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### **Alyosha's Sacred Memory**

The climax of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* — the trial and conviction of Dmitry Karamazov for the murder of his father Fyodor — is followed by an epilogue which is widely regarded as the novel's least satisfying part, a disastrous petering out according to one commentator. The epilogue's final scene picks up a minor narrative thread, the story of little Ilyusha and his pathetic, destitute family, of Kolya Krasotkin and of the influence on him and his schoolfellows of Dmitry's youngest brother, Alyosha. The occasion is Ilyusha's funeral, which concludes with Alyosha's speech to the boys. He tells them it is vitally important that in future years they retain from their childhood some good memory, "some beautiful, sacred memory", because it may come to be "the instrument of (their) salvation." He also tells them that life is good when you do something good and just, and assures them that "as our religion tells us, we shall all rise from the dead and come to life and see one another again, all, and Ilyusha."

One reason (another will become clear presently) for the introduction of this sub-plot, the childhood theme as it is called, was to restate in a minor key some of the novel's dominant themes. Alyosha's speech, for example, recapitulates precepts of his spiritual mentor Father Zossima, and different aspects of Kolya's characterization are meant to remind us of qualities in Dmitry and Alyosha, and in Ivan, the third Karamazov brother. The trouble is that the story of the children is pitched in a sentimental key reminiscent of some of the less happy features of Dickens' novels (which had a marked influence on Dostoevsky). One thinks especially of the cloying scene at Ilyusha's bedside in Book Ten in which the dog he thought dead through his cruelty is brought in to him. The sentimentality is particularly unfortunate because it has led to an insufficient appreciation of the most important feature of the closing scene of *The Brothers Karamazov*, one which concerns the beliefs of Alyosha. To bring into focus this aspect of his spiritual consciousness, it is necessary, as Dostoevsky intended it to be, to consider Alyosha in relation to his two brothers.

*The Brothers Karamazov* is Dostoevsky's crowning achievement. Its scope and power, the profundity and the masterly artistic embodiment of its psychological, philosophical and spiritual insights make it one of the world's great novels; perhaps only the greatest of Tolstoy's and Mann's novels are its peers. One of the two dominant sets of themes in the novel concerns perennial questions of guilt, justice and punishment, themes which are illuminatingly discussed by Richard Peace in his excellent critical study *Dostoevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels*. The other major thematic complex, "eternal questions" as Ivan calls them, but questions which were the particular preoccupation of nineteenth-century literature, has to do with the existence of God and with immortality.

Early in the novel, Fyodor Karamazov, himself believing that "a man falls asleep and doesn't wake up, and that's all there is to it" and intending "to carry on with my filthy kind of life to the end", asks Alyosha and Ivan if there is a God and a life after death. It is not surprising that the former assures him that there is, for one of the first things we are told about Alyosha is that "the moment he thought seriously about it he was overcome by the conviction of the existence of immortality and God." As we shall see, this conviction predates Alyosha's coming under the influence of Father Zossima, whose beliefs are the same. When Mrs. Khokhlakov, a lady of little faith and less sincerity, tells Zossima she suffers from lack of faith and from fear of what lies beyond the grave, he tells her that immortality cannot be proved but that one can become convinced of it "by the experience of active love". He gives love of neighbors as an illustration and elsewhere in the novel gives special emphasis to love of children and of "the divine mystery in things": "Every blade of grass, every small insect, ant, golden bee, all of them (knows) so marvelously their path, and . . . (bear) witness to the mystery of God."

Ivan, on the other hand, assures his father that there is no God, no immortality and, in answer to a further question, no devil. As the novel progresses, however, we come to see that Ivan is not so at ease with these beliefs as he initially seems. As recently as a few months before the action of the novel begins he had envisaged the advent of a naturalistic humanism in which man would become god-like and abandon "all his old hopes for the joys of heaven. Everyone will know that he is mortal, that there is no resurrection and he will accept death serenely and proudly like a God. . . . Love will satisfy only a moment of life, but the

very consciousness of its momentary nature will intensify its fire to the same extent as it is now dissipated in the hopes of eternal life beyond the grave." But in the present time of the novel, the underside of this vision has come more and more to grip Ivan's mind: if there is no God and no immortality, then there is no virtue and nothing is immoral; everything is permitted, "even cannibalism".

