

THE SEDUCTRESS CALLED ÜBERMENSCH

***Sin and redemption in Crime and Punishment,
Fathers and Sons, and A Hero of Our Time***

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Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!" As just then there were standing many of those who did not believe in God, he aroused a great laughter. Why, did he get lost? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? – thus they cried and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances. "Whither is God?" he cried, "I shall tell you! We have killed him – you and I! We all are his murderers! ... The most holy and powerful that the world has yet owned, it has bled to death under our knives – who will wipe this blood off us?... " Here the madman became silent and looked again at his listeners: they, too, remained silent and looked at him... "I come too early," he said then, "my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way."

– Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

They, following science, want to base justice on reason alone, not with Christ as before. They have already proclaimed that there is no crime, that there is no sin. And that's consistent, for if you have no God, what is the meaning of crime?

– Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Russian literature grew into what is arguably one of the world's most thought-provoking literary canons. Russian authors such as Mikhail Lermontov, Ivan Turgenev, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky used their writing to respond to contemporary intellectual movements (most notably several iterations of nihilistic thought), studying how these philosophical currents colored the Russian psyche. And out of these explorations, in which the great minds of Russian literature struggled with the allure of nihilism and various manifestations of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, we are left to wonder: what did they conclude? Did these authors see the answers to Russia's social problems in the scientific rationalism of Western Europe or in the traditions of Russian faith and spirituality?

Nietzsche and Russian nihilism

As a philosophy, nihilism originated in 19th-century Russia during the early years of Czar Alexander II's reign (1855-81).¹ Originally equated with simple skepticism, nihilism eventually became a philosophy associated with social revolution and was erroneously perceived

as the force behind the 1881 regicide of Alexander II. Conservative elements in Russian society decried nihilism as a social menace, and with its rejection of classical philosophy, social science, and traditional morality, nihilism seemed poised to wreak havoc on the established Russian social order. But to its advocates, nihilism was a movement of rationality, pure science, and individual freedom.²

The intellectual conflict surrounding nihilism paralleled a larger struggle between Russia's Westernizers – advocates of European rationalism and science – and the conservative Slavophiles, who contended that the solution to Russia's social ills lay in Russia's traditional spirituality and culture. After more than a century of Westernization that began with the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725), a Russian national consciousness evolved slowly throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century, reflected in the development of a truly Russian literature. But despite this growing national identity, European thought continued to exert considerable influence on Russia's dominant political and cultural institutions: Russian troops brought back Western ideas while fighting in the Napoleonic wars³ (1805-12), and

During the 1820s and 1830s Russian thought was influenced powerfully by several waves of German Romantic idealism and then the philosophy of Hegel, both of which raised to Russian consciousness the concept of distinct national identity and of "inevitable" historical progress... (Wasiolek, 3)

In this time of European-influenced thought, Russian reformers tended to advocate change from within existing political institutions. However, after the Crimean War (1853-56), attitudes towards change themselves began to shift as nihilism spread. The nihilists of the 1850s and 1860s set themselves against the German-influenced liberals of the 1830s-1840s generation as they pushed for greater political freedoms and new social norms, decrying previous reforms as ineffective. The earlier liberals still favored slow change, whereas the nihilists of the '50s and '60s "...wanted radical reform and were committed to violence," (Wasiolek, 4). Thus, from seeds

¹ It is thought that N.I. Nadezhdin first used the term "nihilist" in the context of Russian literature in a letter to Aleksandr Pushkin ("Nihilism," Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

² "Nihilism," Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

³ Wasiolek, p. 3

planted by Peter the Great in the seventeenth century, Russia of the nineteenth century faced a conflict between moderate reformers, radical nihilists, and Slavophilic conservatives who believed that “...Russia has a unique path of fidelity to forces greater than reason and technology,” (Wasiolek, 5). Against this backdrop, the nineteenth century Russian novelists cast their characters and stories, reflecting the changes and conflicts that they saw before them.

