

The Archaeology of *Crime and Punishment* by Jay MacPherson



On the fringe of modern-day academe there is a little-known field of research known as literary archaeology. That is, it might be known by that name if it were known at all, but it is only a quiet backwater far from the swift and bubbling mainstream of gender studies and deconstructive reinterpretations—and so, it is *terra incognita* to most who guard academic posts or ply the literary trades. As the twentieth century closes the curtains on another act in an unending blockbuster of human atrocities and technological miracles, a Russian scholar digging in total obscurity on the remote

northern shore of the White Sea has made what must certainly be called the "find of the century" in the archaeology of Dostoevsky. In the hundred-year history of Dostoevsky scholarship there is nothing comparable. No other discovery brings to light such a treasure trove of hidden lore, opening our eyes to an entire folkloric realm that eluded scholars' attention for many decades.

Yuri Ilyich Marmeladov made the first discovery in the 1970's while working as a village librarian in Varzuga, a tiny White Sea settlement with ancient wooden architecture and a wealth of folklore that has survived even the ravages of Communism. His initial finds were rejected by Soviet *apparatchiki*, but as the wall of atheistic Communism began to crumble, his work (*Tainyi kod Dostoevskogo*) was finally embraced by the Russian Academy of Sciences and published by its Leningrad division in 1992.

But in order to understand Marmeladov's discovery we must first retreat to the tenth century, the period when the early Russians received their first introduction to Christian lore. Foremost among the pagan gods of the

Slavs was Perun, god of thunder, lightning and war. Russia's earliest chronicles relate how the idols of Perun were mocked and destroyed when Prince Vladimir I of Kiev officially converted his realm in 988. The word *perun* survived into modern Russian as a term for a thunderbolt. When the pagan Slavs learned about the exploits of Elijah the Prophet, they were struck by his similarity to their Perun. After all, the Bible says that he could control the rainfall and bring down fire from the skies. His ascent into heaven on a flying chariot amid a whirlwind of fire was also reminiscent of the thunder god's trek across the rainclouds. Moreover, the Christian holiday of Elijah came on July 20 (August 2 on our calendar), the time of year when thunderstorms are almost a daily occurrence. In the eyes of the pagan Slavs, Elijah soon came to be seen as a Christian counterpart to Perun—a new god of rain and thunder. As pagan customs and beliefs were gradually eclipsed by the traditions of the Church, some of the rituals and lore pertaining to Perun were transferred to Elijah. Formerly farmers would invoke Perun for rain; now they sent up pleas to Elijah. Even in the 1800's, peasant farmers would make the sign of the cross when thunder rumbled overhead, believing that thunder came from the wheels of Elijah's chariot as he races across the stormclouds flinging down lightning bolts to remind us of our sins. A thunderstorm was always anticipated on Elijah's holiday. In the era of Peter the Great, the



Church of Elijah the Prophet was erected beside the gunpowder factory on the edge of St. Petersburg in the belief that "Elijah the Thunderer" would protect the workers from the all-too-frequent explosions. Thunder, fire and lightning—these were Elijah's domain.

As Yuri Marmeladov has now shown, Dostoevsky employs the Russian folkloric image of Elijah as a central symbol of divine Judgment throughout his major works, beginning with the stories of

the 1840's and proceeding through *Crime and Punishment*, *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Reading Dostoevsky will never be quite the same...

The importance of Marmeladov's discovery is illustrated by *Crime and Punishment*, the story of a "charitable axe murderer" who is tortured by his conscience until he finally goes to the police and confesses. We now know that the assistant police superintendent to whom Raskolnikov goes with his confession is a symbolic reflection of Elijah the Prophet. His first name is Il'ya—*Elijah*. His nickname is *Porokh*, or 'Gunpowder,' which evokes both the prophet's thunder and the church that is dedicated to him at the St. Petersburg powderworks. All kinds of allusions to thunder and lightning are made in portraying Il'ya Petrovich. He has a "thunderous gaze" and he "lets loose with all his lightning bolts" at a brothelkeeper who has been summoned to the police station. He has a fiery temper. When the superintendent sees him in an angry outburst, he tries to calm him, saying: "Again that thunder and lightning, that whirlwind and hurricane!"



We now know that Raskolnikov's confession to this Elijah comes approximately on the holiday of Elijah. (No precise date is given, but the chronology of events points to sometime between July 15 and July 22, Old Style.) A spectacular thunderstorm thrashes St. Petersburg the night before the murderer's confession, ending a sweltering drought. It is no ordinary rainshower. The rain comes down like a waterfall, and you can count to five during each flash of sheet lightning. Raskolnikov spends the whole night wandering around town beneath the flashes of Elijah's punishing fire. The next morning, all bedraggled and weatherbeaten from the storm, Raskolnikov climbs the steep, spiral staircase leading to the assistant police super-

intendent. Marmeladov's discovery now makes it clear that, on a spiritual plane, Raskolnikov is turning to God's "policeman," the fiery Elijah.

It remains a mystery to what extent these Elijah motifs were obvious to Russian readers in Dostoevsky's time. It appears certain, however, that in Soviet times, when religious themes were forbidden and Dostoevsky was often shunned, the allusions to Elijah were forgotten. Marmeladov's initial attempts to publish his findings met with opposition from the academicians who controlled the scholarly presses. When he made his first submission to *Russkaia literatura*, a journal edited in Leningrad's Pushkin House, Grigory Fridlender, a leading Soviet scholar, responded with the statement, "There is no Elijah the Prophet in *Crime and Punishment*, nor can there be."



