

Transgression and Sakhalin: Dostoevskian Subtext in Chekhov's *Murder*

Although the story *Murder* (*Ubiistvo*, 1895) is Chekhov's only story that directly reflects his experiences on the island of Sakhalin (the story's final chapter is set on Sakhalin), as well as his description of the island and its penal institutions in *The Island Sakhalin* (*Ostrov Sakhalin*, 1895), relatively little critical attention has been paid to this unusual work. Of two Russian studies devoted to it, one examines the story in relation to Chekhov's investigation of Sakhalin and to his interest in questions of penology and jurisprudence in general, while the other relates the story to themes in Chekhov's fiction both prior to and following his journey to Sakhalin [Polotskaia, Dolotova]. In scholarship on Chekhov in English, one article examines *The Island Sakhalin* as an epistemologically problematic text, but does not consider *Murder* or other works linked to Chekhov's journey there [Popkin], and a discussion of the archetype of descent to the underworld in Chekhov's fiction and drama, while identifying the journey to Sakhalin as related to this archetype, does not mention *Murder*, despite the relevance of the story, particularly its finale, to the topic in question [Finke]. In the present paper I would like to take a somewhat different approach and to broaden the discussion of *Murder* by considering it not so much in the context of Chekhov's own works

or the facts of his biography as by suggesting some intertextual dimensions of the story that may expand our understanding of the story as a whole as well as of its final “Sakhalin” chapter.

One reason that *Murder* has attracted so little critical attention may be that, like certain other stories by Chekhov of the mid- and later 1890s, such as *Peasant Women* (*Baby*, 1891) *Peasants* (*Muzhiki*, 1896) or *In the Ravine* (*V ovrage*, 1900), *Murder* presents an almost unrelievedly gloomy picture of the life of the Russian *narod*. Indeed, *Murder* seems to offer even less suggestion of compensatory esthetic or ethical resources among the *narod* to offset the scenes of depressing ignorance and cruelty that pervade all four of these stories. The uniform setting of belated wintry darkness in *Murder* seems to match the inner benightedness of its characters, and the central event of the story, the murder of one character by his cousins (a brother and sister) in a sudden eruption of elemental rage amidst such mundane household activities as eating boiled potatoes and doing laundry, suggests that the propensity for violence at best lurks close to the surface in us all. The story’s emblem of this volatile mix of the ordinary and the violent is the striking image of a potato stained with human blood lying on the floor (this is also practically the only reference to a primary color, as opposed to black, white, or some mixture of the two, in the text). However, this murder, unpremeditated and utterly prosaic in both setting and aftermath, coupled with a consideration of the plot structure of the story, may lead us to a fuller comprehension of the story’s significance.

If we consider the plot of *Murder*, with its exposition of the preceding circumstances, its graphic depiction of the crime itself, and its description of the ensuing investigation, trial, and final exile of the perpetrators, the parallel with perhaps the most noted story of murder in nineteenth-century Russian literature, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and*

Punishment (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866) is clear, although there has been little investigation of the possible implications of this congruence. In fact, I would suggest that *Murder* presents a fusion of associations with (at least) two Dostoevsky texts, not only *Crime and Punishment* but also Dostoevsky's final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Brat'ia Karamazovy*, 1881). The four members of the Terekhov family, rather like the Karamazovs, if on a vastly reduced scale, seem to function as components in a single collective psyche or personality, locked in endless conflict with itself. As in *Brothers Karamazov*, the story focuses on a murder within a family (rather than a parricide, the crime is the murder of a cousin, a sort of fratricide, particularly if we consider the Russian idiom "dvoiurodnyi brat," and the frequent use of the term *brat* by the characters to refer to a cousin), with roots in the family's past and heredity. As in *Brothers Karamazov*, there are mundane and fortuitous murder weapons (a paperweight; a bottle of cooking oil and an iron), and as in *Brothers Karamazov* there is a partial miscarriage of justice (the motive assumed by the court, the murder of Matvei Terekhov for his money, is in fact inaccurate; as the reader is aware, Matvei had little money and the crime occurred during a fit of rage rather than through a premeditated desire for gain; in fact, the murder costs Iakov Terekhov money: he attempts to buy the silence of Sergei Nikanorovich, the station *bufetchik* who was an unexpected witness to the crime). In addition, the name of the railroad settlement where the action of *Murder* takes place, Progonaia, echoes "our town" in *Brothers Karamazov*, Skotoprigon'evsk. These associations notwithstanding, the primary intertext would however seem to be *Crime and Punishment*; in addition to the similarities of plot already noted, there is the shockingly graphic description of the murder itself, as well as the emphasis on the blows and on the copious blood, and the epilogue set in penal servitude, in this case an even more remote and