Although nihilism was an idea born of Russian parents and European ancestors, similar – if less coherent – ideas developed concurrently in the rest of Europe. Indeed, the philosopher most commonly associated with nihilism is Friedrich Nietzsche, a German born in 1844. Nietzsche is widely known for his idea of the *Übermensch*, which is, coincidentally, very similar to Dostoyevsky’s idea of the “extraordinary man”. Nietzsche developed his idea of the *Übermensch* and its intellectual predecessor, the “will to power,” in the mid-1870s through mid-1880s;⁴ as this was well after the publication of *Crime and Punishment* – and, too, after Dostoyevsky’s 1881 death – Nietzsche could not have influenced Dostoyevsky during the writing of *Crime and Punishment*.⁵ Nor could Lermontov or Turgenev have pulled from Nietzsche’s synthesis for similar chronological reasons. Too, there is little evidence that Russian nihilism, literature, and philosophy influenced Nietzsche: Rather, the similarity between Nietzsche’s ideas and Russian nihilism is more likely due to common intellectual influences such as Hegel, Darwin, Rousseau, and Kant.⁶ If anything, the coincidence points to the force and spread of pre-nihilistic ideas in Europe.

But even though Nietzsche and these three Russian writers did not directly influence each other, the idea of the *Übermensch* still provides a highly useful model through which to evaluate characters such as Pechorin, Bazarov, and Raskolnikov. Nietzsche’s idea of the *Übermensch* sprang from his theory of the “will to power”, or the human predilection for growth and

⁴ Ibid, 152 - 153

⁵ Nietzsche did have a great respect for Dostoyevsky after discovering him in 1887. He stated that Dostoyevsky was the only psychologist from whom he learned something (Kaufmann, 298). However, it is highly unlikely that Nietzsche’s ideas of the *Übermensch* and of the will to power came from Dostoyevsky – even more so that they came from *Crime and Punishment*; see Kaufmann, 280n, for a detailed explanation.

durability. He held that "all the supreme values of mankind lack this will [to power] – that values which are symptomatic of decline... are lording it under the holiest names."⁷ He considered religion, particularly Christianity with its doctrines of self-sacrifice and humility, to be one of the systems that lacked the will to power.

Additionally, the *Übermensch* idea is closely entwined with Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence:

The doctrine of eternal recurrence... asks the question, "How well disposed would a person have to become to himself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than the infinite repetition, without alteration, of each and every moment?" Presumably most men would, or should, find such a thought shattering... The person who could accept recurrence without self-deception or evasion would be a superhuman being (*Übermensch*)... (Britannica Online, *Nietzsche*)

In a slightly more abstract form, the *Übermensch* is a person who surpasses the constraints that men put upon themselves (or that he has forced upon him). An *Übermensch's* raises the visible heights to which humanity may rise, and in doing so, benefits the common man. This precept is very close to Dostoyevsky's idea of the extraordinary man, as presented in *Crime and Punishment*: extraordinary men are above the bounds of normal laws and morality, as their benefit to humanity far outweighs their obligation to obey the sacrosanct rules that normal men must abide by. Thus, society and history can forgive any sin or transgression so long as the transgressor atones for his crime by sufficiently enlightening mankind.

The *Übermensch*, in this sense, is a figure who embodies the themes and problems that these authors addressed throughout their works.

The Übermensch and the Christ figure

The protagonists of *A Hero of Our Time*, *Fathers and Sons*, and *Crime and Punishment* are not heroes in the classical Romanticist sense. Far from being Herculean, Pechorin, Bazarov,

⁶ See Kaufmann for a discussion on Nietzsche's philosophical background.