Possibly Fridlender's trashing of Marmeladov's discovery can be attributed to a myopic imagination, an excessively literal turn of mind that cannot accept the figurative presence of an Old Testament prophet who is never directly mentioned anywhere in the novel. However, a brief glance at *The Village of Stepanchikovo and Its Inhabitants*, which Dostoevsky wrote a few years before *Crime and Punishment*, should leave no doubt, even in the minds of those who are afflicted by "Fridlender's myopia."

The Village of Stepanchikovo (also known in English as *A Friend of the Family*) is a lighthearted comedy about Foma Fomich Opiskin, a backbiting sponger who lives in the home of a generous landowner, Yegor Ilyich Rostanov. Foma takes advantage of his unselfish host and repays his hospitality by slandering him and undermining his authority. The tale is a humorous allegory in which Foma represents man in the likeness of the Devil,

while Rostanev is man in the likeness of God. After enduring endless mischief from the ungrateful sponger, Rostanev finally throws him out of his house—during a thunderstorm on the holiday of Elijah. On a symbolic level, Rostanev's sudden wrath is Elijah's fierce storm of retribution. After ejecting Foma from his home, Rostanev sits beneath the icons and pauses before saying his "last word." As the entire household waits to hear his "last word," thunder explodes directly overhead. The guests and family members cry out, "Elijah the Prophet!" and make the sign of the cross, following the Russian custom.



According to Marmeladov, *Stepanchikovo* is the only work of Dostoevsky in which the symbolism of Elijah is brought out into the open by mentioning the prophet directly. Throughout his other fiction, practically every rainstorm and every character named Il'ya or Ilyich ('son of Elijah') is intended to elicit associations with Elijah the Prophet, but Dostoevsky counted on his readers' familiarity with their own folk culture to decipher his allusions.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitry is arrested in a village called Mokroye ('Wet Village') during a rainstorm. As he is being conveyed to jail, he has a dream-like recollection of peasant fire victims standing by the roadside. Dmitry comes to realize that, like these peasants, he has been brought low by Elijah's lightning. He later insists that "if it hadn't been for this thunder," he never would have seen the error of his ways. In the early drafts of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitry is referred to as Ilyinsky—from *Ilya* 'Elijah.' In the final version, not long before the fateful night when old Karamazov is murdered, a priest leads Dmi-

try through Sukhoi Posyolok, or 'Dry Village,' to a rich merchant from whom Dmitry hopes to obtain money. The priest is the "Ilyinsky father"—the father from the village and church of Ilya, Elijah the Prophet. The rich merchant is evocative of the cruel and seemingly deaf God, whose ways are beyond the ken of human logic. Dmitry finds him in a drunken stupor and obtains nothing from him.

One might argue—indeed, it has been argued—that Marmeladov's discovery does not radically change the way we interpret Dostoevsky's fiction. If we saw him as a Christian writer before Marmeladov uncovered the Elijah motifs, we continue to see Dostoevsky as a Christian writer now. In response to this argument, it must be noted that literary scholars and students of Dostoevsky have not infrequently voiced scepticism in



regard to the writer's spiritual orientation. He is not unanimously viewed as a traditional Christian writer. And, even if the Elijah material does not radically change the way we see Dostoevsky, it radically changes *what* we see. We see infinitely more! And there is at least one work that is virtually deciphered by Marmeladov's discovery: *The Landlady*.

The Landlady has stymied scholars and critics ever since it was first published in 1847. Even Belinsky, who had helped to orchestrate Dostoevsky's literary debut, was baffled by this work. At the center of the story stands the enigmatic Ilya Murin, a gruff old man whose wife or companion is a quiet, meek young woman named Katerina. They rent a room in their apartment to a young man (Ordynov) who yearns for Katerina and imagines that Murin treats her cruelly. Scholars before Marmeladov have made the mistake of viewing Murin through Ordynov's eyes and seeing him as a satanic, evil figure, but he is actually another earthly emanation of the wrathful Elijah. He is repeatedly associated with storms, fire and lightning. Katerina, for example, longs to go with him "to the edge of the world, where the storm and lightning are born." He has a "thunderous gaze" like that of

the assistant police superintendent in *Crime and Punishment*. At the beginning of the story, Ordynov is concocting some sort of social program, evidently a utopian scheme. At the end of the tale, after his confrontation with Il'ya Murin, he renounces his rationalistic scheme and turns to the church.

Marmeladov's archaeological dig does not end with Dostoevsky. He has uncovered Elijah motifs in the works of other great Russian writers, including Turgenev, Tolstoy, Bunin and Goncharov, showing that Elijah the "Thunderer" was a popular theme that was subsequently forgotten together with the folklore that inspired it. However, in none of these writers does this theme become the immensely important leitmotif that we find in Dostoevsky, who uses the Russian folkloric Elijah as a central mythos, a kind of writer's trademark.

Pessimists claim that literary culture is dying; that students are not likely to read more than the CliffsNotes for *Crime and Punishment*. Regardless whether this pessimism is justified, commentaries will have to be refurbished in light of Marmeladov's discovery. Reading the CliffsNotes in the twenty-first century will never be the same...