hostile environment, Sakhalin, rather than in the Siberia that Dostoevsky knew from his own bitter experience.

However, it is precisely in the epilogue on Sakhalin that the divergence between *Murder* and its Dostoevskian antecedents emerges most clearly. The epilogue to *Crime and Punishment* presents Raskol'nikov's spiritual and moral regeneration, or at least the crucial inception of the process. As Dostoevsky stated in 1862 in an introduction to a translation of Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* that appeared in Dostoevsky's journal *Vremia*, "the fundamental idea of the whole art of the nineteenth century [...] is the restoration of the person who has perished, unjustly crushed by the weight of circumstances, the inertia of the ages, and social prejudices" [Dostoevskii, XX, p. 28]. Regardless of how applicable this formula may be to the nineteenth century generally or to Hugo's novel specifically, it seems more than appropriate to the works of Dostoevsky, above all to his first major novel, which can be construed as an extended demonstration of this argument. Dostoevsky even incorporates the biblical prototype of his plot, the account of Jesus's raising of Lazarus, from the Gospel of John, into the text of his novel: Raskolnikov asks Sonia to read the gospel passage, much of which is quoted in the novel [Dostoevskii, VI, pp. 250–251], and in the epilogue, Raskolnikov's reading of the same passage (in both cases from the copy of the New Testament that had belonged to Lizaveta, one of Raskolnikov's victims) functions as the final catalyst to his regeneration [Dostoevskii, VI, p. 422]. By comparison, *Murder* seems muted and reserved in its epilogue. Rather than the gentle spring time with which *Crime and Punishment* concludes, *Murder* ends with autumnal, even infernal darkness, and the approach of yet another storm to torment the shackled convicts. The character who is the focus of the epilogue, Iakov Terekhov, has undergone at best an ambiguous transformation, the recognition of the

erroneous nature of his previous beliefs and the life he had based on them; he now desires nothing more than to “return home, to tell about his new faith there, and to save from destruction even just one person and to live even just one day without suffering” [Chekhov, IX, p. 160]. Even this modest hope, it is clear, will be permanently denied the unfortunate Iakov.

At this point, one might ask whether *Murder* seeks merely to “correct” the more ecstatic or visionary aspects of Dostoevsky’s novelistic conclusions, particularly that of *Crime and Punishment* (as well as of *The Brothers Karamazov*). There is at least one other case of a Chekhov story with an analogous polemic with Dostoevskian texts and themes embedded in it [Durkin]. However, some recent scholarship on Dostoevsky’s novels may suggest that on a deeper level, the essential issue in *Murder* may not be so much a critique of Dostoevsky’s plots and their implications as a counter statement concerning the nature of religion and the ethical implications of belief.

As has been suggested by the Russian scholar Tat’iana Kasatkina, each of Dostoevsky’s major novels seems to conclude in a sort of verbal icon, that is, a configuration of characters, images, and details that not only assume a certain static, emblematic quality, but also recreate the specific subject of a well-known icon. While the full articulation of this argument may well be speculative and debatable, such a concluding visual iconic “harmony” for both *Crime and Punishment* and *Brothers Karamazov* seems well-founded [Kasatkina, pp. 69–82; pp. 117–128]. More importantly for the analysis of *Murder*, this Dostoevskian iconic closure provides a more specific point of contrast. If Dostoevsky concludes his novels with an iconic configuration, *Murder* opens with the display of an actual icon:

Na stantsii Progonnoi sluzhili vsenoshchnuiu. Pered bol’shim obrazom, napisannym iarko, na zolotom fone, stoiala tolpa

stantsionnykh sluzhashchikh, ikh zhen i detei [...]. Vse stoiali v bezmolvii, ocharovannye bleskom ognei i voem meteli, kotoraja ni s togo, ni s sego razygralas' na dvore, nesmotria na kanun Blagoveshcheniya [Chekhov, IX, p. 133].