We are first allowed an inside view of the enigmatic Ivan only in Book Five of the novel, in the tremendous chapters in which he opens himself to Alyosha. Here Ivan reveals himself to be a man with a will to live and a desire to love similar to Alyosha's and Zossima's, but less intense and encompassing, and more theoretical: "However much I may disbelieve in the order of things, I still love the sticky little leaves that open up in the spring, I love the blue sky, I love *some* people" (italics mine). But at the same time Ivan outlines his absurdist program of enjoying life until he is thirty and then destroying himself. His desire to love and (since for Dostoevsky love and belief are virtually synonymous) his capacity to believe are thwarted by his intellect, which insists on attaining an understanding of the universe and is unable to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil, specifically the sufferings of children at the hands of adults, examples of which Ivan details in the harrowing chapter that precedes his parable of "The Grand Inquisitor" — the most famous episode in Dostoevsky's entire canon, which he himself regarded as the high-water mark of his career as a writer.

In Ivan's parable, the Inquisitor tells Christ, who is imagined to have reappeared in Seville at the height of the Spanish inquisition, that he has aimed too high in giving mankind so terrible a gift, "so fearful a burden as freedom of choice", and that the tools of miracle, mystery and authority, which Christ had rejected when thrice tempted in the desert, have been taken up by the church and used to fashion an environment in which man can live peacefully, free of the curse of the knowledge of good and evil: "Peacefully they will die . . . and beyond the grave they will find nothing but death. But we shall keep the secret and for their own happiness will entice them with the reward of heaven and eternity." There is no doubt of the meaning this parable had for Dostoevsky: his perception of the absolutism of the Roman Catholic Church is fused with an extraordinarily accurate prophecy of the Soviet state, what Dostoevsky described in a letter to Katkov as "the complete enslavement of the freedom of conscience" which is the goal of "our foolish but terrible Russian socialism" and the antithesis of the Russian Christ. Ivan's

attitudes to his parable are more equivocal and less sincere than Dostoevsky's. This becomes clear in considering the subject first introduced in the next chapter of the novel: Ivan's first preceptorial, then inquisitorial relationship with the epileptic Smerdyakov, the servant of Fyodor, possibly his bastard, certainly his murderer.

After Book Five, Ivan does not figure importantly in the novel until 400 pages later, in a sequence of six chapters which includes his three conversations with Smerdyakov and culminates in what is perhaps the most compelling chapter in the entire novel: his hallucinatory conversation with the devil, the prince of darkness as a seedy, impecunious Russian gentleman, "a well-bred sponger . . . agreeable and ready to assume any amiable expression that occasion should demand." The chilling conversations with Smerdyakov had revealed to the reader and to Ivan that his increasingly intense feelings of guilt were rooted in his having secretly desired his father's death and semi-consciously contrived to give the servant an opportunity to commit the crime. As Smerdyakov calmly points out, the real murderer is Ivan, who had taught him that if there is no God, everything is permitted.

The link between Ivan's atheism, the subject of his conversation with Alyosha early in the novel, and his complicity in his father's death, the subject of his conversations with Smerdyakov, is the deficiency in his powers of active love and his sense of responsibility for *all* his fellow men. At one point in his conversation with the devil, "the indispensable minus sign" as he calls himself, Ivan asks "Is there a God or not?" The devil, a figment of Ivan's tormented psyche, is momentarily flustered and says he doesn't really know. We know from Father Zossima's teaching why this must be his answer: because one can only come to an awareness of God "by the experience of active love", a force of which this deferential and comfort-seeking apparition is the quintessential negation.

