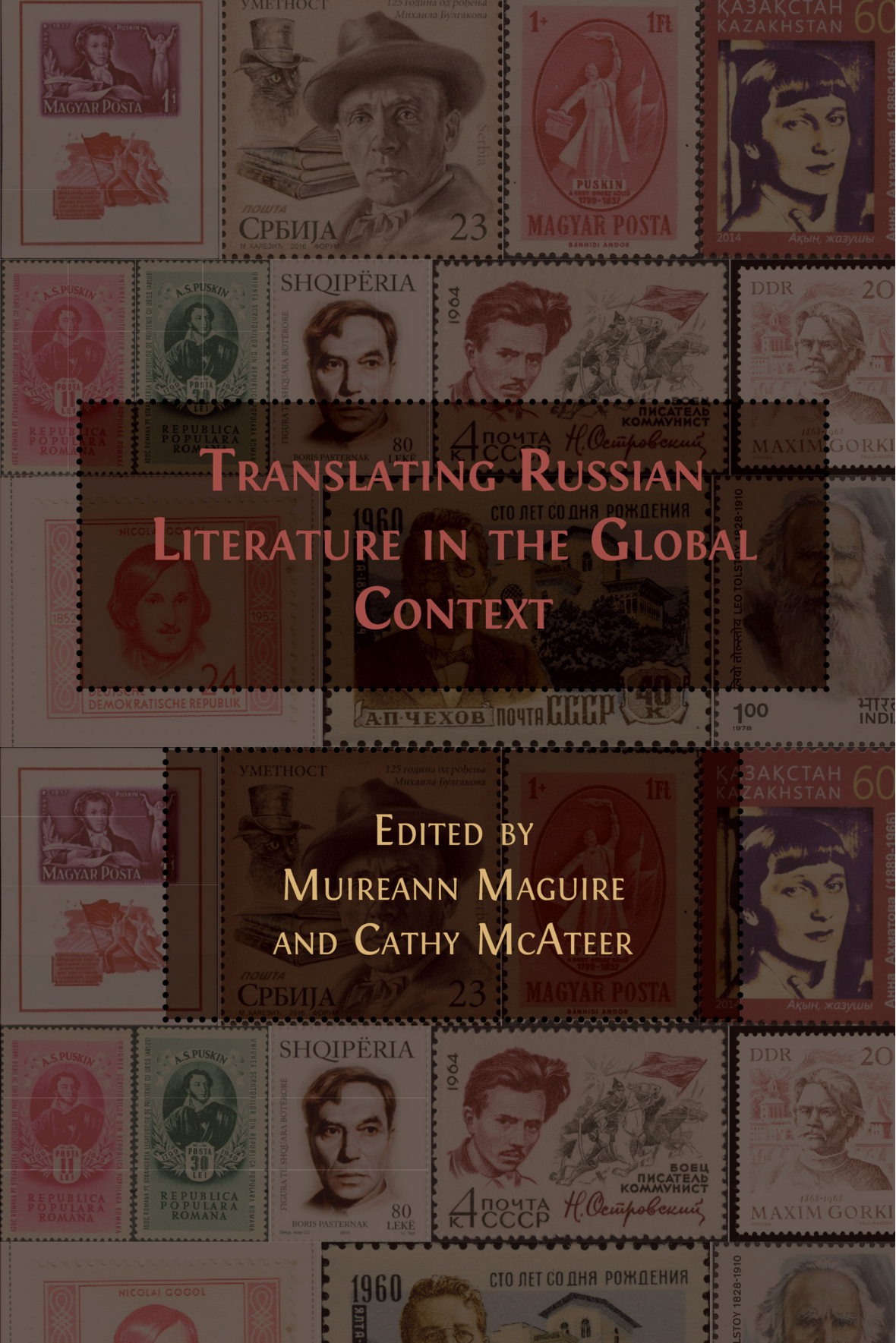

Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context

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Norway and Sweden

"The mysteries of the nerves in a starving body": Knut Hamsun and Dostoevsky

Susan Reynolds

Introduction

In *The World Republic of Letters,* Pascale Casanova, surveying "world literary space", discusses how the influence of French literary culture within Scandinavia provoked a rebellion against the German cultural ascendancy of the nineteenth century.[1] She describes the significance of Georg Brandes in bringing back to Denmark the Naturalism which he had discovered during his years in Paris. As the founder of *Det moderne Gennembrud* (the 'modern breakthrough'), Brandes hoped to launch a national literature capable of tackling social, political, and aesthetic questions in opposition to German idealism. His books *Eminent Authors of the Nineteenth Century* (*Hovedstrømninger i det 19. Aarhundredes Litteratur*, 1871) and *The Man of the Modern Breakthrough* (*Det moderne Gjennembruds Mænd*, 1883) presented the possibilities that Paris had revealed by modelling such changes. In the chapter that follows, I propose to survey the influence of Russian literature in translation on Scandinavia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a particular focus on Norway and especially Knut Hamsun's relationship with Dostoevsky's work. For purposes of comparison, I will begin by briefly considering the situation in Sweden, since different cultural and linguistic factors have influenced the translation and reception of Russian literature in Sweden and Norway.

1 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by Malcolm DeBevoise (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999; repr. 2007), p. 158.

