Dostoevsky’s reflections on crime and punishment recall those in Memoirs from the House of the Dead (1862), his account of his four years in a Siberian prison, wherein he is haunted by ‘an almost insoluble problem . . . that of the inequality of the punishment for one and the same crime’ (p. 58). There are, he argues, huge dissimilarities between the crimes themselves and ‘Every different personality means a different crime’ (p. 59). Thus, even ‘the most backward people’, he had observed with a mixture of disdain, incredulity and awe, proved that ‘the legal punishment for crime’ is less frightening and operative than the psychological need to accept suffering and ‘to expiate his deed’. The probable germ for Raskolnikov’s case is Dostoevsky’s example of ‘an educated
man, who has an active conscience, a mature mind, and a feeling heart. The pain in his heart is enough to kill him with its agonies before any punishment begins’ (p. 59). In Crime and Punishment, however, the action is ‘contemporary’, the ‘intelligent’ hero is one of the new generation of the 1860s, and the schema is polemical. The tag-ends of the ‘“unfinished” ideas . . . in the air’ that confuse Raskolnikov, confirm that Dostoevsky’s satire is directed at the utilitarianism of Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–89) and the Nihilists. This group believed that we are all rational and governed by self-interest; that the basis of morality, therefore, is not spiritual but rather the product of ‘rational egoism’ which was their term for certain innate, shared characteristics, such as our dislike
of pain and our natural pursuit of happiness, which teach us that our best interests do not promote strife and competition, but cooperation and a desire for the greatest good for the greatest number, good being that which is useful and beneficial to all. Hence, we can construct in theory, and hope to achieve in practice, a perfectly ordered society based not on religious and mystical imperatives, but on the rigorous application of the scientific method of enquiry. Thus, in Dostoevsky’s schema, Raskolnikov’s subsequent discovery of ‘unsuspected and unexpected feelings’ involves ‘The law of justice and human nature’, grounded in the claims of conscience and the need for Christian expiation, as against the rational, pseudo-humanist ideas that condone
murder because it can fulfil our ‘humanitarian duty to humanity’.

This letter is recognisably both an account of, and a sketchy first draft for, the novel that we know as Crime and Punishment. Thus, ‘From the moment of its conception’, as Mochulsky observed, ‘this plan to portray “a ‘theoretician-murderer’ was divided into two distinct parts: the crime and its causes, and the effects of the crime upon the criminal’s soul” ’ (Mochulsky, p. 273).⁴ And, of course, the crime is accomplished in ‘an absolutely accidental way’ with Raskolnikov being overwhelmed by ‘the feeling of separation and alienation from humanity’. The motives for the crime in this draft, however, constitute only ‘a dry and sketchy determinism’ (John Jones, p. 217) and Dostoevsky passes over ‘the
whole plot’. We are told Raskolnikov yearns to be linked to people, but in this account his need for and decision to accept punishment are self-motivated and his story is self-contained; and there is no mention of Marmeladov, Sonia and Porfiry, who contribute so enormously to Raskolnikov’s recognition of ‘the law of justice and human nature’. Most importantly, ‘the form’ of the novel and its narration are putative and unresolved.

Dostoevsky continued to work on the novel on his return to St Petersburg in the autumn of 1865 and decided to merge the story of Marmeladov (first conceived in June as a separate novel, ‘The Drunkards’) with that of Raskolnikov. Then in November, even though he was deeply in debt, sick with epilepsy and haemorrhoids, and even though the first