As guilty as Ivan of wishing his father dead, Dmitry is unlike him in that his existence is dominated by love, not thought. His love, however, is not the active love of Alyosha and Zossima but romantic love (or passion love), *eros*, not *agape*, to use cognate terms. Father Zossima distinguishes between the two early in the novel in a passage one is meant to remember in assessing Dmitry's passion for Grushenka: "compared with romantic love, active love is something severe and terrifying. Romantic love yearns for an immediate act of heroism that can be achieved rapidly and that everyone can see. This sort of love really

reaches a point where a man will even sacrifice his life provided his ordeal doesn't last long and is over quickly just as though it took place on a stage, and provided all are looking on and applauding. But active love means hard work and tenacity . . . ."

Dmitry's passion for Grushenka is exposed to extended scrutiny in Book Eight, the central section of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which describes in exhaustive detail his frenzied escapades in the time surrounding his father's murder. The excesses and fatuities of his passion are pointed up in a series of brilliantly managed comic scenes: the visit to the peasant-merchant Lyagavy, who is too drunk to discuss business on the night Dmitry arrives in a tremendous hurry to see him, and who gets equally drunk the following morning while Dmitry is still asleep; the visit to Mrs. Khokhlakov, who babbles on about gold mines and the woman question while he frantically and unsuccessfully tries to borrow from her 3,000 rubles; his dealings in the inn at Mokroye with the farcical Poles, one of them Grushenka's first lover. Dmitry speaks better than he knows when he exclaims with characteristic hyperbole: "What terrible tragedies realism inflicts on people." The ironic discrepancies between Dmitry's passion and his actions tellingly deflate the theatrical pretensions of romantic love; but they do so without demeaning Dmitry or making him into an object of ridicule.

The reason for this is that early in the novel, in chapters which parallel Ivan's confession to Alyosha, Dmitry reveals to the same brother his innermost feelings and aspirations in a way that creates in the reader an involved and abiding sympathy. Quoting from two poems of the German Romantic Schiller — the "Hymn to Joy" and a more purgatorial poem about Demeter — Dmitry gives voice to his consuming love for the visible world and to his desire to enter into a lasting alliance with his ancient mother, the earth ("Dmitry" means belonging to Demeter, goddess of the earth). But Dmitry does not know how to bring about this union. Loving the wholesome, he cannot shun the shameful, to which he is driven by periodic storms of lust. In what is clearly a self-image, he says he is maddened by the thought "that a man of great heart and high intelligence should begin with the ideal of Madonna and end with the ideal of Sodom."

As long as Dmitry is in the grip of romantic love, he is unable to discipline himself in the practice of active love (requiring "hard work and tenacity") which alone can bind him to the natural world, the source of spiritual nourishment for Alyosha and Zossima. By the end of

the novel his fate is still unclear, but it does seem likely that he will be able to transform romantic passion, the love that turneth but to dust, into active love through the acceptance of suffering and the recognition that "we are all responsible for all." The peasant Andrey thinks Dmitry will be saved because "you're just like a little child, sir. . . . And though there's no denying you're hot-tempered, sir, the Lord will forgive you for your being simple hearted." And it is to Dmitry's eventual union with the earth, and consequent regeneration, that Christ's words from St. John's gospel — the epigraph to *The Brothers Karamazov* — principally allude: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

At the same time that Dmitry is speeding through the night in his troika to what he thinks will be a final confrontation with Grushenka followed at dawn by his suicide, Alyosha, his soul "overflowing with rapture" after his visionary dream of a risen Father Zossima (who has just died) joining Christ at the wedding feast of Cana, throws himself onto the earth and vows to love it forever. Though it occurs not halfway through the novel, this is the climactic scene involving Alyosha. After it, his presence and his importance in the novel sharply diminish; he never does come to be the hero of the Karamazov story that his creator originally intended him to be. As Dostoevsky admits somewhat defensively in the preface to his novel, Alyosha, a would-be man of action, acts "only in a vague sort of way" and must seem to the reader "strange, almost eccentric".