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Sweden

The Linguistic Filter: Pivot Languages and Popularity

As a new century approached, another literature began to gain currency throughout Scandinavia: that of Russia. One of the earliest authors to achieve popularity (not least because his cosmopolitan lifestyle raised his profile on the wider European stage) was Ivan Turgenev.[2] Next came Nikolai Gogol, whose psychological insights into the loneliness and alienation of the individual in the city and picturesque depictions of rural life transcended their immediate setting. The importance of French as a medium for the transmission of Russian literature made sense in Turgenev's case, but by the time that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy appeared on the Swedish publishing scene, German had become the most widely spoken second language (at least for Swedes). Indeed, the Swedish publisher Albert Bonnier 'discovered' Tolstoy through a German translation of *Anna Karenina*. The translator, Walborg Hedberg, a member of a well-known Stockholm theatrical family and daughter of the playwright Frans Hedberg, subsequently learned Russian, but the majority of her translations were made from German.[3] In Finland, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Turgenev were first translated into Swedish rather than Finnish, not surprisingly, in view of the increasing strength of Swedish publishing houses and the growing number of Swedish translators of Russian.[4] From the late 1860s to the mid-1880s, translated literature actually predominated on Finnish publishers' lists over that written originally in Swedish, with Russian literature occupying a central position.[5]

2 See Jørgen Erik Nielsen, *Fra Neva til Øresund. Den dansk modtagelse af russisk litteratur 1800–1856* [*From Neva to Øresund. The Danish Reception of Russian Literature 1800–56*] (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanums forlag, 1998). See also Karl Tiander, *Turgenjev i dansk aandsliv* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1913); Johan Fjord Jensen, *Turgenjev i dansk åndsliv. Studier i dansk romanskunst 1870–1900* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1961) and Ivan Malinovski, *Russiske bøger i danske oversættelser* (Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1953).

3 Walborg Maria Hedberg (1859–1931) published her translation of *Crime and Punishment*, *Raskolnikow* (later known as *Brott och straff*) to great acclaim in 1883. She subsequently translated *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* in 1885 and 1886 respectively, working from a French translation of the latter.

4 For more on the Finnish reception of Russian literature, see the chapter by Tomi Huttunen, Marja Jänis, and Pekka Pesonen in this volume.

5 For an analysis of the Swedish publishing market and its role in disseminating Russian literature in translation, see Nils Håkanson, *Fönstret mot Öster: rysk skönlitteratur i svensk översättning 1797–2010 med en fallstudie av Nikolaj Gogols svenska mottagande* (Uppsala: Ruin, 2012), esp. his notes on pp. 27–28 for further reading on the translation and reception of Russian literature in Scandinavia.

The Neighbour to the East: The Changing Image of Russia in Swedish Culture

Russophobia was widespread in Sweden during the 1840s; in the reign of Oscar I (1844–59), Sweden distanced herself from St Petersburg. The Swedish national and liberal movements became strongly anti-Russian, exacerbated by the outbreak of the Crimean War and reinforced by the Polish uprising of 1863. After the Crimean War, however, Russia gradually became less demonised in Sweden; increased trade and economic progress encouraged cultural exchanges and a closer acquaintance between the countries. This in its turn created a growing respect for Russia as a nation of high culture, with the dissemination of Russian literature and music, and the establishment in the 1880s of departments of Slavonic Studies at the universities of Uppsala and Lund.[6]

Nils Håkanson has identified a first (1863–90) and a second (1890–1917) phase in the breakthrough of Russian Realism in Sweden. These followed a period (1797–1863) when translations of Pushkin, Gogol, and Lermontov, together with novels by largely forgotten authors such as Mikhail Zagoskin, Aleksandr Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, and Faddei Bulgarin were in vogue; the Finnish-Swedish translator Otto Adolf Meurmans, for example, published his translation of Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter* (*Kapitanskaia dochka*, 1836) in 1841, and in 1849 the Swedish journal *Tiden* printed 'The Queen of Spades' ('Pikovaia dama', 1834) as a feuilleton. Meurmans and his publisher Thomson were almost entirely responsible for this surge in translations of Russian authors. Thus, when their collaboration ended, Russian literature disappeared from publishers' lists in Sweden for a quarter of a century (1843–68). This resulted in a long gap between the Russian publication of works by authors such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin in the 1840s and their appearance in Swedish twenty or thirty years later. Håkanson also notes that out of eighteen translations issued by Swedish publishers, eight were made directly from Russian and the rest from secondary languages (chiefly French and German).[7]

As the new century progressed, the number of translations from Russian in publishers' lists decreased, so that by the end of its first decade only a few were appearing every year. For a while, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky disappeared, to be replaced by a new generation of writers—Chekhov, Leonid Andreev, Gorky, and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii. Håkanson suggests that this marked fall in publications may be explained by a "monoculture" or fixation on individual

6 This was considerably in advance of the situation in Britain, where it was not until 1900 that William Richard Morfill became Professor of Russian and Slavonic Languages at Oxford, the first to be appointed at any British university; Russian was only accepted as a degree subject at Oxford in 1904.

7 Nils Håkanson, *Fönstret mot Öster*, pp. 27–28.

personalities.[8] By the early twentieth century, all of Turgenev's works had been translated, but after *The Kreutzer Sonata* (*Kreitserova sonata*, 1889) appeared in 1890, Swedish publishers had to wait nearly ten years to publish another book by Tolstoy. Swedish translations of both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy declined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. No Swedish publisher brought out a single translation of Dostoevsky between 1891 and 1905, and nearly all the earlier translations vanished from print during this period. However, a new trend arose in the early 1900s, when most of his major works were (re-) translated. This coincided with reawakening interest in Russian radicalism, even though Dostoevsky could no longer be regarded as the voice of "young Russia".[9] Instead, it was the philosophical and psychological aspects of his writing which attracted attention in Sweden, just as they did in England and Germany; these themes of universal interest made him equally accessible to international and Russian readers.[10]