⁷ From Encyclopedia Britannica Online

and Raskolnikov were each considered odious representations of contemporary thought. Pechorin is a character "...composed of all the vices of our generation," (*Hero*, 2); Bazarov deliberately slays sacred cows; and Raskolnikov is a double murderer. Both Pechorin and Bazarov engendered cries of protest from the reading public, enough that Lermontov felt compelled to write an introduction to *A Hero of Our Time* to point out that he was using the word "hero" in a different sense than was traditionally understood.⁸ Had Dostoyevsky not included the epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*, in which Raskolnikov is saved by his conversion to Christianity, he would likely have received comments such as Turgenev did: "You are crawling at Bazarov's feet... You only pretend to condemn him; in reality you ingratiate yourself with him, and await a single careless smile of his as a favor!"⁹

Rather, the three authors created these characters for other reasons. Through them, we see the nature of the ideals that they embody. Bazarov shows us how nihilists think and act, while Raskolnikov lets us peer into his mind and try to understand why he murdered the pawnbroker. Lermontov uses a virtually anonymous narrator to show us how Pechorin acts, and then, with Pechorin's diary, tells us the reasons (or lack thereof) which motivated Pechorin.

Crucially, though, each of these protagonists is valuable because each shows us the struggle between the Western European *Übermensch*, whose gifts can justify his transgressions, and the Russian ideal of the Christ figure, who does not transgress as he tries to elevate humanity. Each of the three characters transgresses in some way: Bazarov believes in nothing; Raskolnikov murders two women; Pechorin tramples on the lives of those around him and shrugs off blame in the name of determinism. Like all humans, these three err. But they, unlike their religious and spiritual contemporaries, try to absolve themselves of guilt through penance to mankind, rather

⁸ In his introduction, Lermontov implies that he used the term "hero" in an ironic sense, although given the thematic development of the book – which I discuss later – it is a misleading conclusion to draw. Lermontov writes, "It is a pity that [readers do not read prefaces], particularly in our country. Our public is still so young and naive that it fails to understand a fable unless it finds a lesson at the end. It misses a humorous point and does not feel irony... The present book has only recently suffered from the unfortunate faith that certain readers and even certain reviewers have in the literal meaning of words," (*Hero*, pg. 1 – 2).

than by appealing to the divine for forgiveness. All three characters attempt to justify their erroneous actions with a philosophical theory floating around Russia at the time – and they argue throughout the course of each book that their hideousness in the eyes of society is justified by some greater force.

Pechorin's case is slightly less direct than Bazarov's and Raskolnikov, since Lermontov was not responding to the as-yet nonexistent nihilism movement. Certainly, though, Pechorin experienced many of the same feelings of insignificance as did the nihilists; just as Bazarov says that he is "...so small compared to the rest of space, where I am not and where things have nothing to do with me; and the amount of time in which I get to live my life is so insignificant compared to eternity..." (*F&S*, 97), Pechorin wonders why on earth he bothers to live (*Hero*, 159):

If I am to die, I'll die! The loss to the world will not be large and, anyway, I myself am sufficiently bored. I am like a man who yawns at a ball and does not drive home to sleep, only because his carriage is not yet there. But now the carriage is ready... good-bye!

I scan my whole past in memory and involuntarily wonder: why did I live, for what purpose was I born? (*Hero*, 158)

He does not see significance in life and does not care whom he hurts by his actions; in this way, his determinism casts him in the same role as Bazarov and Raskolnikov, whose crimes under conventional morality are not crimes under their own.

Unlike Bazarov and Raskolnikov, Pechorin does not feel guilty about the hurt he causes others with his outlook on life (for example, consider his shoddy treatment of Princess Mary and the fact that he greets Maksim Maksimich as a formal acquaintance rather than a close friend in "Maksim Maksimich"). He does not seek to justify his behavior; he simply acknowledges in his journal that once he dies, "there will not remain, on earth, a single creature that would have understood [him] completely," (*Hero*, 159). But here we see the functionality of the "first narrator" in the story, the character who "published" Pechorin's journals. This narrator believes

⁹ Turgenev, Ivan. "Apropos of Fathers and Sons." Published in *Fathers and Sons*. Trans. Michael Katz. New York: W.

that Pechorin can be absolved of his sins if readers would only understand what motivated him in the first place: not cruelty, not pettiness, but despair caused by life itself (e.g., see *Hero*, pg. 158 - 159). By juxtaposing Pechorin with the narrator, Lermontov argues that Pechorin transgressed and an attempt was made to justify his transgressions to humanity based on the nature of his personal philosophy. Clearly, the first narrator believes that readers have some sort of enlightenment to gain from an understanding Pechorin (*Hero*, 63); thus, we see the justification (enlightenment) offered in exchange for Pechorin's alleged wickedness.