[At the Progonaia station vespers was being held. Before a large icon, brightly painted with a gold background, stood a crowd of station workers, their wives and children [...] They all stood in silence, enchanted by the brightness of the lights and the howl of the blizzard that, for no reason, was raging outside, despite the fact that it was the vigil of the Annunciation.]

Particularly in the light of Dostoevsky's iconic conclusions, this opening "manifestation" of an icon suggests a radical inversion of Dostoevskian structure. The "iconic moment" occurs at the very beginning of the text, and is overt rather than a matter of suggestion or allusion; still, the illumination and beauty of the scene seems to dissipate quickly in the gloom and spiritual darkness that dominate the setting and characters of the subsequent narrative. The beauty, transcendence, and communion with the spiritual realm embodied in an icon are revealed, but seem to remain an unobtainable ideal with little relevance to the actual course of people's lives. The moment of "enchantment" ends as Matvei Terekhov, the focus of the opening sections of the story, leaves the service. Although the specific subject of the icon is not stated, it is presumably an icon of the Virgin, given that the ceremony marks the vigil of the feast of the Annunciation (March 25), one of the earliest and most significant feast days observed by the Church and the one that served as the first indicator of the mystery of the Incarnation, that is the direct presence of the divine in the world [Bulgakov, p. 119]. In addition, the opening paragraphs of the story mention numerous hymns sung for the Feast of the

Annunciation, including “Arkhangel’skii glas,” (which Chekhov recalled being forced by his father to sing along with his brothers), providing the vocal equivalent to the visual icon displayed at the opening of the story. This initial “illumination,” as well as the community/communion implicit in the scene, is however precisely what disappears in the course of the story. The emphasis throughout is on the deviation on the part of the Terekhov clan from both orthodoxy (as well as from Orthodoxy in the proper sense) in favor of heterodoxy, either in the form of sectarian leanings or of self-isolation from the community of believers. The founder of the Terekhov line (as well as of their economic holdings), Avdot’ia, was an Old Believer, and although later generations ostensibly adhered to Orthodoxy, the present generation combines the family’s characteristic zeal with aberrant forms of belief: Matvei has in the past pursued ascetic practices to the point of ecstatic excess (including sexual excess). In a sort of parody of the “good news” that begins with the Archangel’s annunciation to the Virgin, Matvei himself describes his earlier excesses, which he has forsaken for more orthodox practice marked by a strong esthetic sense, on the feast of the Annunciation itself. In the final text of the story, Chekhov replaced the word “religiia” (religion) in Matvei’s discourse with the substandard “lerigiia” [Chekhov, IX, p. 480]; although Chekhov introduced other indicators of Matvei’s semi-literacy, this phonetic and graphic transposition encapsulates the inverted quality of the religious behavior of all the Terekhovs. Matvei’s older cousin Iakov has withdrawn, in the name of purity, into isolated ritual excess; in the private chapel he has set up in the dilapidated inn that the Terekhovs inhabit, an icon of the Annunciation is also on display, but Iakov’s exclusion and suspicion of outside witnesses to his devotion contrasts with the community of fellow believers that is the hallmark of Orthodoxy and is implicit in the opening iconic scene. Iakov’s sister