Two trends emerged in the translation of Russian authors in Sweden after the turn of the century. In contrast to the first wave of enthusiasm for Russian literature, the channels of communication between source and target cultures were maintained and widened. More translations of authors who were still alive and active—including Leonid Andreev, Vladimir Solov'ev, and the prose writers Nikolai Oliger (1882–1919) and Georgii Erastov (1875–1918; born Heinrich Edelman to German and Polish parents living in Finland)—were appearing. Notable among translators with an anti-militaristic and anti-tsarist stance was Erik Gustaf Nordenström, who brought out an anthology in two volumes entitled *Free Words from the Land of Tyranny* (*Fria ord från tyranniets land*, 1901–02). A further indication of diminishing distance between the cultures of Russia and Sweden is the marked difference between the more sensationalist and exoticising fascination with Nihilism before 1890 and the newly-awakened interest in Russian radicalism after 1900. While the former arose at a time when awareness of Russian culture was limited, the second occurred during

8 Ibid., pp. 29–30.

9 Incidentally, the only Scandinavian country which Dostoevsky visited was Denmark. In October 1865 he spent ten days in Copenhagen as the guest of his friend Baron Aleksandr Wrangel, who was secretary to the Russian Embassy there. He arrived on Friday 13 October after a stormy passage lasting four days, shortly after finishing *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866). He visited the Assistens Cemetery, where both Hans Christian Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard were buried. On 3 November 2019, a monument to Dostoevsky created by the Russian sculptor Andrei Tartishnikov was unveiled there at a ceremony including musical and dramatic performances in the presence of the Russian ambassador to Denmark: see 'Dostojevskij Monument Unveiled in Copenhagen', *Daily Scandinavian*, 12 November 2019, https://www.dailyscandinavian.com/dostojevskij-monument-unveiled-in-copenhagen/.

10 Håkanson, *Fönstret mot* Öster, p. 91. See also Bengt Rur, *Björck & Börjesson. Ett antikvariat med historia*, https://www.yumpu.com/sv/document/view/19925985/bjorck-borjessons-ett-antikvariat-med-historia-av-bengt-rur-pa-.

a period when closer acquaintance left less room for stereotypes. Increased social, economic, political, and scientific contacts between Sweden and her Eastern neighbour, and the international respect accorded to the great Russian Realists, promoted a similar regard within the Swedish literary world. There were also direct contacts between Swedish and Russian authors; in the early 1900s Tolstoy's son Lev, Georgii Erastov, and Valerii Briusov were among those who visited or resided in Sweden. Nordenström's anthologies and the Swedish left-wing press demonstrated a sense of solidarity with groups in Russia whose experiences were regarded as relevant to conditions in Sweden; Gorky's work acquired considerable significance as Swedish workers' literature.[11]

The principal left-leaning Swedish publishing house was Björck & Börjesson, whose distinctive political character became particularly evident around 1905. In 1904 it launched the series 'The Free Word' ('Fria ord'), which began with Tolstoy and continued with Algot Ruhe's *Maxim Gorky—Agitator. His Life and Literary Activity* (*Maxim Gorkij—upprorsmannen. Hans lif och litterära verksamhet*, 1905), an anonymous text entitled *The Tsar* (*Tsaren*, 1905), claiming to be the work of "a high Russian official", and *Russia in Revolution* (*Ryssland i revolution*; 1905), a compilation of political texts by Tolstoy, Kropotkin, and Cherkasov. Among its other publications in 1904 were Swedish versions of revolutionary Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii's novel *En nihilist* (first published in London in 1889 as *The Career of a Nihilist*) and of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (translated as *Raskolnikow* by David Hector) and *The Insulted and Injured* (*Unizhennye i oskorblennye*, 1861). In 1905, Gorky's *Prison* (*Tiur'ma*, 1905) was translated by Rafael Lindqvist. Lindqvist, a Finland-based Swedish translator, also translated Gorky and Dmitrii Mamin-Sibiriak for Bonnier and Söderström, and compiled anthologies of contemporary and earlier Russian poetry. In general, the Russian authors whose works appeared in Sweden were also published in Swedish in Finland, with certain significant differences. In the period from 1863 to 1914, it was not Tolstoy but Turgenev who was the most frequently published Russian author in Finland, possibly because of difficulties with the Russian censors who moderated Finnish literature. Swedish translations of earlier Russian authors ranked higher on Finnish publishers' lists than they did in Sweden; in the years 1863–1914, six out of nine translations into Swedish of works by Aleksei Tolstoy appeared in Finland, thirteen out of twenty-five translations of works by Lermontov, and thirteen out of forty translations of works by Pushkin. Probably because of the closer proximity to St Petersburg, a higher percentage of Swedish translations of Andreev appeared in Finland than in Sweden; in the 1900s Andreev, Erastov, and other Russian authors were also discovering Finland as a holiday destination. In the 1890s, there was a rise in the number of translations of Russian literature into Finnish, with a further increase in 1905–14.

11 See Stig-Lennart Godin, *Klassmedvetandet i tidig svensk arbetarlitteratur* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1994), p. 25, p. 147, p. 156, and Håkanson, *Fönstret mot Öster*, p. 91.

Norway

It is instructive to compare the cultural, linguistic, and literary context of translations of Russian literature at this time in Sweden (which had the advantage of an established literary language) and in Norway. The situation in Norway is of particular interest within the field of Translation Studies, as potential translators had the opportunity to make a statement by choosing to work in either Danish or Norwegian. Until 1814, Norway existed within the state of Denmark-Norway, in which Denmark was the dominant partner. Danish was the officially recognised language used by church, state, and nobility, while Norwegian, with no such recognition, existed mainly as a spoken language within Norway. This situation was succeeded by a 'personal union' with Sweden which lasted until 1905. Following a plebiscite, Norway then became an independent monarchy. As Jeremy Munday indicates, Translation Studies frequently illustrate power disparities between languages, both in postcolonial translation theory and other ideological contexts.[12] Thus the choice to translate authors of international significance into a target language which was gradually emerging as a literary medium constituted a bold political statement. As a growing nationalistic movement sought to establish a Norwegian purified of Danish influences, Ivar Aasen (1813–98), a self-taught Norwegian linguist, travelled throughout the country collecting local dialects as the basis of what he named Landsmål, a form of Norwegian which he developed between 1848–73 using the language of ordinary rural speakers, in contrast to Riksmål, a Danish-Norwegian form of the language used for official purposes.

