

The Brothers Karamazov

by Fyodor Dostoevsky

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with an introduction by Malcolm V. Jones

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Introduction

In one sense the introduction to a classic is superfluous. Having established a claim on our attention, it is for each reader to respond in his or her own way. Yet the very fact that a novel has become a classic suggests that there is more to the claim than immediately meets the eye. Even a vague awareness of the hundreds of books and thousands of articles (or is it now thousands and hundreds of thousands?) on *The Brothers Karamazov* and other works by Dostoevsky may intimidate the scholar and critic, let alone the general reader.

What makes *The Brothers Karamazov* a literary classic? It is easy to list some of the superficial reasons. Over a century after publication it remains a readable, up-to-date, entertaining and thought-provoking novel of action, its plot pivoting on those standbys of the best-seller -- murder, violence and sexual rivalry.

At a deeper level, its characters and the dramatic events in which they participate continue to agitate the memory long after the book has been put down. Ivan, Dmitri or Alyosha Karamazov, what they say, their emotional torments, their clash of personalities, how they react to dramatic events, readily spring to mind in discussions of the modern condition. Dostoevsky's characters are men and women under stress, victims of modern neuroses, in the grip of modern ideas. Their presentation, while eminently readable in realistic terms, has also provoked comparisons with modernist and postmodernist fiction. Indeed, not least of the novel's claims to classic status is that it has continued, it seems, to stimulate and to find an echo in every significant intellectual development to have gripped the western mind since its appearance.

Yet it is not just that *The Brothers Karamazov* seems contemporary and relevant to every succeeding generation --- like that famous portrait whose eyes seem to follow you round the room; it also echoes and develops some of the most ancient paradoxes and preoccupations of humanity and foresees intellectual, social and political developments of our own time. It was the French existentialist Albert Camus who said that Dostoevsky not Karl Marx was the great prophet of the twentieth century. No less interestingly, though more difficult to fathom, Albeit Einstein declared that he had learnt more from Dostoevsky than from any other thinker.

'Does Dostoevsky then simply use the novel form as a vehicle for his philosophical and religious ideas, for prophecy and psychological experiment? The reactions of some critics, in his own day as much as in ours, might lead one to think so. There they are on the shelves: works on Dostoevsky and theology, psychology, philosophy and so forth. But the important point is that for Dostoevsky himself only imaginative fiction is capable of expressing what matters about the human condition. It does not always do so, especially in the work of the 'realists' of his day at whom he was always having a dig. Yet at its best, it is capable not simply of entertaining, telling a good story or providing a social chronicle, but also of plumbing and illuminating the depths of the human soul. In Dostoevsky, one might say following his own line of thought, the novel finds its true vocation.

The Brothers Karamazov was Dostoevsky's last book, published in serial form in *The Russian Herald* from January 1879 to November 1880, and is generally held to represent the synthesis and culmination of his entire work. It appeared as a single volume almost immediately after its serialization was complete, bearing the date 1881. The prefatory note called 'From the author' indicates that there was to be a sequel and it is widely assumed that we were denied this only by Dostoevsky's untimely death on 28 January 1881. (All dates are given according to the pre-revolutionary calendar which was twelve days behind ours in the nineteenth century.) But Dostoevsky could easily have changed his mind. The surviving notebooks for his novels show how often he did this. What we have is a tent which, because it claims to be incomplete, stimulates the reader to imagine how it might have continued and that is much more important than any fragmentary evidence of what was in Dostoevsky's mind: for whatever reason *The Brothers Karamazov* is a novel whose story has no definite end.