Aglaia is rumored to have been a Khlystovka (a member of the Khlysty, a sectarian group at least accused of self-flagellation and of a belief in new Christs). The fourth member of the family, Iakov's teen-age daughter Dashutka, seems mentally deficient, capable only of parodic mimicry of her father's and aunt's beliefs. (Chekhov enhances the atmosphere of heterodoxy in the story by also including comments by other characters. The police officer Zhukov characterizes Matvei's earlier ecstatic worship as "Molokanstvo" and later at the trial, the judge, upon learning that Iakov did not attend church, asks him whether he is a *Raskol'nik* [Chekhov, IX, p. 140; p. 158].) In general, the Terekhovs would seem to present a set of deviations from the norm, a norm offered by the vision of the icon at the beginning of the story, but one that goes unrecognized by them. As Chekhov says in a letter, "The norm is unknown to me, as it is to any one of us. We all know what a dishonorable act is, but we do not know what honor is" [Letter to A. N. Pleshcheev, 9 April 1889; Chekhov, Letters, III, p. 184]. The sense of a missing, unrecognizable norm, as remote as the icon of the opening passage, pervades the story, with the characters and the reader confronting alternatives that offer no real solution or resolution.

The murder of Matvei at the hands of his cousins Iakov and Aglaia is of course the ultimate consequence of this pattern of deviation from the norm, and the logical outcome of the isolation that the family's quasi-religious practices entail. As with the opening in relation to the entire story, Chekhov carefully correlates the crime to the religious calendar. The main part of the story (excluding the final two chapters, depicting the trial and Iakov on Sakhalin) is set during Lent (*Velikii post*), the period of most somber penance for believers, particularly its concluding week, *Velikaia* or *Strastnaia nedelia*. The murder takes place on Monday of Holy Week (*Strastnoi* or *Velikii ponedel'nik*) [Chekhov, IX, p. 146], the first day of the week dedicated to

commemoration of the Passion and Death of Christ. The liturgy for the day “invites the faithful to accompany Christ, to be crucified with Him, to die for His sake to the pleasures of life, in order to live with Him” [Bulgakov, p. 534]. Instead, Iakov and Aglaia act as executioners, rather than as sacrificial victims. The liturgy for the day recalls as a prototype of Christ the Old Testament Joseph, “by the envy of his brothers sold and abused, though innocent, and later restored by God” [Bulgakov, p. 535]; the story presents an even more extreme instance of fraternal betrayal, the murder of an innocent at the hands of his cousins. The desolate darkness of the natural setting reflects the somber religious season; in such a world of suffering and darkness, the murder of a brother seems the uttermost loss of human community and moral desolation.

Chekhov’s emphasis on liturgical season and religious observations may also function as a reverse reflection of *Crime and Punishment*. The crucial event of the novel’s epilogue, the renewal of Raskolnikov’s faith, begins with his illness during the end of Lent and Easter Week [“ves’ konets posta i Sviatuiu,” Dostoevskii, VI, p. 419]; although it is not possible to assign the final, iconic scene mentioned by Kasatkina to a specific day, it clearly takes place during the period after Easter, in which the Resurrection and its consequences are commemorated. The last specific time reference before the scene in question is to the “second week after Holy Week” [Dostoevskii, VI, p. 420], that is, the second week after Easter, known as Nedelia po Fome. The Sunday (Fomina nedelia) that begins the week commemorates the episode of the Apostle Thomas overcoming his doubts as to Christ’s Resurrection [John, XX, 24–29]; in addition (in specifically Russian tradition), the dead are commemorated on the Monday (Fomin ponедельник) or Tuesday after Fomina nedelia [cf. Bulgakov, p. 588] (in other churches, both Eastern and Western, November 2 is the usual

date for this observance). Dostoevsky thus provides a liturgical backdrop appropriate to the reawakening of faith in Raskolnikov and reinforces his “resurrection,” already outlined by the story of the raising of Lazarus (which, as we have noted, Raskolnikov himself reads shortly after the scene in question), with associations with Thomas encountering the risen Christ.