With special reference to Dostoevsky's reception in Norway, Martin Nag records eleven translations of his fiction between 1883 and 1890. He notes in particular the popularity of two stories whose themes made them especially appropriate for publication in a number of Christmas issues of periodicals such as *Aftenposten* and *Christiania Intelligentssedler*: 'A Christmas Tree and a Wedding' ('Elka i svad'ba', 1848) and 'The Heavenly Christmas Tree' ('Mal'chik u Khrista na ëlke', 1876), whose similarity to Andersen's *The Little Match-Girl* may have made it especially appealing to Scandinavian readers (it appeared in two Norwegian translations and one in Danish between 1884 and 1899).[13] He

12 Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 207–16. See also Munday, 'Using Primary Sources to Produce a Microhistory of Translation and Translators: Theoretical and Methodological Concerns', *The Translator*, 20:1 (2014), 64–80.

13 Martin Nag, *Dostojevskis gjennombrudd i Norge. Rapport fremlagt på symposiet 'Ryssland och Norden i skjønlitteraturen', Sandberg Slot, 5.-11. Oktober 1975* (Oslo: Slavisk-baltisk avd., 1977). He lists the translations, with details (where available) of the translators: Winter-Hjelm's translation of *Crime and Punishment*, discussed below, was followed by 'A Gentle Creature' ('Krotkaia', 1876) in 1885, a collection of four stories: 'The Landlady' ('Khoziaika', 1847), 'A Christmas Tree and a

does not, however, specify the reasons as to why new translations of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* appeared comparatively soon after the first Norwegian versions.

The first Norwegian translation of *Crime and Punishment*, published by Albert Cammermeyer in 1883 under the title *Raskolnikow*, was made by Kristian Winter-Hjelm from a German version.[14] Martin Nag suggests that Hamsun first became acquainted with Dostoevsky's work in the spring or summer of 1884, when he was acting as secretary to the Unitarian pastor and poet Kristofer Janson in Minneapolis and had access to his extensive library; Janson, a great admirer of Russian literature, possessed a copy of the Winter-Hjelm translation.[15] In November 1882, Winter-Hjelm had written to Dostoevsky via Cammermeyer asking permission to translate the novel; the fact that he was unaware that the author was already dead indicates Dostoevsky's relative obscurity in Norway at that time. Dostoevsky's widow Anna granted permission by return of post, and the translation appeared the following July.

Wilhelm Henckel's 1882 German translation of *Crime and Punishment*, used by Winter-Hjelm as the basis of his version, appeared fifteen years after the novel's publication in Russia. This delay may be attributable to the negative reviews of the original text in the *Magazine for Foreign Literature* (*Magazin für die Literatur des Auslandes*);[16] however, Henckel's translation achieved immediate success, and provided a basis for the first three Norwegian versions. In 1887, the wholesaler Johan Sørensen set up the first publishing house in Norway to produce cheap editions, *Bibliothek for de tusen hjem* (*Library for a thousand homes*), offering literature in translation at low cost. It was strongly supported by the radical left as a means of making such literature readily available to the working classes. Holger Sinding (1853–1929) was a member of Sørensen's circle; originally trained in chemistry, he came from Gothenburg, edited the newspaper *Stavanger Amtstidende* (1877–78), wrote novels and plays, and in 1889 published his own translation of *Crime and Punishment*, the second to appear in Norwegian, once again based on Henckel's.

Wedding' ('Ëlka i svad'ba', 1848), *White Nights* (*Belye nochi*, 1848) and 'The Honest Thief' ('Chestnyi vor', 1848) in 1886, 'A Faint Heart' ('Slaboe serdtse', 1848) in 1887, two versions of *White Nights* in 1888, *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Brat'ia Karamazovy*, 1878–80), *The Gambler* (*Igrok*, 1866) and another translation of *Crime and Punishment* (as *Raskolnikow*, by H. Sinding), and a further *Brothers Karamazov* in 1890.

14 *Raskolnikow* (1882), translated by the German bookseller, translator and publisher Wilhelm Henckel (1825–1910).

15 See Martin Nag, *Geniet Hamsun—en norsk Dostojevskij?* [*Hamsun the Genius—a Norwegian Dostoevsky?*] (Oslo: Solum, 1998). For Janson's enthusiasm for Russian literature, see his memoirs *Hvad jeg har oplevet. Livserindringer* (Kristiania and Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1913), p. 118.

16 Geir Kjetsaa, '*Forbrytelse og straff* i samtidens kritikk', in *Dostojevskijs roman om Raskolnikov*, ed. by Geir Kjetsaa (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1973), p. 138.

In 1908, Olav Hammer published the first and only translation of this novel into Landsmål (known after 1929 as Nynorsk), which since 1885 has been one of two officially approved written forms of the Norwegian language. Unfortunately, Hammer's *Crime and Punishment* remained incomplete as the entire print run of the third volume was destroyed in a fire in 1911. It was not until 1929 that the first Norwegian translation made directly from the Russian was published by Carl Olaf Fosse (1860–1940). All these translations bore the title *Raskolnikow*; it was not until 1975 that the novel appeared as *Forbrytelse og straff*, a calque of the Russian title (in his preface, Sigurd Fasting explains that Henckel had feared that the sophisticated public of the 1880s would have taken *Crime and Punishment* for a moralising *roman à these* or a cheap tract).[17] In her survey of Norwegian translations of the novel from 1883 to 1972, Anne Ragnhild Berteig notes that two Danish versions by Ejnar Thomassen (1921) and Georg Saurow (1943) were also widely read in Norway. Examining the specific challenges of rendering Dostoevsky into Norwegian, she concludes that, of the secondary versions, Winter-Hjelm's remains the best and most faithful. As such, it dominated the market until new translations made directly from Russian became available. Sinding's version is fair but less reliable, while Sturla Kvam's 1972 version, based on an English translation, deviates so far from the original text as not to be acceptable as a translation at all.[18]