In *Fathers and Sons*, Bazarov (the prototypical nihilist) argues with Pavel Kirsanov (the prototypical liberal of the 1840s generation) about the nature of nihilism and usefulness to Russia in an episode which personifies the struggle between the fathers – i.e., the liberals of the 1840s – and their nihilist “sons”. “Aristocratism, liberalism, progress, principles,” Bazarov says on page 38. “Just think, how many foreign... and useless words!”

Bazarov tells Pavel that he will abandon nihilism when Pavel can show him “...a single institution of contemporary life, either in the family or in the social sphere, that doesn't deserve absolute and merciless rejection,” (*F&S*, 42). But despite this utter scorn for all things associated with traditional Russia, Bazarov still believes that there is a purpose and a value in pure science. While this makes him something of a hypocrite – i.e., he denounces all principles and authorities, but still believes in the authority of the scientific method and Aristotelian logic and in the betterment of humanity – it does show us that there is some purpose to his nihilism. Bazarov does not simply seek obliteration; he seeks a systematic obliteration of what he considers to be unnecessary in order to clear the ground for a better humanity (*F&S*, 38).

Of the three characters, Dostoyevsky's Rodion Raskolnikov investigates this “justifiable transgression” principle the most explicitly. Indeed, Raskolnikov echoes Nietzsche's sentiments of the *Übermensch* almost exactly:

...people *in general* are divided by a law of nature. The lower part, ordinary people I mean... [are] good only to reproduce their own kind. The other part consist of people in the true sense. I mean those who are gifted... The first part is mere stuff, generally speaking; people conservative by nature... [who] are morally obliged to obedience, because that's their role in life. In the second part, all transgress the law. They incline to be destroyers, according to their abilities... They call for the destruction of the present in the name of something better for the most part, in their different ways. (*C&P*, 258)¹⁰

Raskolnikov's chief psychological dilemma in the novel is coming to terms with the fact that although he originally considered himself to be an extraordinary man, allowed to transgress in the name of a better humanity, he was ultimately not great enough to overstep the boundaries of conventional morality. "Napoleon, the pyramids, Waterloo – and that vile, skinny clerk's widow, that wizened old bag, the pawnbroker woman... would Napoleon sneak up to an old bag like that along her bed! Oh, hell!" (*C&P*, 271), he berates himself. Certainly, though, Raskolnikov at first believes that the good he will be able to do for society and himself will outweigh his transgressions. Raskolnikov's motivations are clear; he, like Bazarov, justifies his crimes with the idea that his end goals will allow him to be forgiven.¹¹

Pechorin presents a somewhat different perspective on the interplay between crime and forgiveness than do the other two protagonists. Unlike Bazarov and Raskolnikov, Pechorin does not have any explicit desire to destroy and to push himself over the normal boundaries of moral law. He is plagued by the ennui characteristic of Russian men of the 1840s; he ponders the purpose of his life (*Hero*, 158) and characterizes himself as a will-less "executioner's tool" who would "fall upon the head of doomed victims, often without malice, always without regret," (*Hero*, 159). Pechorin attributes these characteristics to determinism; at many points during the

¹⁰ Given the similarity of Raskolnikov's statement (about destruction) to Bazarov's views on the same topic, it is likely that here, Bazarov directly influenced Dostoyevsky's extraordinary man theory. Dostoyevsky had read *Fathers and Sons* and appreciated Bazarov as a character; in a letter to Dostoyevsky, Turgenev wrote, "I cannot tell you to what extent your opinion of *Fathers and Sons* made me happy... You have so completely and subtly grasped what I wanted to express through Bazarov that I simply throw my hands up in amazement – and in pleasure. It's as if you had entered my soul and felt even what I didn't consider necessary to express," (From Turgenev's letters, *F&S*, 173).