Chekhov rewrites this plot of renewal of faith and restoration/resurrection of the individual. In place of this optimistic scenario, Chekhov offers a world of aberrant religion, rooted in psychological pathology, that must be rejected and overcome. As the pervasive darkness of the entire story, and particularly of the concluding scene on Sakhalin, suggests, there is no final illumination and redemption, only the recognition of our true existential condition, without the false support of a blind faith. I would however suggest that Chekhov not only “corrects” Dostoevsky’s plot and particularly its conclusion, he also implicitly rejects the prototypes or archetypes that underlie it. The master narrative of *Crime and Punishment* is clearly the story of the raising of Lazarus; in addition, there is an implicit association with the story of Thomas. These two episodes occur only in the Gospel according to John (chapters XI and XX respectively), where they function as a frame to the mystery of the Resurrection, the first as an emblematic precursor and the second as a miraculous confirmation. (It should be noted that John was the focal gospel for Dostoevsky throughout his life; in his own copy of the Gospels, which was constantly with him from the time he received it from the wife of a Decembrist in Siberia, the Gospel of John is the most heavily annotated [Kirillova; Kogan].) Not only the Thomas episode but also the raising of Lazarus emphasize the centrality of faith in Jesus as divine, a particular, indeed central, concern of the Gospel of John [Pagels, p. 34]. In John XI 23–27, Jesus asks Martha, the sister of

Lazarus, whether she believes in the resurrection. To her response that she believes in a general resurrection on the last day, Jesus responds “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? She saith unto him: Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world” [John, XI 25–27; King James version]. In light of Chekhov’s generally sceptical attitude toward what are often held to be universal truths, it is not surprising that he may have found *Crime and Punishment*’s emphasis on belief as the inevitable solution to and resolution of the problems of existence (including murder) as dubious. In his first notebook, in which Chekhov noted down drafts for short sections of *Murder* and a number of other stories of the 1890s, Chekhov also recorded one of his most notable (and noted) statements on belief:

Mezhdu “est’ bog” i “net boga” lezhit tseloe gromadnoe pole, kotoroe prokhodit s bol’shim trudom istinnyi mudrets. Russkii zhe chelovek znaet kakuiu-nibud’ iz dvukh etikh krainostei, seredina mezhdu nimi emu neinteresna, i on obyknovenno ne znaet nichego ili ochen’ malo [Chekhov, XVII, pp. 53–54].

[Between “God exists” and “there is no God” there lies an entire enormous field, which a true wise man traverses with great difficulty. A Russian however knows only one of these two extremes, he is not interested in the mean between them, and he usually knows nothing or very little.]

In *Murder*, Chekhov seems to counter Dostoevsky’s belief in belief, and his presentation of the consequences of unbelief, if not with belief in unbelief, then with a presentation of the consequences of the other extreme, of blind and excessive faith in deadly combination with impenetrable ignorance.

We might perhaps distinguish the two types of textual relationship involved by terming the Dostoevsky texts “intertexts” with regard to *Murder* and the archetypal texts underlying them “prototexts.” In addition, it should be noted that while the plot of *Crime and Punishment* re-iterates and thereby validates the pattern of its prototext, the relation between text and prototext in Chekhov is somewhat different and more complex. I would suggest that, rather than directly confirming the prototext as Dostoevsky does (his use of iconic scenes provides a visual analogue to this method), Chekhov, as we might expect, argues indirectly, showing the deviation from the norm, the consequences of the violation of the prototext rather than its affirmation.

The question arises whether in *Murder* Chekhov merely depicts deviation from the norm as a means of undermining Dostoevsky’s argument by counterexample or whether he offers a true counterstatement to the assertion of the primacy and efficacy of faith, that is a qualification or redefinition of belief itself. A partial answer to this may lie in the names of the central characters, the cousins Matvei and Iakov Terekhov. As we know from other studies [Senderovich, de Sherbinin], Chekhov’s use of names is often not fortuitous, although the significance of a name in a given text may be rather deeply embedded in cultural and religious traditions. In *Murder* specifically, certain names seem to serve as semantic foci, some with possible personal significance for Chekhov himself; the family name Terekhov is taken from that of a convict on Sakhalin, Fedor Terekhov, a notorious murderer of other convicts (and also one of a pair of brothers) [Chekhov, IX, p. 481]. Although none of the Terekhovs in the story seems to bear any marked resemblance to the original bearer of the name, the association with Sakhalin presumably influenced the choice of surname; the name also shares some phonetic features with