These translations achieved Friedrich Schleiermacher's aim of bringing the reader and the original author closer together in time to meet a particular cultural need.[19] As Norwegian developed as an independent literary medium, liberating itself from German cultural and Danish linguistic domination, Kristiania was described by Edvard Munch as a "Siberian town" requiring its own Dostoevsky to depict it.[20] The author who rose to this challenge was Knut Hamsun:

> I could, so help me, create a whole world about desperate states of mind. But if people look on Dostoevsky as mad, then I am not likely to get anywhere. For the kind of oddities Dostoevsky has written about in the

17 For analyses of these and three later translations of *Crime and Punishment* into Norwegian, see Anne Ragnhild Berteig, *Norske oversettelser av Dostojevskijs* Forbrytelse og straff (Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, Slavisk-baltisk avdeling, 1993). She does not mention which English translation Kvam used as the basis of his version (*Forbrytelse og straff*; Oslo: Solum, 1972).

18 Berteig, *Norske oversettelser*, p. 45.

19 Friedrich Schleiermacher, 'On the Different Methods of Translating' in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 43–63.

20 Pola Gauguin, *Edvard Munch* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1933), p. 15. Quoted in Sue Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind The Scream* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 71. Munch was also profoundly influenced by Dostoevsky; he was reading *Devils* on the day of his death in 1944 (see Alexandra Guzeva, 'How Dostoevsky Influenced Edvard Munch', *Russia Beyond*, 19 April 2019, https://www.rbth.com/arts/330262-dostoevsky-influenced-edvard-munch).

> three books by him I have read—and I haven't read more—is something I live through daily. I only have to take a walk down Gothersgade to find far more peculiar things. Alas![21]

On Boxing Day 1888, in a letter from Copenhagen, Knut Hamsun addressed these words to the Danish author Erik Skram, who had introduced him to the city's literary scene. At that time the twenty-nine-year-old Hamsun had recently returned from America, pawned his raincoat to rent an attic room, and presented himself to Edvard Brandes, editor of the magazine *Politiken*, with a thirty-page story which he hoped Brandes would publish. When Hamsun returned the following day, he was informed that although it was too long for *Politiken*, Brandes had recommended that Carl Behrens should publish it in the November issue of *Ny Jord* instead. Within three days, it had sold out, winning the author a contract for publication of the entire work and making his name—although it was published anonymously. Born Knut Pedersen, he experimented with various pseudonyms until *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890) finally appeared under the name of Knut Hamsun.

By the time Hamsun finished the novel, he had moved back to Kristiania. He had been commissioned by the Danish publisher Philipsen to write a book on culture in America, based on two lectures which he had given drawing on his own experiences and impressions while living there (1882–84 and 1886–88). *On the Cultural Life of Modern America* (*Fra det moderne Amerikas Aandsliv*, 1889) presented a view very different from the optimistic visions of Henrik Ibsen, who had never been there, or of the Norwegian Nobel laureate Bjørnstjerne Bjørnsen, whose lecture tours had made him a celebrity. Hamsun's experiences in Chicago and Minneapolis as an agricultural worker, train conductor and labourer as well as a journalist had exposed him to a far harsher reality, which continued when he moved to Copenhagen, an existence of poverty, hunger, and rootlessness. Throughout his life he retained a distrust and dislike of urban life. Yet the novel which established his reputation—the first section published, as he readily admitted, for the sake of the money—owed its existence to his bitter periods of destitution in Kristiania during the winters of 1880–81 and 1885–86.

The material could not, as Hamsun himself observed, have taken its final form without the influence of one of the three figures whom he identified as the greatest influences on his younger self—Nietzsche, Strindberg, and Dostoevsky. Writing to his second wife Marie in 1910, he would state that "Dostoevsky is the only writer from whom I have learned anything; he is the greatest of the Russian giants".[22] This was shortly after he had received a copy of Vasilii Perov's 1872 portrait of Dostoevsky from a Russian admirer, Mariia Blagoveshchenskaia, who had translated his novel *Victoria* (1898). According to Hamsun's son Tore, the

21 Knut Hamsun, *Selected Letters*, ed. by Harald Næss and James McFarlane, 2 vols (Norwich: Norvik Press, 1990–98), I: *Selected Letters 1879–98* (1990), p. 82.

22 Martin Nag, *Geniet Hamsun*, p. 195.

portrait, framed in black, accompanied him to his homes in Nordland, Larvik, and Nørholm, where it hung over his bed, "the finest and most soulful face of an epileptic in the world".[23] He would later declare that he was completely ignorant not only of the Russian language but even of its alphabet—not surprising in a man whose education had been so sparse that in his first year at school (1868) he received a mere eleven days' schooling, leaving school altogether aged just fourteen in 1873. How, then, did he become acquainted with Dostoevsky's writings, and which translations were available to him? Why, too, was he so vehement in denying that during one particular period of his early career he had had any knowledge whatsoever of a specific work by Dostoevsky?