¹¹ A slight difference emerges in that Bazarov does not seek forgiveness from society as Raskolnikov does, but that distinction is irrelevant here.

novel, he ascribes various events to fate (for example, see *Hero*, 183) and tells Vulich that he believes in predestination (*Hero*, 187). Pechorin, then, is similar to both Raskolnikov and Bazarov in that he ignores social authority and (roughly speaking) makes life for those around him unpleasant. The chief difference is that while the other two deliberately act in order to achieve some further goal or purpose, Pechorin does not deliberately transgress for a greater good; he merely follows his fate regardless of its effects.

Each of these characters, then, exhibits the first attribute of the *Übermensch*: all three transgress the law, whether moral or statutory. But to be an *Übermensch* or an extraordinary man, a person cannot merely break the law. He must give mankind a gift so great that his transgressions can be forgiven, as Raskolnikov argues that Napoleon and Mohammed did (*C&P*, 257). If a person succeeds, he is a superhuman; if he fails, he is merely one of the common men and is morally wrong for transgressing.

At this point, the authors have shown us the nature of the protagonists' crimes and explain the reasoning (or, as in Pechorin's case, the lack thereof) behind these transgressions. The authors then show us a two-fold struggle: first, do the protagonists believe their gifts warrant their transgressions; second, do we, outside the characters' dilemmas, agree or disagree that society should permit crime if a suitable gift is given in return? And it is in this sense that we see the struggle between the *Übermensch* and the Christ figure, i.e., the traditional source of forgiveness, moral law, and philosophy. Christianity is the conservative influence against which the nihilists struggled; it is the deeply-ingrained notions of objective morality and repentance through God that these authors and characters questioned. If the *Übermensch* represents a transferal of the power of forgiveness from God to man, then Christ represents the opposite; additionally, the notion of Christ represents these traditional ideas of objective morality and salvation through repentance to the divine.

The authors of the books arrive at different conclusions to this question. Neither Raskolnikov nor Bazarov presented society with any of their talents and gifts – and hence, could

not have redeemed themselves – whereas Lermontov argues that Pechorin was able to redeem himself. Finally, the outcome of each novel shows us that neither Dostoyevsky nor Turgenev agreed with the principle of the *Übermensch*, and that Lermontov did, at least in the limited manifestation of the *Übermensch* that exists with Pechorin.

In the author's introduction to *Hero*, Lermontov writes that although Pechorin is "...a portrait composed of all the vices of our generation" (*Hero*, 2) and characterizes Pechorin as a villain (*Hero*, 2), he believes that Pechorin is valuable. He tells his readers, "You will say that morality gains nothing from this. I beg your pardon. People...need some bitter medicine, some caustic truths... Suffice it that the disease has been pointed out; goodness knows how to cure it," (*Hero*, 2). From this, we see that Lermontov agreed with the first narrator: Pechorin, despite his evil status under traditional morality, was useful to humanity, in only that he might help repair traditional morality.

In *Fathers and Sons*, Turgenev implies that Bazarov might have been able to redeem himself; although Bazarov would see society destroyed, he wanted to build a better humanity. His dedication to medicine plus his considerable intelligence indicate that he does have something to offer humanity, and certainly his goal throughout the book is to use his talents to increase human knowledge. But Bazarov dies before offering a gift that could possibly redeem his nihilism, and although he does not explicitly destroy society, he certainly transgresses social law with his philosophy.

Most notably, Bazarov's nihilism falls apart in the face of human emotions, specifically his love for Anna Odintsov. His nihilism does not account for the pain that his unrequited love causes him, and this introduces a despair that he is not capable of contending with. In the latter half of the novel, "...the fever to work had deserted him and had been replaced by dreary boredom and vague restlessness," (*F&S*, 142). Bazarov forgets his science – science being the symbol of his rationalistic nihilism – and even engages in a very Romanticist duel with Pavel.