His last few years, in spite of the fatal illness which would shortly overtake him at the age of fifty-nine, were probably the most stable and relaxed period of Dostoevsky's life, and the notebooks for this novel are the most coherent. He had married Anna Grigorevna, his second wife, in 1867, having employed her in a crisis to take down *The Gambler* in shorthand as he composed it. Thanks to her good housekeeping his financial affairs were in order for the first time in his life. The greater part of the book was written at Staraia Russa, a provincial town about a hundred and fifty miles south-east of St Petersburg, where the Dostoevskys bought a house in 1877, and the novel was completed at Bad Ems, a German spa near Koblenz, to which Dostoevsky repaired from time to time for health reasons. In the summer of 1880 he had been hailed as a great contemporary prophet by representatives of the warring factions in the Russian intelligentsia on the occasion of his famous 'Pushkin Speech', delivered to mark the unveiling of the Pushkin statue in Moscow. Moreover he was now *persona grata* in government and court circles. He was on good personal terms with Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the reactionary and increasingly influential Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, and corresponded with him about the religious aspects of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Moreover the Emperor had asked him to act as spiritual guide to his younger sons. Still, tragedy haunted him. In May 1878 his little boy

Aleksei died and he made a pilgrimage in the company of the young philosopher Vladimir Solovyov to the monastery of Optina Pustyn. Both these events had a profound effect on the writing of the novel.

If Dostoevsky's last days saw increasing acceptance and respectability, it had not always been so. His life story seems to swing backwards and forwards between extremes. His introduction to the great critic Belinsky and the literary circles of St Petersburg in the mid-1840s had, owing to the success of his first novel *Poor Folk*, momentarily turned his head. But hubris invited nemesis: his flirtation with groups of Utopian socialists in St Petersburg at the end of the decade led to his arrest, a death-sentence, the commuting of the sentence at the place of execution and eight years in Siberia.

The sixties and seventies, after his return to St Petersburg from exile, did indeed see his transformation into the great European novelist we know, with the publication of *Notes from Underground* (1864), *Crime, and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868), and *The Possessed* (1871). But the price in personal terms was considerable. These years also saw him racked by illness, with increasingly severe epileptic fits, by a gambling obsession and consequent debts, which he only began to get on top of with his wife's help in the 1870s. Indeed the tormented character of the novels themselves is evidence enough of his state of mind.

All Dostoevsky's major novels turn on murder. *The Brothers Karamazov* is exceptional in this respect only in the nature of the murder, parricide. In spite of the assurance in 'From the author' that the hero of the novel is Alyosha, the main story line is about his brother Dmitri who has the motive, the means and the opportunity to kill his father and is deeply incriminated by circumstantial evidence. Many readers, when the book first came out in serial form, were held in suspense month by month wondering if he would do it, if he had done it, whether he would be convicted and if so whether he would escape. And this narrative still grips the imagination.

In curious ways the theme of parricide haunted Dostoevsky all his life. As a boy he had been fascinated by Schiller's play *The Robbers*. In 1838 he entered the Engineering Academy in St Petersburg, housed in the building where the Emperor Paul had been murdered, some believed with the collusion of the future Alexander I. In 1839 Dostoevsky's father died, presumed murdered by his serfs, and though Dostoevsky certainly had no hand in it, and there is even doubt about whether it was murder at all, the point is that he always believed in the murder story and perhaps felt guilty about his absence at the time. Freud certainly associates this event with the working out of the Oedipus complex in Dostoevsky's life and work, as also the metaphorical threat to the Tsar implicit in his association with the Utopian socialists in the forties, for which Dostoevsky accepted punishment in Siberia. Late in life he returned to *The Robbers* which he read to his young children and to which there are allusions in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Most important of all for the plot of the novel was an encounter in Siberia with a convict called Ilinsky, who served ten years for the murder of his father, before the real murderers confessed and he was exonerated. At the time of his trial he

had denied all knowledge of the crime though the evidence was overwhelming. Dostoevsky was convinced of Ilinsky's innocence after meeting him.

Yet in each case one is struck more by the fascination than by the reality, and in each there is a certain distance between Dostoevsky and the act of parricide. Either we are dealing with fiction (*The Robbers* or George Sand's *Mauprat* which also has striking parallels with the plot of Dostoevsky's novel), or doubt and error (Alexander I seems not to have known about the intention of killing his father; Dostoevsky certainly had no hand in his father's death, which may not even have been murder; he never had any intention of assassinating the Tsar; Ilinsky was actually innocent).