Hamsun's first awareness of Russia came through stories told by the men who came to supply Russian grain to the village mill. In 1899, shortly after his first marriage, he and his wife Bergljot set off from Finland, where they had lived for a year, on a trip to the Caucasus via Moscow and St Petersburg. From there they continued to Batumi and Baku. He later recorded this journey in *In Wonderland* (*I Æventyrland*, 1903), an account of his travels which also includes his appraisals of Russian authors including Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.[24] He describes Russia's people, landscapes, architecture, and bizarre characters in a style that at times recalls Mark Twain's travel writings in its detailed portrayals of quaint incidents (his search for a tailor in Moscow to replace a missing button, or the misunderstandings which resulted from his use of mime). In other passages, he tends to idealise the people of a country which he had glimpsed through the lens of its literature:

> Some distance away a number of good old people are chatting and eating, and their faces aren't ugly and ravaged like those of old people generally, but open and strong, and they have all their thick hair. Slavs, I think to myself as I look at them, the people of the future, conquerors of the world after the Teutons! Only in such a people can a literature like that of Russia well forth, endless and heaven-defying, flowing in eight thick, warm streams from its eight creative giants.[25]

This was to be Hamsun's only visit to Russia; ten years later, writing to his Russian translator Peter Emanuel Hansen, he sighed, "How I longed to come to Russia—properly, for a long time, to stay there for a year or so. But it is so fearfully expensive there. And then there is the language. [...] So I remain stuck."[26] Writing to Dagny Kristensen, a friend with a good knowledge of Russian, in December 1900, Hamsun exclaimed:

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23 Tore Hamsun, *Knut Hamsun som er var. Et utvalg af hans brev* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1956), p. 144.

24 Knut Hamsun, *In Wonderland*, trans. by Sverre Lyngstad (Brooklyn, N.Y.: lg publishing, 2004).

25 Ibid., p. 29.

26 Quoted by Martin Nag, *Geniet Knut Hamsun*, p. 304.

> It must be wonderful to know Russian. Oh God—how I wish I knew it! I have been in Petersburg and Moscow—I shall never experience a more powerful and beautiful adventure, especially the journey from Vladikavkas over the mountains to Tiflis. [...] It's another world—more handsome people, redder wine, higher mountains. And I believe that God lives around Mount Kasbek all year long.[27]

It was in Tbilisi that Hamsun paused to consider Russian writers who had visited the city, from Griboedov and Pushkin to Lermontov and Tolstoy, and to make his own pronouncements on them: "Russian literature is, everything considered, very large and very difficult to get a hold on", which he attributes to the "wide expanses of the Russian land and the expansiveness of Russian life". In his view Turgenev was "a European, a Frenchman, at least as much as a Russian", a calm mediocrity in direct contrast to Dostoevsky, "as torn and disproportionate as his characters" and possessed of a Slavophilism "rather too hysterical to be deep", but in a class of his own: "Never has human complexity been dissected as by him; his psychological sense is overwhelming, clairvoyant. Appraising him, one lacks the measure to mete with; he is in a category of his own".[28]

For Hamsun, then, Russia remained largely a 'wonderland' in the sense of a country of the imagination, experienced through the medium of literature in translation; *In Wonderland* contains a chapter in which he sets forth his views on Russian literature. Unlike the translations of his own works into Russian by Hansen,[29] many of the translations of Dostoevsky which Hamsun would have read were not made directly from the original at all. The one work by Dostoevsky which he mentions by name in this chapter, the story 'A Gentle Creature', first appeared in Norwegian in 1885, translated by Gerhard Gran from a French version and published in Bergen.[30] Nag traces the influence of this story and especially of Dostoevsky's remarks in the preface about his use of the first-person narrative, on Hamsun's own preface to his story *Sin* (*Synd*, 1886), and his construction of a similar "monological world"—a new universe of psychological insights—in *Hunger* and *Mysteries* (*Mysterier*, 1892).[31] In 1890,

27 Quoted by Martin Nag, *Myter! Myter!* (Kveldsbel-eika: Martin Nags forlag, 2001), p. 30.

28 Hamsun, *In Wonderland*, pp. 145–47.

29 Peter Emanuel Hansen (1846–1930) was born in Copenhagen, trained as a telegraphist, and in 1871 went to work in Siberia in that capacity. From 1881 to 1904 he was the director of a school of telegraphy in St Petersburg. Here he met and married his Russian wife Anna (1869–1942), with whom he collaborated on Russian translations of Scandinavian authors, including Hamsun.

30 For a detailed analysis of the novella and its reception in Norway, see Ingvild Broch, 'F.M. Dostoevskijs fortelling *Krotkaja*' in *F.M. Dostoevskij 1821–1881–1981: fire forelesninger*, ed. by Ingvild Broch, Jan Brodal, and Erik Egeberg (Tromsø: Universitetet i Tromsø, 1982), pp. 68–86.

31 Nag, *Geniet Knut Hamsun*, pp. 184–85.

a new literary review, *The Present Day* (*Samtiden*), appeared, edited by Jørgen Brunchorst and Gerhard Gran, the translator of 'A Gentle Creature'. The first issue contained Hamsun's own manifesto:

> What if literature were now to become more concerned with states of mind, and less with marriage plans and dances and trips to the country and other misfortunes like that? We would learn a bit about the disorderly confusion of our senses [...] the endless boundless journeys of our hearts and minds, the mysterious operation of the nervous system, the whisperings of our blood, the prayers of our bones: the whole subconscious life of the soul.[32]

In following Dostoevsky by revealing the invisible subtext as narrative and addressing similar existentialist issues, Hamsun dispensed with plot in favour of exposing and analysing his characters' interior lives by means of a stream of consciousness which laid bare the state of mind of the dispossessed—a condition in which Hamsun knew all too well.

While in America, Hamsun had been commissioned to write and edit articles for various Norwegian-language periodicals including the Minneapolis temperance magazine *Battle Cry* (*Felt Raabet*). Under the subtitle 'Marmeladov, or Cause and Effect', he presented two extracts from *Crime and Punishment* in this publication in 1887:

> This faithful representation of the misery of drunkenness is taken from the Russian author F. M. Dostoevsky's novel `Raskolnikov', which appeared in 1883 in a translation by K. A. Winter-Hjelm, published by Alb. Cammermeyer. Raskolnikov is the book's main character [...]. [33]

The first passage is headed 'What drink did to him and his' and consists of Raskolnikov's encounter with Marmeladov in the tavern while the second, 'How it ended', describes how Marmeladov is run over while drunk and subsequently dies.