the name Chekhov. Perhaps more importantly, the contemptuous nickname by which the Terekhovs are known in the area, the Bogomolovs (from *bogomol*, devout person, pilgrim), was reportedly applied to Chekhov's own paternal uncle Mitrofan, like Chekhov's father Pavel a zealous observer of Orthodox ritual [Chekhov, IX, p. 482]. Whatever the biographical and psychological implications of these names for Chekhov himself, their use in *Murder* suggests that names play a particularly important role in the story, and the names Matvei and Iakov may be the most important in this respect. The two given names seem to suggest alternatives to the paradigm offered by Dostoevsky, with the further complication that a given character in the story, through his behavior or belief, may himself stand in an ironic relationship to the prototype suggested by his name¹. Analogously, *Murder* itself operates ironically in at least two directions simultaneously, first in relation to a prior literary text, primarily *Crime and Punishment*, and secondly in relation to that text's appeal to a prototype, specifically one found in Scripture and tradition. Given the ironic nature (in Northrop Frye's sense) of the world of *Murder*, such multiple textual irony seems appropriate.

With this general framework in mind, I would suggest that the names in question function precisely as the nuclei of

1 The names of the two female members of the Terekhov family, Aglaia and Dashutka (Daria), do not appear to function in as complex a fashion as the names Matvei and Iakov. Aglaia is the feminine form of Aglaii, one of forty Christian soldiers martyred in Armenia; Daria was a priestess of Athena in Rome who was converted to Christianity by her Christian husband Christanthus and subsequently martyred [Bulgakov, 106; 115–116]. The feast days of the two saints are March 9 and March 19 respectively, in the same period as the action of the story. In keeping with the ironic use of names however, the meanings of the two names do suggest a contrast with the characters in the story: Aglaii (Aglaia) means “light” (*svetlyi, svetlaia*), while Daria means “powerful, conquering” (*sil'naia, pobezhdaushchaia*), markedly different from the vituperative and ignorant Aglaia and the half-witted and easily dominated Dashutka.

counter-statements to the Johannine orientation of Dostoevsky's text. Matvei (Matthew) is of course the traditional author of another gospel (and the only one besides John that inscribes its author in the text as directly called by Jesus Himself [Matthew, IX, 9]); more importantly for *Murder*, the apostle and evangelist Matthew is described as leading a secular existence, as a tax collector, before he is called by Christ. Matvei Terekhov has also lead a "secular" life, as a worker at a tile factory, but in that life he was also a religious zealot. It is only with his retirement (for reasons of ill health in large part induced by his excessive asceticism) and return to his family that he embraces a less rigorous (and less aberrant) approach to religion and becomes a sort of inverse apostle, an advocate of orthodox (and Orthodox) moderation in ritual practice to his cousins Iakov and Aglaia. His gospel is resented by the cousins, who reject his liberating message (*euaggelion*: good news) in favor of their enslavement to obsessive and isolated ritualism. Matvei, in Hebrew "gift of God," has come to embody a faith proportioned to human ability that Iakov and Aglaia find abhorrent and ultimately attempt to suppress by violent means.

Iakov presents a more complex, and more deeply ironic, case; most importantly, the name points to the prototext operating in *Murder*. The figure that is the primary referent for the name in this instance is not the patriarch Iakov (or Jacob), son of Isaac, of the Old Testament, but rather the Apostle Jacob (usually referred to as James the brother of Jesus in English; to avoid possible confusion over the form of the name in various languages, I will use Iakov, the Russian form of the name), whose feast day in the Orthodox church is October 23. According at least to Orthodox tradition, this Iakov was from early youth extremely zealous in religious observance, first under Jewish law and later, in the early Church, as a leading figure of the Christian community of Jerusalem. As a young man (under Jewish law), he "distinguished