So it is with the novel. Guilt and guilt feelings vaguely motivate the action of all rather than focus on the one who physically committed the crime. Is there parricide at all? Assuming Dmitri did not commit the deed and Smerdyakov did: is Dmitri still in some sense morally culpable? Is Smerdyakov definitely Fyodor Karamazov's son? Is not Ivan in some sense to blame? Is not even Alyosha guilty of dereliction? Is not everybody, in Zosima's words, in some sense guilty for everything?

So we find ourselves drawn from our focus on the murder story to questions of moral responsibility and guilt, complicity and collusion. We also find ourselves drawn into Ivan Karamazov's thinking about religion: is his rejection of God not a sort of religious parricide, a killing in his own mind of the Divine Father, reminding us of the nearly contemporaneous claim by Nietzsche that God is dead? Similarly we find ourselves thinking about whether Fyodor Karamazov brought his death upon himself, about his treatment of his wives and the Karamazov children, of innocent suffering (the source of Ivan Karamazov's rebellion and the stories he gathers from the newspapers). The very nature of fatherhood is discussed at the trial itself, reflecting another of Dostoevsky's long-term ambitions, to write a novel about children.

The reader who reads exclusively for the excitement of the story may of course become impatient with, or even skip, Books Five and Six. But for Dostoevsky they were the heart of the novel. Ivan's rebellion against God and his 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor' have been widely read as an immensely powerful indictment of Christianity on the one hand and as a uniquely prescient analysis of totalitarianism on the other.

Dostoevsky believed that Ivan's rebellion against God was much more devastating than any case contemporary left-wing intellectuals had managed to assemble. The text speaks for itself. By marshalling a series of anecdotes illustrating the suffering inflicted by adults on innocent children (child abuse as we have come to call it) Ivan reaches the conclusion that he cannot accept God's world and that if such suffering is the price of entry into paradise then (echoing Schiller here) he respectfully returns the entry ticket. He does not at this point deny the existence of God as he does elsewhere in the text; he revolts against the order of the universe out of compassion for the suffering of little children. In letters to N. A. Liubimov, his editor, and to Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Dostoevsky insists

that Ivan's blasphemous arguments are to be refuted later in the novel. Clearly, he was anxious that the censor, the publisher (M. N. Katkov) or the editor might refuse publication. But as time went on, Dostoevsky found the task of refuting them through Zosima increasingly taxing.

Meanwhile 'Rebellion' was followed by 'The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor'. Whole books have been written on this chapter (a reference to Sandoz's book is given below) and indeed it has many enigmatic aspects. For example, the meaning of Jesus' silence and his kiss has generated much discussion, as has the Grand Inquisitor's reading of the Gospel narrative of the temptations in the wilderness, which the novel presents in Matthew's version. Since the Legend is there to be read in Dostoevsky's text it would be fatuous to repeat it here. Nevertheless it may be worth rehearsing some of its central features. Some modern readers are overwhelmed by its incisiveness, but others labour in vain to discover the point.

The Grand Inquisitor, a Roman Catholic Cardinal, already ninety years old, in charge of the burning of heretics in sixteenth-century Seville, is unexpectedly visited by Jesus in his cell, and attempts to justify himself. It should be noticed that the Grand Inquisitor is actually an atheist. He is also a humanitarian, motivated by a deep love for humanity. His objective is the happiness of mankind and he has devoted his life to organizing society so as to ensure general peace and prosperity. He perceives that humanity's deepest need is not for freedom: moral choice is the gift which Jesus brought to the world, but it is a burden too heavy for all but a very few to bear. Humanity's present lot is conflict, turmoil, confusion, bloodshed and unhappiness, the result of that gift of freedom. Humanity yearns above all not for freedom but for what the Grand Inquisitor calls 'mystery', 'miracle' and 'authority', and he relates these three principles to the three temptations in the wilderness. There the devil tempted Jesus to win people's hearts by turning stones into bread, to test God by leaping from the pinnacle of the temple, and to rule over all the kingdoms of the earth. Jesus was wrong to reject these temptations. The Catholic Church has corrected Jesus' error and accepted them. For eight centuries it has been on the devil's side. Of course this means that for eight centuries the leaders of the Church have been propagating an enormous lie, since they alone know that there is no God and that Christianity is an elaborate myth designed to organize and control people's rebellious imaginations. But they have done so in the interests of humanity and its greater happiness. Freedom is incompatible with happiness.

