The Question of Raskol'nikov's Suicide

When I. I. Glivenko published the first complete edition of the surviving notebooks to Crime and Punishment in 1931, he remarked in his introductory essay: "One cannot help observing an entirely different scheme for ending the novel. On page 150 of the third notebook, in large, calligraphic letters, [Dostoevskii wrote]: 'Conclusion of the novel. Raskol'nikov goes to shoot himself.' " Glivenko's interpretation of this passage as a variant ending to Crime and Punishment has been widely accepted by scholars both in the Soviet Union and in the West. Each decade has seen it repeated anew, often by leading students of Dostoevskii in important literary studies. In 1940, for example, Ernest J. Simmons told his readers that "Dostoevski actually considered suicide as the natural way out for his hero. Under the heading 'Conclusion of the Novel,' he [wrote] in one of the notebooks: 'Raskolnikov goes to shoot himself.' " Seven years later Konstantin Mochul'skii declared: "The demonic personality cannot come to repentance and rebirth; it is doomed to perdition. Dostoevsky noted: 'Finale of the Novel. Raskolnikov goes to shoot himself.' " In 1957, K. N. Polanskaia, in the annotations to the fifth volume of Dostoevskii's collected works, stated that "for a long time, Dostoevskii could not decide how to end the novel. In all of the writer's notebooks there are entries pertaining to the need for Raskol'nikov's confession, to his flight abroad, and even to suicide." Similarly, in 1967 Edward Wasiolek remarked in his translation of the notebooks to Crime and Punishment that "Dostoevsky [had] a hard time deciding how to bring the novel to an end. We know that he thought of having Raskolnikov shoot himself." And as recently as 1979, S. V. Belov, in his book of commentaries on Crime and Punishment, asserted that "Dostoevskii... painfully sought a conclusion for

his novel. In one of the notebooks we read: 'Conclusion of the novel. Raskol’nikov goes to shoot himself.' ”

These few examples will serve to indicate to what extent the “suicide thesis” has become a standard part of the literary scholarship on *Crime and Punishment*. While the passage most frequently cited as evidence that Dostoevskii thought of having Raskol’nikov take his own life is the one quoted by Glivenko, some scholars adduce other notebook entries as well. Thus, Mochul’skii writes that “the hero’s suicide was to have taken place immediately after Marmeladov’s death. ‘Marmeladov’s death. A bullet in the forehead.’ ” And Polanskaia cites as evidence the passage in the first notebook which reads: “I am in everybody’s way. A bullet in the forehead.”

The question of whether Dostoevskii did or did not consider suicide as a possible ending to the novel (the case for a negative answer will be presented here) is by no means a narrow one, of interest only to those relatively few persons who study the novel’s compositional history. It is also a matter of concern to critics who interpret and evaluate the final version of *Crime and Punishment* as well as to those who investigate Dostoevskii’s intellectual biography.

If, for instance, the accuracy of the suicide thesis could be conclusively demonstrated (as many believe it has been), then the following kind of argument would become possible: “Since Dostoevskii seriously considered suicide as an ending, it is reasonable to conclude that, at least for a time, he was dissatisfied with the notion of Raskol’nikov’s confession; therefore, the readoption of confession as an ending may well have been nothing more than an unfortunate error of judgment on his part.” This kind of argument would strengthen the position of those who maintain, with Simmons, that “Dostoevskii set aside the logic of events in rejecting the ending of suicide for his hero.” Conversely, if the suicide thesis should be disproven, then the position would be enhanced of those scholars who hold that the “logic of events” in the final text points not to suicide, but to confession.

Because the ending of *Crime and Punishment* is so intimately connected with the novel’s ethos, furthermore, the suicide thesis strongly implies that while at work on *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevskii temporarily shifted, or considered shifting, his fundamental ideological position. Dostoevskii, after all, was not a partisan of the “reflection of reality” school of art. He wrote not with an effort to mimic photographic objectivity, but to express his

9. Simmons, p. 165.