himself by an unusual strictness in life, he observed the strictest fast, took neither wine nor meat, did not cut his hair, did not bathe or anoint his body with oil... and prayed frequently with genuflection. He was so zealous in prayer that from frequent genuflection the skin on his knees became hard like that of a camel” [!] and “he alone was allowed by the High Priest into the Holy of Holies of the Temple” [Bulgakov, p. 386]. Subsequently, he was equally active in his advocacy of the Christian faith and was later martyred by members of the Jewish community of Jerusalem for his steadfast defense of the new faith [Bulgakov, p. 386]. As an image of religious zeal, the Apostle Iakov is reflected in the excessive ritualism of Iakov Terekhov, though the latter’s isolated fervor lacks any hint of commitment to a larger community that the Apostle Iakov’s activity as a Christian evinces.

More importantly, in addition to the character and biographical details attributed to the Apostle Iakov by tradition, he is also held to be the author of an epistle, the General Epistle of James/Iakov, supposedly addressed in the first instance to the Jerusalem Church. (I will refer to this text with both the English and Russian forms of the name.) Viewed as being in many respects closer to traditional Jewish wisdom or ethical literature than to other New Testament texts [Johnson, p. 178], the Epistle of James/Iakov, although a brief five chapters, is noteworthy for several features that make it an intriguing candidate as a prototext for *Murder*, in opposition to the Johannine texts that function in *Crime and Punishment*. The epistle is perhaps the least Christological of the New Testament texts, with only a few brief references to Christ or to the central event of the Resurrection [Johnson]. It thus stands in clear contrast to the emphatic focus on the Resurrection in the Gospel of John (as well as in *Crime and Punishment*). More importantly, in terms of the positive content of the epistle, two themes dominate, both of which seem highly relevant to

Murder and its covert polemic with Dostoevsky. Particularly in its second chapter, the Epistle of James/Iakov insists, to the point of near redundancy, on the inadequacy of faith alone; indeed works seem to serve as the only sure indication of valid faith: “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?” [James, II, 14], with the second question clearly a rhetorical one; “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” [James, II, 17]; “But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” [James, II, 20]; “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only” [James, II, 24]; “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” [James, II, 26]. As a specific corollary to this axiom, the epistle upbraids the wealthy for their hypocrisy and lack of charity toward the poor and suffering: “Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that will come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten” [James, V, 1–2]; “Behold, the hire of the laborers [...], which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth” [James, V, 4]. The epistle’s assertion of the necessity of works, of action on behalf of one’s fellow man, as the only sure manifestation of faith, stands in clear contrast to the Gospel of John’s tendency to emphasize faith alone, without consideration of the practical or social implications of faith. With regard to *Murder*, we can see consequences of the neglect of the principles articulated by James/Iakov. Iakov Terekhov not only practices faith alone (a debased form of faith that finds expression in the sterile ritual and isolation that may well be the necessary outcome of such faith), his business activities have clearly involved the economic exploitation of his workers, debtors, and others. Although he experiences some twinges of conscience over past shady activities (the sale of a stolen horse, a death at his tavern from excessive or tainted alcohol), Iakov views his cousin’s reproaches concerning his fixation

with monetary gain as the word of those “who do not like to work. As if being poor, not amassing anything, and not saving anything, were much better than being rich” [Chekhov, IX, p. 145]. Iakov’s fusion of the desire for economic gain with a zeal lacking charity seems congruent with the attitude that the Epistle of James/Iakov excoriates. Matvei Terekhov has at least given all the money he had accumulated working at the tile factory to the mother of his illegitimate child and has not asked for it back when the child later died. The second major theme of the epistle relates not to charitable works in the narrow sense, but rather to a general charitable disposition among believers. According to the epistle, the lack of such charity expresses itself in anger, envy, and in particular in abusive language: “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain” [James, I, 26]; “[...] the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body” [James, III, 5–6]; “But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” [James, III, 8]; “He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law” [James, IV, 11]. Any of these verses, but especially the first, might indeed stand as an epigraph to Chekhov’s story; all the Terekhovs, Matvei included, lack charity in their verbal communication with one another, but perhaps Aglaia, whose verbal behavior alternates between endless vituperation of her cousin Matvei and sanctimonious prayer and hymn-singing with her brother Iakov, embodies the second major fault denounced by James/Iakov. Viewed in the light of the Epistle of James/Iakov, *Murder* can be read as an exemplum in reverse: it is precisely the disregard of works and the over-valuation of “faith”, abetted by abuse of language, that lead to