Turgenev symbolizes this pull towards the “fathers” when Bazarov returns (however unwillingly) to his family after Odintsova rejects him. Bazarov complains to Arkady that “...they, that is, my parents, are occupied, and don’t worry in the least about their own insignificance; they don’t give a damn about it... While I... I feel only boredom and anger,” (*F&S*, 98). His theory’s inability to account for his emotions frustrates him and he sinks deep into boredom and ennui (*F&S*, 142-143). Conversely, Turgenev shows us Arkady and Nikolai’s traditional happiness in marriage and estate management as the solution to Bazarov’s despair. Arkady and Nikolai are flexible and modify their theories of life as they experience more of it, whereas Bazarov and Pavel’s lives became less and less meaningful because they would not learn and would not change their theories to reflect new life experiences. Finally, Turgenev also refutes Bazarov’s “insignificance principle” – i.e., the nihilist idea that life is utterly insignificant and that nothing remains after death: the final passage of the book portrays Bazarov’s parents visiting his grave.

They walk with a heavy step, supporting each other; when they approach the railing, they fall on their knees and remain there for a long time, weeping bitterly, gazing attentively at the headstone under which their son lies buried: they exchange a few words, brush the dust off the stone, move a branch of the pine tree, and pray once again; they can’t forsake this place where they seem to feel closer to their son, to their memories of him... Can it really be that their prayers and tears are futile? Can it really be that love, sacred, devoted love is not all-powerful? Oh, no! (*F&S*, 156-7)

Their love causes them to remember Bazarov and this defeats his nihilism: he is remembered after death, and that creates a permanence that lasts beyond the span of his life. The nihilist has transcended death, but only through the love of other people.

Like Bazarov, Raskolnikov is undone by his theory’s inability to deal with love (in this case, divine love rather than specifically human love). As Raskolnikov struggles under the weight of his crime, he begins to realize that he is not a great man and that he cannot redeem himself in the eyes of humanity. He sees only three paths: madness, corruption, or suicide. But in the end of *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov finds a fourth choice. He is redeemed: his theory did not account for divine forgiveness and redemption as a solution for the common man who

transgresses. Had Sonya not intervened, Raskolnikov's version of the Übermensch would have led to one of his three choices. Dostoyevsky thus tells us that divine intervention saved Raskolnikov, and from this, we conclude that Dostoyevsky saw the figure of Christ as the antidote to nihilism and the Übermensch.

This distinction is the crux of the authors' argument against the Übermensch. Übermensch and extraordinary man alike, these philosophies divorce the divine presence from morality and from law. Under these systems of thought, God is no longer the arbiter who judges right and wrong according to an objective morality. Instead, humans can shed blood, but society has the power to absolve them of their sins if the transgressors make an appropriately grandiose offering. Divine will and objective morality are removed from the process of absolution; in their stead, a sort of bartering system emerges, where anything is permissible so long as something of equal or greater value is given in return.

In *Fathers and Sons*, Bazarov tries not so much to take the power of absolution from the divine and give it to humanity, but to reduce all to the realm of the perceptible. He believes that man must take control over his own life and destiny: he certainly does not believe in divine control and he does not believe in the power of (irrational) emotionalism and romanticism. This scorn for love ruins Bazarov and thus indicates that Turgenev disagreed with Bazarov in this respect. In the same way, Dostoyevsky shows that Raskolnikov is almost ruined by his rejection of divine control – i.e., Raskolnikov tries to take the power of forgiveness and redemption out of divine hands and put it into the hands of society, of history, of mankind. He must reject this idea before he can escape madness, suicide, and/or corruption. Only Pechorin is not ruined by his ideas, and only Lermontov believes that his character's crimes were justified enough for humanity to forgive him of his sins, which ultimately validates the idea.

Thus, as historical forces challenged traditional Russia with the ideals of Western enlightenment, Russian literature developed to observe and comment on this uniquely Russian struggle. And just as Russia itself divided into camps of nihilists, traditionalists, and moderates,

so too did Lermontov, Dostoyevsky, and Turgenev diverge as they answered the question of how we, as humans, must request forgiveness for our sins.

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