In 1929, when the Swedish professor John Landquist was working on a biography of Hamsun, he asked the latter about an episode early in his career. The author Arne Garborg, whom Hamsun had approached with *Pa Tourné* (*On Tour*), an account of Hamsun's unsuccessful Norwegian lecture tour in 1886, had rebuffed the young writer with the criticism that his work was too strongly influenced by Dostoevsky. Hamsun claimed that this was wrong; rather, he was trying to apply Dostoevsky's concept of style to Norwegian material. However, he acknowledged that when Georg Brandes had remarked that the younger Hamsun's *Mysteries* had been "infected" by Dostoevsky, that was true: "at that

32 Hamsun, `The Unconscious Life of the Soul' in *Samtiden*, I (1890), quoted in Prideaux, *Edvard Munch*, pp. 122–23.

33 Nag, *Geniet Knut Hamsun*, p. 184.

time I read all the translations of Dostoevsky that I could get, and this reading infected me…"[34]

There was, however, one work by Dostoevsky that Hamsun strenuously claimed not to have read at this time. Shortly before Christmas 1889, he encountered a newly published Norwegian translation of *The Gambler* (*Igrok*, 1866). He had just had his story *Hazard* (*Hazard*, 1889) accepted for publication in the periodical *The Way of the World* (*Verdens Gang*). In view of the similarities between Dostoevsky's story and his own text, he asked the editor Olaf Thommessen to return the manuscript, but it was already too late; the story was scheduled to take up three pages of the eight-page Christmas edition. Despite Thommessen's reassurances that, if necessary, he could testify that Hamsun's story owed nothing to Dostoevsky, accusations of plagiarism emerged some years later. In the summer of 1892, Hamsun was puzzled not to hear from Marie Herzfeld, who had translated *Hazard* and agreed to translate *Mysteries* into German. The letter that finally arrived contained a cutting from the Berlin periodical *Free Stage* (*Freie Bühne*), in which *Hazard* had appeared, where Felix Holländer openly accused Hamsun of plagiarism. As his German publisher Samuel Fischer also oversaw *Freie Bühne*, this was especially disastrous. On 25 June, he replied at length to Herzfeld; the story, he alleged, had been drafted during his time in America and expanded and revised when he had an opportunity to publish it. He also claimed that Thommessen would vouch for him as promised and urged Herzfeld to translate the whole letter for Holländer to read.[35] In the meantime, however, Hamsun had antagonised Thommessen by his aggressive dismissal of Ibsen. Not only did Thommessen fail to defend Hamsun; he published a review of *Mysteries* in *Verdens Gang*, which scornfully declared that Hamsun was no more than a pitiful but opportunistic imitator of Russian literature writing about a mentally unbalanced protagonist remarkably similar to Hamsun himself. In addition to the hostile reviews in the Norwegian press, the Danish critic Edvard Brandes sneered at the "childish" impression created by the novel and the crippled Minutten, "a very Russian character". It was against this background that Hamsun wrote to Albert Langen, the German publisher of *Mysteries*, from Paris on 10 February 1894 in fractured English, explaining the situation and urging him to do all he could to prevent attacks on Holländer in *Freie Bühne*:

> I fear there are certain persons standing behind Holländer, persons which I will not name. The question is: if he conferred with other persons, and who these persons were. […] At present I can do nothing for anybody. I wish I could leave Paris today and go to Germany and live there. I feel myself only as a *Germanish Soul*, not as a Romanish, and these feelings are

34 Hamsun, *Selected Letters*, I (1990), pp. 157–59.
35 Ibid., pp. 196–97.

> increasing the longer I remain here. [...] And so you will kindly try to see the Kritiker of *Mysterien* before it gets too late.[36]

It could certainly be argued that Hamsun had no need to resort to plagiarism when writing a story about gambling; in his letter to Herzfeld he admitted, "If I could go through certain papers I have—material for a novel which, between you and me, consists of personal experiences at the roulette table—I could easily explain a good deal of the similarity there is between Dostoevski and me in our gambling stories." His penchant for gambling would, like Dostoevsky's, reach dangerous levels, and contributed to the breakdown of his first marriage. Early in 1901, he hoped to resolve his financial difficulties by taking off for Belgium to try his luck at the tables. He spent several weeks at the Hotel D'Harscamp in Namur, shuttling back and forth between casinos there and in Ostend and losing heavily at both. Ironically, in view of the fact that his flight had been precipitated by his guilt at living off Bergljot's money, he gambled away much of her dowry. In a letter to her he inveighed against God, claiming that he had had recourse to prayer "not just once, but on my knees, in the middle of the night in the Ostend streets for a month, or was it five weeks—and He heard me the way He hears everyone. Now I spit in his face for the rest of my life. He gave me this mind, it's His responsibility."[37]

While it is plausible that Hamsun had not read the Norwegian translation of *The Gambler* while writing the first draft of *Hazard*, an English version of the former had been published in London in 1887 by Vizetelly & Co. Translated by Frederick Whishaw directly from the Russian, it appeared as part of the 'Celebrated Russian Novels' series at the time when Kristofer Janson, Hamsun's employer in Minneapolis, was building up his library of Russian literature. Pages 244–45 of the English text contain a meticulous explanation of terms such as *pair, impair, manque, passe* and *zero*, and bear a clear similarity to the passage in *Hazard* where Hamsun explains precisely the same expressions. In 1993, Nag suggested to Tore, Hamsun's son, that his father considered using Dostoevsky as the basis of his portrayal of the psychology of gambling as a legitimate modus operandi rather than plagiarism. The latter suggested that his father could well have noted down a few lines immediately after reading *The Gambler* (he was in the habit of keeping such notes folded and pinned together), and subsequently forgotten where they had occurred.[38]

In Thomas Mann's estimation, Hamsun was the most distinguished of Dostoevsky's 'pupils', not only in Norway, but in Russia itself. Having disposed of the question of plagiarism, and of Georg Brandes' sneer at Hamsun as a mere epigone, it remains to be seen what Hamsun took from the author who "felt as

36 Ibid., pp. 197–98.
37 See Robert Ferguson, *Enigma: The Life of Knut Hamsun* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), pp. 189–90.
38 Nag, *Geniet Knut Hamsun*, pp. 201–203.