fratricide, not the lack of belief, as *Crime and Punishment* would have it. Only at the end, when Iakov at last has recognized the error of his previous belief, does he come to see the necessity of deeds and to desire to “tell about his new faith and to save at least one person from destruction” [Chekhov, IX, p. 160]; the second goal would presumably be achieved precisely *by* telling about his new faith, by harnessing language in the service of charity and the deed. Ironically this is of course a very old faith, new only for Iakov at the pathetic close of his life, a faith directed toward the other, a faith of erasure of the self, not of its resurrection. The horror of the last chapter of *Murder*, and that which truly makes Sakhalin a hell, is that Iakov, having suffered his way to an understanding of the inadequacy of faith alone and an awareness of the necessity of works, is now (and will be until his death), shackled to Sakhalin in a Promethean torture of enforced inaction². The internal stasis of his previous existence has been broken, but now an external, imposed stasis precludes the possibility of acts. In his final misery, Iakov Terekhov resembles the ironic hero that Northrop Frye sees as shading into the suffering hero or martyr.

It might be argued that, in contrast to Dostoevsky’s overt inscription of his Johannine prototext in the text of *Crime and Punishment*, the hypothetical James/Iakov prototext in *Murder*, is only hinted at or suggested, not explicitly cited. In fact, that is in a way the point: the moral principles articulated in the Epistle of James/Iakov

2 In fact, Iakov’s situation is even more tortured than that of the mythological Prometheus (“Forethought”). Iakov can only regret what he failed to do, while the Titan Prometheus was punished by the gods for having provided mankind with fire and other cultural benefits (indeed, he even created mankind), among other offenses to the Olympians, so that even in his agonies he can recall having helped “at least one person”. Iakov perhaps more closely resembles Prometheus’s hapless brother Epimetheus (“Afterthought”) who is unable to foresee or consider the consequences of his actions (specifically, opening the box offered him by Pandora) and is fated to rue them endlessly.

(responsibility and charity toward one's fellow man) do not require authoritative revelation or demand absolute belief; they can be attained by man's understanding alone and acted upon even without complete certainty. The truth of these notions is accessible to all, "hidden in plain sight." The Epistle of James/Iakov, as Chekhov seems to be using it, is less a source of blinding and binding revelation and more a sort of algebraic solution—given the moral facts and conditions of our existence, these are the most plausible conclusions at which we can arrive. The Epistle of James/Iakov is not a uniquely necessary source of truth in *Murder* (and thus inscribed as an integral and explicit constituent of the text), rather it is a text closer to the implicit norm that we can sense but can not readily express. *Murder* is thus not only oriented toward a different Biblical prototext, with differing value, than is *Crime and Punishment*, it also implies a different relation between text and prototext, and between character (and reader) and prototext. The textual situation constructed in *Murder* offers much greater freedom, but also carries much greater risk of freely creating one's own hell on earth.

Murder thus reverses the model of *Crime and Punishment* (and, if we accept Dostoevsky's analysis, that of the nineteenth century novel as a whole) of rebirth of the individual through a renewal of faith, in favor of a paradigm that favors works over faith and seeks not so much the rebirth of the individual as the loss of the self in concern for others. At the same time, *Murder* implies alternative prototypes within the Christian tradition itself to the prototypes privileged by the Dostoevskian scheme. The result is a religion, or rather an ethics, of inclusion rather than exclusion, of action rather than belief. Adjacent to several entries in his notebook that clearly relate to *Murder*, Chekhov makes the following somewhat uncharacteristic generalization: "Without faith man can not live" ["Bez very chelovek zhit' ne

mozhet,” Chekhov, XVII, p. 35]. At issue in *Murder* is precisely what in fact would constitute a faith by which man can, or should, live.

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