawn on the time of the Apocalypse. However, he stresses that "we live in very difficult times, and difficulties become harder each year". According to Tarkovsky, a conscience that "is incapable of believing" suffers from the "lack of spirituality" and the "impossibility of waiting for the Grace". He also stresses: "happy is the man who has met this state [who believes]. Very few people can be proud of that. To feel free and happy, intrepidity is what counts" (Tarkovsky, 1984). Denounced by Tarkovsky, contemporaneous society has lost culture, in the spiritual sense of a bond with God. – as assumed by Nikolai Berdyaev – setting to a development whose dynamic is no longer subjected to human will control. Such destiny is the Apocalypse for Tarkovsky (Tarkovsky 1984, Mendonça, 2015).

Dostoyevsky emphasizes the apocalyptic dimension of human destiny in Raskolnikov's Babel Tower, we see that his prophetic dream anticipates the destiny of humanity subjugated by a knowledge that, rather than setting it free, like the waters of a whirlwind, it would involve it in an increasing and frantic way. In the 21st century humanity is taken by fear and surrounded by objects, immersed by in virtual lives, with no condition to establish true dialogical relations, community relations or just relations of trust, impaired in its faith, where any movement of ascendancy is destroyed in the crucible of the show and in damaged and falsified lives. Before us, men of the 21st century, Raskolnikov's world reveals itself in its dark grandiosity. We are chained in technologies that under the pretext of joining us together, has moved us apart. We have been increasingly moving away for each other and, as in the dream we fight each other and divide, unable to establish true bonds of trust and friendship. This is the core of Raskolnikov's Babel Tower.

Buber (1952) perceives such movement when he analyzes the evil that according to him has two directions: the first one is the personal singularity, the egotic movement toward oneself and unable to establish relations of dialogue with his/her peers. Buber would associate the images of Adam and Cain with the image of this movement. Man, on one's own

will, denies the dialogue with the Creator. However, this is a movement where, based on a personal decision, one can cause a stop. The second movement no longer has the capacity to be stopped. It is the Babel Tower that surges when the hearts and minds of the great masses of people are controlled. In the background, there are invisible powerful people who command and start wars among people, the destruction of social bonds and what is known as humanity or society. It has been increasingly faster, because subjugated by technology, the possibilities of men's self-control disappear. Once lost are the bonds of trust with men immersed in a virtual world where they build their own reality, almost always marked by lies, fear and violence, we no longer have a way out beyond the unending conflict and war of all men fighting each other.

When the bricks of this tower were being set it escaped our notice that it was Cavafy's "Walls" (Kaváfis, 1982). First it was fear, then, it started to transform itself into terror, meanwhile we remained self-contained without communicating with each other for fear and distrust. Eventually, each individual thought that his/her own brick was better and more correct. If the bonds had been broken by fear, they were also broken by our absolute confidence that we were all correct. Thousands of groups fighting for thousands of rights have surged, thousands of minorities in conflict with each other. As a result, we can no longer refer to what is correct, we have lost the path that would lead us to social relations. We have lost the reference of what is to be human, and this issue became a secondary matter.

Dostoyevsky's prophecy remains to be fulfilled. The time when all tears and evils cease and when the pure and chosen men will surge to reconstruct the wreckage is unknown to us, however we certainly know by now what is the bitter taste of Raskolnikov's dream.

Mercy

But the counterpart to the disaster in "Crime and Punishment" is mercy, amid chaos and abjection we have love, forgiveness, solidarity. In his misfortune and abjection is Marmeladov who has the greatness, together with Sonia, of expressing the authentic Russian Christ, the face of love that springs from the swamp of sin and error.

Marmeladov and Sonia are the highest expression of a suffering humanity, who surrounded by pain is capable of turning to their peers and translate into hope a genuine feeling of Mercy for the neighbor. Marmeladov carries this feeling under the mists of his vice, and Sonia acts as the bearer of Mercy for people like Raskolnikov, the most materially and spiritually neglected. Sonia has a mysterious power to conduct everything with love and as only agape love can do. Marmeladov is the human face marked by sin, weakness and vice, but in the deepness of his eyes shines the light of Christ. Sonia, also in the middle of weakness and error can be considered the real bearer of Resurrection. Sonia is the fallen angel, the angle of mercy, a character that assimilates to the *petite* Fadette of George Sand, one of Dostoyevsky's favorite writers and who had a great influence on him. Marmeladov and Sonia, in their weakness, are open to a relation with God. A reason why they are strong. They are the best and most astonishing example in literature on the light of God in the middle of darkness. They are examples for a world of strong people and supermen who discard or simply ignore Him.

"And, when she visited Raskolnikov at work, or met a party of the prisoners on the road, they

all took off their hats to her. “Mátuchka, Sofia Siemionovna, you are dear, good little mother” coarse branded criminals said to that frail little creature. She would smile and bow to them and everyone was delighted when she smiled. They even admired her gait and turned round to watch her walking; they even admired her too for being so little, and, in fact, did not know what to admire her most for. They even came to her for help in their illnesses” (Dostoevski, 1994: 24).

Matushka, a Mother as the Virgin Mary, so pure, that by transcending the physical world, and in a remarkable and unforgettable way, she is above all, spiritual. Someone who is so beautiful and pure that overcomes all existing pain in the middle of those men. Someone they revere, as a Mother. And, how can we forget Theotokos, the Holy Mother of God? Ray of light and hope. Synonym of redemption, Sonia is the true Resurrection. There can be no doubt that Sonia will also have an impact on Tolstoy who will write his novel “Resurrection” after Dostoyevsky’s death and whose books he read. Let us remember that over his bedside at the Astapovo railroad station, where he would die, a copy of “The Brothers Karamazov” was found, as well as “Montaigne Essays”.

Finally, the time has come for Resurrection, as well as for Raskolnikov, the incredulous intellectual, immersed into the existential emptiness that he refuses to leave, and finally, the light of Mercy touches him through the fragile and timid hands of Sonia.

The prophesied chaos is overcome, in “Crime and Punishment”, by the redemption of mercy. The prophet Dostoyevsky is marked by the Russian Christocentric vision which pervades all his great future narratives. With Sonia he takes up the Apocalypse that has as central figure “a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” (Ap 12:1). The woman that brings redemption. Raskolnikov, emptiness and chaos, is redeemed by the fullness of Sonia’s love. The prophet gives us hope.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Translated by Raimundo Moura with funds from Programa de Apoio à Publicação Qualificada/PROPEP- Pró- Reitoria de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa/UFPA – Universidade Federal do Pará (Federal University of Pará).

This research is supported by a grant (Productivity scholarship) from CNPq-Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPQ - National Council for Scientific and Technological Development).

Article written for the XVI Symposium of the International Dostoyevsky Society. University of Granada, 2016.

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