I do—I realise it now—and even in some ways thought as I do, only infinitely richer and better and greater, because he is the greater writer", as he wrote in his letter of 1892 to Marie Herzfeld. Sixty years later, his contempt for the Naturalist school, already evident in his distaste for Ibsen, was as strong as ever; Zola and his contemporaries, he declared, had "no use for a psychology of nuance", but dealt in people whose behaviour was dominated by a "ruling characteristic" (as in Zola's Rougon-Macquart series, where the characters' lives are largely controlled by heredity): "Dostoevsky—and others—taught all of us something different about people".[39]

These words come from the report on Hamsun's psychological state following his confinement to a hospital in Grimstad after being detained by the police on 14 June 1945. His meetings with Hitler and Goebbels, his support for Germany during the war, his loathing of England, and his outspoken admiration of Hitler, whom he described in an obituary as "a warrior for mankind", led him to be tried for treason. Only his advanced age saved him from an even more severe penalty than the fine of 325,000 kroner eventually imposed on him. He had pleaded ignorance—an attitude which chillingly recalls his words in reply to the accusation of plagiarism: "I never reply to attacks on myself—why should I do it now?"[40] It is, however, possible to trace qualities throughout his writings which, taken to extremes, contributed to this attitude, and among these are certain features which, it can be argued, may derive from Dostoevsky.

Recurring throughout Hamsun's work is the figure of the exceptional individual who regards himself as existing outside the norms and limitations of conventional society. Living in conditions of profound and humiliating poverty in his early years and later in America and Copenhagen, he personally experienced the hallucinatory effects of hunger and physical suffering. Like Ekaterina Marmeladova, he suffered from tuberculosis in his youth, and was warned that he might not survive. These traits were reflected in the heroes of *Hunger*, *Mysteries* and *Pan*; the refusal to conform and compromise with society's expectations, the development of a moral code on one's own terms (deliberately depriving oneself to offer food to hungry children, stealing but subsequently confessing to the crime) link them directly to Raskolnikov with his generosity towards the Marmeladov family and his final public acknowledgement of his guilt. These are the acts of characters who refuse to accept the tight-lipped morality of the 'unco guid'—the rigidly righteous—citizens progressing through Munch's *Evening on Karl Johan Street*, but identify with the solitary figure walking in the opposite direction, treading a path supported by its own bizarre logic. As Raskolnikov develops the arguments which justify his crime and lead him to overthink himself into possibly the most irresolute murderer

39 Gabriel Langfeldt and Ørnulv Ødegård, *Den rettspsykiatriske erklæring om Knut Hamsun* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1978), p. 82.

40 Tore Hamsun, *Knut Hamsun som er var*, pp. 138–44.

since Hamlet, they too operate, like Ivar Kareno in Hamsun's dramatic trilogy, as 'supermen', unrestricted by the rules applicable to ordinary mortals. Tellingly, Hamsun himself noted that reading *The Insulted and Injured* "just about murdered" him,[41] leaving him shattered and shaking after the long walk which he took on closing the book. To demonstrate the evolution of such ideas required a narrative technique and subtle psychological exposition equal or, at the very least, closely related to Dostoevsky's.

Shortly after the events of 22 July 2011, when Anders Breivik caused the deaths of seventy-seven people in Oslo and on the island of Utøya, the Danish author Klavs Birkholm published an article on 'Nihilism in Norway—and Denmark'.[42] Here, Birkholm describes the plot of *Devils* and the murder of a young student at the Moscow School of Agriculture which inspired Dostoevsky to explore the motives of Sergei Nechaev and his anarchist cell, presenting a whole gallery of Nihilists including Nikolai Stavrogin, perhaps the most extreme. Like Raskolnikov, Stavrogin makes a confession—that of raping a twelve-year-old girl, who is later driven to suicide which he fails to prevent. But Tikhon, the holy recluse who hears Stavrogin's confession, immediately recognises its emptiness and falsity, expressed with the arrogance of an accomplished narcissist *avant la lettre*.

Birkholm draws parallels between the Nihilism which Dostoevsky feared would leak out of Russia and lead to a general disintegration of society, and his depiction of the inner emptiness characteristic of those capable of committing such acts. This vacuum, and the attempts to fill it by developing a means of justifying their actions, are equally present in Hamsun's solitary figures. A study of his writings may not enable us to pardon them, but can at least assist us in developing some measure of understanding.

41 Hamsun, *Selected Letters*, I (1990), pp. 157–59.

42 Klavs Birkholm, 'Nihilismen i Norge—og Danmark', *Klavsbirkholm.dk*, 7 August 2011, https://www.klavsbirkholm.dk/2011/08/07/nihilismen-i-norge-og-danmark/. See also Frederik Strand, 'Den danske Raskolnikov', *Weekendavisen*, 12 January 2022, https://www.weekendavisen.dk/2022–2/ideer/den-danske-raskolnikov, which discusses the 1890 murder in Copenhagen of an elderly debt collector, Johan Meyer, by Adolph Philipsen. The Danish translation of *Crime and Punishment* (1884) had made a powerful impression on Philipsen, who was condemned to death for the murder. His motive was never explained. However, the sentence was commuted, and after fourteen years in prison Philipsen was released to start a new life in Canada.