The Two Faces of Svidrigailov

The figure of Svidrigailov has fascinated some Western critics no less than it fascinated Dunia and Rodion Raskol'nikov. For Middleton Murry in 1916, Svidrigailov was the principal hero, the most striking figure in Crime and Punishment. Philip Rahv, somewhat more cautiously, says that Svidrigailov “is so fascinating a character in his own right, exercising an appeal nearly matching that of the hero, that at times he threatens to run away with the story.”

Yet most critical appraisals of Svidrigailov are summary and/or neglect important parts of the evidence. It has become almost traditional to define him as the double of Raskol’nikov’s dark self, as an extrapolation of the would-be superman in Raskol’nikov. But this not only leads to facile simplification of a complex character: it misses the fact that Svidrigailov is a fundamentally different type of “superman” than the type aspired to by Raskol’nikov.

Any adequate account of Svidrigailov must pivot on an assessment of at least three capital facts of his career: the feelings he inspires in Dunia (and in his child-bride); his sparing of Dunja when he has her at his mercy; and his suicide. But before considering these facts directly, it may be useful to summarise the author’s evidence—and Dunia’s on his personality.

At his first meeting with Raskol’nikov Svidrigailov bursts into hearty and unreserved laughter; if we bear in mind the significance which Dostoevskii attaches to laughter as an index of character, this should alert us to a positive

3. What they have in common is the axiom: “To the superman all is permitted.” But Raskol’nikov makes this license conditional on the ability to say a new word; Svidrigailov does not, and in fact, eschews philosophising. Moreover, their objectives are radically different: Raskol’nikov seeks power, Svidrigailov—pleasure.
4. Dunia is manifestly a witness of truth, though she may be uncertain on some points and mistaken on others. On the other hand, Luzhin is a rogue and a rival: Raskol’nikov is self. Dostoevskii himself warns us against swallowing Raskol’nikov’s judgments uncritically.
5. Within half a dozen lines we read: “vdrug raskhokhotalsia . . . smiejas’otkrovennei-shim obrazom . . . smcias’ naraspaeshku. . . .” In his relations with Raskol’nikov Svidrigailov laughs more often than he smiles. His laughter is in almost all cases expansive, loud, sincere. His smiles are mostly slyly mocking, occasionally cunning. With Dunia he does not laugh; his smiles run the whole gamut from condescension through mockery and rage to despair.
side in Svidrigailov. Indeed, he laughs and smiles a great deal throughout the novel, and as often as not, good-humoredly; this bespeaks an affinity with Dunia and opposes him to Raskol’nikov, whose laughter is usually either forced or sardonic. Moreover, as is implied by this laughter naraspashku, Svidrigailov is distinguished by a singular candor: he is always honest with himself and more than averagely honest about himself.

His intelligence is attested not only by the quality of his irony (which, incidentally, he turns against himself as readily as against others), but by his penetrating and just characterisation of other people (his wife, Dunia, Luzhin, Razumikhin and even, up to a point, Raskol’nikov).

He loves Schiller and appreciates Raphael; but this does not make him merely a Romantic. Though there are elements of Romanticism in his passion for Dunia and in his proclamation of illusion as the key to happiness, he appears thoroughly realistic in regard to himself and other people.

Unlike the materialist Luzhin and the rationalist half of Raskol’nikov, Svidrigailov believes in ghosts and in other worlds. Unlike Luzhin, who takes all his ideas from the West, and Raskol’nikov, whose dark self is imbued with Western values, Svidrigailov prefers Russia to all other countries and is bored by foreign travel. These are virtues in Dostoevskii’s eyes.

He is as free from Raskol’nikov’s drive to power as from Luzhin’s greed for money: he leaves his wife’s wealth to his children, reserving for himself only the competence she had herself given him. And on the testimony of Dunia as well as on his own, usually truthful testimony, Svidrigailov was, in the main, a good husband (though no sort of father) and a good landowner and master, loved by his servants and peasants.

So much on the credit side. On the other, he is a self-confessed voluptuary (sladostrastnik) and profligate (razvratnik). There are rumors (but only rumors) that by his sadistic baiting he caused his servant Philip to commit suicide; Dunia, who has lived under his roof, disbelieves this, although she admits

6. Another trait opposing him to Raskol’nikov is his refusal to judge others (p. 378: ia nikogo reshitel’no ne obviniau). But this smacks of Laodiceanism rather than Christian charity and may even imply a certain complacency; Raskol’nikov is harsh in his judgments on people whose failings he cannot admit in himself.

7. Prestuplenie i nakazanie, p. 370: vsekh veselet tot i zhivet kto vsekh luchshe sebia suneet nadut’; cp. Pushkin (Geroi): T’my nizkikh istin mne dorozhe/ Nas vozvyshajushchij obman. Svidrigailov’s version is parodic, but none the less Romantic for that. Citations from Crime and Punishment in this and the preceding and in all following notes are from: F. M. Dostoevskii. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, (Leningrad: Nauka, Leningr. ot- enie, 1972-), VI.

8. Cf. his characterisations of his wife (pp. 363-64) and of Dunia (pp. 365 et seqq.). On himself, cf. such candid self-revelations as: iia redko lgu [p. 220]; otchego zhe i ne pobyvat’ poshliakom . . . osobennno esli k tomu i natural’nuiu sklonnost’ imesh’ [p. 217]; Deistvitel’no, ia chelovek razvratnyi i prazdnui [p. 222] Da i kakoi ia otets! [ibid.]. Net, kakoi ia igrok. Shuler ne igrok [p. 359]; the apologia for his womanising (pp. 359, 362); etc.