By adopting these three principles --- formulated by the devil in the most penetrating questions ever devised --- the Church has furnished all that humanity seeks on earth: someone to bow down to, someone to take over their consciences, and a means for uniting everyone into a common, concordant and incontestable anthill.

Alyosha challenges Ivan's identification of his Grand Inquisitor with the Catholic Church, but of course Ivan's Legend does not have to be taken literally: he is talking about fundamental forces in human history. For him the Grand Inquisitor stands for all totalitarian creeds and ideologies based on an honest desire to save

humanity from its own inability to handle freedom without lapsing into bloodshed and chaos. Ivan does not question the Grand Inquisitor's motives: indeed he affirms that he is tormented by great sadness and loves humanity. But until human beings understand the feebleness of their rebellion, the burning of heretics will continue to be necessary.

Readers familiar with Dostoevsky's other writings know that Dostoevsky saw socialism as the illegitimate offspring of Catholicism. The 'anthill' and the 'Tower of Babel' which the Legend also mentions are among Dostoevsky's favourite metaphors for socialism. It is for such reasons that the Legend has frequently been taken from its context in the novel and seen as a powerful allegory of the development of twentieth-century totalitarianism, particularly of the Communist variety. There can be little doubt that with the collapse of the Soviet empire it will take on a potent new force as that country reviews its recent history.

The Legend is but one of four, or possibly five, stages in Ivan's thought recorded in the novel. They span the period between his eighteenth and twenty-fourth year: they are the legend of the philosopher who refused to believe in paradise, the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, the article on the ecclesiastical courts, the conversation with Alyosha on rebellion and the theory of 'geological upheaval' set forth by Ivan's hallucinatory devil. Each of them represents a stage in Ivan's wrestling with questions of theodicy, God and the world-order. And they feed back into the plot through the axiom which so impresses Smerdyakov, that 'if there is no God there is no morality'.

It was Dostoevsky's declared intention that the refutation of Ivan's rebellion should find its focus in Zosima's testament in Book Six. The Jesus of the Legend remains entirely silent apart from the Aramaic words 'talitha cumi' ('damsel arise') which he utters as he makes his way through the crowd to meet the Inquisitor. Alyosha concludes that the Legend is in praise of Jesus and does not blaspheme him.

Dostoevsky was, however, very worried by the thought that he might fail to refute Ivan's blasphemy convincingly. In May 1879 he assured Liubimov that he was working on the chapter 'The Russian monk' 'with fear, trepidation and awe'. He had done an enormous amount of background reading of the Bible and works of Russian Orthodox piety; he had briefly met the Elder Amvrosy on his visit to Optina Pustyn. He had read the monk Parfeny's account of a visit to the Elder Leonid. In August 1879 he wrote to Pobedonostsev that he did not intend to refute Ivan 'point by point' but 'indirectly' by means of an 'artistic picture'.

Whether this 'artistic picture' does the work Dostoevsky intended for it has been a matter of intense dispute. His Zosima has been accused of heresy by some; others have simply regarded his image as too weak to overcome the deep emotional impact made by Ivan. Some, though usually those with a pre-existing commitment to Christianity, have been profoundly impressed by him. Yet there remains a lingering doubt that the God whom the Grand Inquisitor failed to take account of is frustratingly elusive in Zosima's religious consciousness as well. One scholar (A. B. Gibson) has referred to 'the combination of the sincerest piety with

the apparent absence of its object'.

Alyosha too represents the religious principle in the debate, but for all his allegiance to Zosima and the life of the monastery, his profoundest religious ecstasy has very little about it that is specifically Christian.