One reason for this falling off is that Alyosha never has more than a confidante's role to play in the pivotal events upon which the entire narrative of *The Brothers Karamazov* turns, the murder of Fyodor and its consequences. Indeed, the sub-plot involving the children and the passion that the self-tormentor Lise is allowed to develop for him (a relationship with interesting possibilities which is allowed to peter out) were clearly intended to provide Alyosha with two things that the narrative of his father's murder could not: a substantive role to play and the chance for his powers of active love to become efficacious. A more important reason has to do with the proverbial artistic difficulty of convincingly portraying — particularly in the medium of realistic prose fiction — characters of pure innocence and transcendent goodness. We know that while working on *The Idiot*, the story of the Christ-like Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky complained that "depicting the *positively beautiful* is an im-



measurable task." And when towards the end of the composition of *The Brothers Karamazov* he described to a friend his painful realization that "I have literally failed to express one-twentieth part of what I had wanted to", it is hard not to feel that he was referring principally to Alyosha.

To appreciate Dostoevsky's difficulty, we have only to compare the characterizations of Dmitry and Ivan to that of Alyosha, which is comparatively sketchy and psychologically thin. Alyosha does not have to undergo the searing process of change, crisis and possible transformation — the very stuff of many great fictional characterizations — that Dmitry and Ivan experience, for when the novel opens he is already in possession of the beliefs which will sustain him throughout his life. Dostoevsky does rather half-heartedly attempt to supply Alyosha with a *crise de foi* triggered by his conversation with Ivan and by the discrediting of Father Zossima's teaching when his body begins to decay immediately after death; a crisis which culminates in his triumphant vision of the marriage feast. But perhaps the least credible aspect of *The Brothers Karamazov* is the narrator's attempts to convince us that previous to this vision Alyosha experiences "agonizing contradictions" and stands "on the verge of despair". We are told of these states of mind, but they are never made palpable, as are Ivan's and Dmitry's. And they are gainsaid by the narrator's own admission that even in the midst of his dislocation none of "the fundamental and, as it were, elemental beliefs of his soul had in any way been shaken. He loved his God and believed in him firmly. . . ." This could not of course have been otherwise since, as we have seen, one of the first things we learn about Alyosha — it is virtually his leitmotif — is that from childhood he has been unshakeably convinced of the existence of God and of immortality.

At the height of his madness, Shakespeare's King Lear, whose daughter Cordelia never ceases to love him, cries out for an explanation of why his two daughters have become creatures of ferocious evil: "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" *The Brothers Karamazov* invites the similar question of why Alyosha is so deeply convinced of God and immortality and so fully wedded to the earth in the spirit of active love, while one of his brothers is a slave to passion and the other a tormented rationalist with an insufficient capacity to love. The only answer that *The Brothers Karamazov* would seem to offer is extraordinarily simple: Alyosha cherishes from his childhood a "beautiful sacred memory" that has been the instrument of his salvation. In Book

One we are told that all his life Alyosha possessed, like a shaft of light out of the darkness, one memory of his mother, who had died when he was in his fourth year:

all he remembered was an evening, a quiet summer evening, an open window, the slanting rays of the setting sun (it was the slanting rays that he remembered most of all), an icon in the corner of the room, a lighted lamp on front of it, and on her knees before the icon his mother, sobbing as though in hysterics, with screams and shrieks, snatching him up in her arms, hugging him to her breast so tightly that it hurt, and praying for him to the Virgin, holding him out in both arms to the icon as though under the Virgin's protection. . . .

It is this remembered image of the suffering of a loved one that is in some mysterious way the source of Alyosha's belief in God and the life to come, and his power to love actively. In the same way the death of his beloved older brother during Father Zossima's childhood left "an indelible impression" in his heart and, because he remembered it years later at a crucial moment, became the turning point of his life and the instrument of his salvation. In the closing scene of *The Brothers Karamazov* Alyosha hopes to instill into the hearts of the boys he has befriended an indelible memory of the death of Ilyusha, whom they loved, so that it may become in later years the means by which they can avoid being consumed by the desolating negations of an Ivan, the destructive passions of a Dmitry.<sup>1</sup>

NOTE

1. I have used David Magarshack's two-volume Penguin translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which is in some respects superior to the older Constance Garnett translation. Both are in print.