It was as if threads from all those innumerable worlds of God came together in his soul, and it was trembling all over, 'touching other worlds.' He wanted to forgive everyone and for everything, and to ask forgiveness, oh, not for himself! but for all and for everything, 'as others are asking for me,' rang again in his soul. But with each moment he felt clearly and almost tangibly something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault descend into his soul. Some sort of idea, as it were, was coming to reign in his mind --- now for the whole of his life and unto ages of ages. He fell to the earth a weak youth and rose up a fighter, steadfast for the rest of his life, and he knew it and felt it suddenly, in that very moment of his ecstasy. Never, never in all his life would Alyosha forget that moment. 'Someone visited my soul in that hour,' he would say afterwards, with firm belief in his words ... Expressions such as 'as if,' 'almost,' 'some sort of,' qualify the description and it is 'someone', not specifically 'God', who visits his soul. Perhaps to the modern mind, however, this bashfulness about the Christian God is less important than the affirmation of the value of religious experience itself. There is no doubt that Dostoevsky wanted at all costs to escape dry conventionality in the presentation of his answer to Ivan, and to represent religious faith as a synthesis of unique personal experience with the authority of the Scriptures. What he has undoubtedly succeeded in doing is demonstrating a wide variety of religious experience, much of it false (Ivan, Ferapont, Fyodor Karamazov), some of it bearing fruit in richer lives (Zosima, Markel, Alyosha).

As always, ideas are intimately linked with personal feelings in Dostoevsky and the reader is invited to judge the validity of the ideas by the viability of the personality. In that case, Alyosha's spiritual destiny, being more enviable than Ivan's, might incline us in his favour. The Russian scholar Valentina Vetlovskaja has shown, moreover, that Dostoevsky uses various subtle rhetorical devices to predispose us towards Zosima and Alyosha, and against Ivan and characters such as Miusov and Rakitin. Indeed, Zosima's and Alyosha's voices are never presented ironically, whereas the reverse is true to varying degrees of all the other characters.

This runs against what many readers, following the influential Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, have seen as the principal distinguishing feature of Dostoevsky's major novels, and *The Brothers Karamazov* in particular. Bakhtin called the Dostoevskian novel 'polyphonic'. One of the things he meant by this is that each voice in the book has equal weight in an ongoing dialogue, including the author's. Nowadays we should be more inclined to say 'including the narrator's' in order not to confuse the voice of Dostoevsky's narrator (itself a fictional construct) with his own. Bakhtin argues that this constitutes a major revolution in the history of the novel. Most other novels are 'monologic' in the sense that the voices of the characters are evidently subordinated to a single consciousness which we usually

identify with that of the author. As a matter of fact (as Terras explains), Dostoevsky's narrator himself exhibits here two fundamentally incompatible voices: a local resident who is realistic and sceptical, and an omniscient narrator who is an idealist and a believer, and who knows things about the characters' thoughts which the resident could not possibly know. The reader may notice that in the former mode the narrator displays all sorts of stylistic awkwardness. Although the permissible limits of stylistic awkwardness are not the same in English as in Russian, the translators of this much-acclaimed English version have endeavoured to retain his idiosyncratic prose, thereby preserving much of the humour and distinctive voicing of the novel.

There has of course been much dispute about Bakhtin's thesis, but it has proved a very powerful tool when applied to Dostoevsky's major novels. They do privilege free dialogue in a more radical way than we find in any of Dostoevsky's predecessors or contemporaries. One thing about which there is no doubt is that each of the major characters has a distinct and distinctive personality and with it an individual voice of his or her own. Although it is claimed that each of the brothers has something of the Karamazov inheritance, they are so different from each other that some critics have been tempted to see in them three basic human types, roughly defined as the sensual (Dmitri), the spiritual (Alyosha) and the intellectual (Ivan).

It is true that Dmitri seems to have inherited sensuality from his father, but he has none of his father's low meanness. On the contrary, Dmitri is notable for his idealism, his sense of honour and his wrestling with the idea of two kinds of beauty --- the beauty of Sodom and the beauty of the Madonna. He complains that people are so complex that a thirst for both types of beauty can coexist within them.

In spite of his own misgivings, Alyosha appears to have very little of his father's sensuality and what he has seems, as the critic Frank Seeley argues, to have been sublimated: 'Alyosha is predominantly his mother's son.' To the reader of Dostoevsky's earlier novels he follows in that tradition of 'saintly' characters which include Sonya Marmeladova (*Crime and Punishment*), Myshkin (*The Idiot*), Shatov (*The Possessed*) and Makar (*A Raw Youth*). He is, however, healthier and less complicated than any of his predecessors, though he shares with them a certain immediacy and childlikeness of response, insight into the hidden thoughts of others, compassion and humility.

Ivan's relationship to his father is seen differently by different people. Fyodor does not see himself in Ivan and Ivan loathes and rejects the old man. Ivan certainly experiences a love of life but, above all, his energies are channelled into thought, a thought racked with his own inner contradictions based, one would surmise, on his repression of the Karamazov inheritance. However that may be, Ivan is doomed to neurotic inactivity and indecision in the world of action.

Dialogue in Dostoevsky means not just the coexistence of independent and distinctive voices. It means being able to absorb aspects of the voice of another and exerting influence over the other's voice. The examples given show how Fy-

odor Karamazov's voice is partly absorbed (and modified) in his sons. But we also observe Zosima's influence on Alyosha, Ivan's on Smerdyakov, Alyosha's on Kolya. And we may note that the whole novel can be read as an extension of Ivan's voice (point-of-view), or Alyosha's or Mitya's. In extreme cases (but not unusual ones in Dostoevsky) characters have 'doubles'. This term is sometimes used to denote conflicting 'personalities' in the same character. Sometimes it is used to refer to a projection of some aspect of a character's personality with which the character enters into dialogue. The classic case occurs in Dostoevsky's early novel *The Double* where the hero meets his *Doppelgänger*. The most striking case in this story is, of course, Ivan's conversation with his devil representing aspects of his personality he wants to disown but cannot. The third use of the term 'double' indicates secondary characters who seem to embody one significant aspect of a main character's personality. Such is Smerdyakov's relationship to Ivan.

Dostoevsky often brings divergent and conflicting personalities together in scenes of excruciating embarrassment, variously known as his 'conclaves' or 'scandal scenes'. Possibly the most memorable of these in *The Brothers Karamazov* occurs in the monastery in Part I, Book Two. Typically Dostoevsky sets the scene in a place and on an occasion where a high degree of social decorum is expected. Any breach of it will inevitably cause offence and embarrassment. He places there at least one character who sets great store by the preservation of this decorum but who is on edge in fear of a disaster. He also introduces a number of other characters who in a variety of ways are likely to cause some sort of scandal --- perhaps because this kind of decorum goes against their normal inclinations. But they are also predisposed to do things to upset each other; their personalities and interests are bound to clash and since they are all play-acting to some degree, they may try to 'unmask' each other and show up the other's lie. Interestingly, it is not the monks who are embarrassed. Equally interestingly, Zosima accurately diagnoses the source of Fyodor Karamazov's provocative behaviour, advising him not to lie, above all to himself. The victims of the scandal are Miusov and the Karamazovs.

Another memorable scandal scene, though played out on a less public stage, is described in the chapter 'The Two Together', in which Grushenka has lured Katerina into pouring out her heart, only to turn on the girl and humiliate her, finally revealing in a parting taunt that she knows her awful secret. Katerina is devastated in Alyosha's presence, just as Grushenka had planned. At a time when Katerina is emotionally vulnerable she proffers love and then cruelly withdraws it. She calls attention to areas of Katerina's personality of which Katerina is but dimly aware and which she is unwilling to recognize. She stimulates her emotionally in a situation where it is disastrous for her to respond. She exposes her almost simultaneously to stimulation and frustration and switches from one emotional wavelength to another while on the same topic. Finally, she blames Katerina for provoking the scene which she has herself engineered. These are akin to the strategies which the psychologist R. D. Laing has identified as causing the most intense emotional confusion. They can be found at work frequently between Dostoevsky's characters.