The Brothers Karamazov is Dostoevsky’s last and most complex novel. It represents the fullest expression of his quest to achieve a literary work which would express the dilemmas and aspirations of his time and also represent the eternal, absolute values he perceived in the Christian tradition. Diane Thompson’s study focuses on the meaning and poetic function of memory in the novel, and seeks to show how Dostoevsky used cultural memory to create a synthesis between his Christian ideal and art. Memory is considered not only as a theme or subject, but also as a principle of artistic composition. Her interpretation identifies those aspects of cultural memory Dostoevsky incorporated into his novel, and analyses how he used them as significant components of his characters’ memories.
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THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV AND THE POETICS OF MEMORY

DIANE OENNING THOMPSON
To the memory of my Grandmother

Elise Helmine Eidsor Baer

Kristiansund, Norway 1881–1971 Chicago, Illinois
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Preface

This book is an interpretation of *The Brothers Karamazov* based on a study of the meaning and poetic function of memory in the novel. Aristotle said in the *Poetics* that all people experience the ‘greatest of pleasures’ when contemplating a work of imitation because they are at the same time ‘learning something’, which he calls ‘gathering the meaning of things’. Establishing, illuminating and ordering meanings is the primary goal of literary interpretation. An emphasis on poetics requires that we focus on the text of *The Brothers Karamazov* as a system of mutually connected elements in order to discover the aesthetic principles of their interrelation. Poetics and interpretation are in fact complementary activities. Poetics studies how an artistic text is constructed, interpretation strives to reveal its meanings.

Memory, in its broadest sense, is the general category of what remains of the past. The past is inscribed in memory, individual and cultural. Every individual retains in memory traces of his or her own past experience which can become the subject of an artistic representation. There are also supra-individual memories shared by all people in a given culture and extending over generations. This study attempts to identify those aspects of cultural memory Dostoevsky variously incorporated into his novel, to analyse how he used them as significant components of the individual memories he created for his characters, and to explore the dialogic interactions between them. It proceeds from two basic positions which have been convincingly argued by M. Bakhtin in his by now famous book on Dostoevsky’s poetics, namely, that the novel is pre-eminently an artistic genre, and that Dostoevsky, notwith-
standing his polemical involvement in the ideological issues of his day, was first and foremost an artist. Thus, I consider memory not only as a theme or subject, but as a principle of artistic composition. This means that we shall want to discover what is distinctive to those aspects of memory Dostoevsky selected to shape his poetic structures and give meaning to his novel.

The Brothers Karamazov has been approached from many avenues. Some have treated it as a philosophical work, others as a quasi-documentary reflection of socio-political reality, still others as a religious credo. Much valuable scholarly work has been devoted to tracing its literary and historical sources. The particulars of Dostoevsky’s biography, his intellectual and publicistic preoccupations and his socio-historical milieu have also received the attention of many outstanding scholars. These investigations have contributed greatly to our understanding of the novel’s diverse sources and the circumstances of its composition. By approaching The Brothers Karamazov through the concept of poetic memory, we may hope to see some of its meanings in a new perspective and to discover some of those aesthetic principles which unify the whole.

I was first drawn to the idea of analysing the poetic structure of The Brothers Karamazov from the point of view of memory after being struck by the multitude of references to memory in the novel, far exceeding that of all Dostoevsky’s previous fiction. While there is rich material in his earlier work for a study of memory, it is in The Brothers Karamazov, his last novel, that we see him at full stretch in his creative uses of memory. Interestingly, it is also the work in which a word of hope for the future sounds most clearly.

Another general observation inspired me to concentrate on poetics. I had long been intrigued by the fact that people of the most diverse social, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, even those totally unacquainted with the Russian tradition, find that Dostoevsky’s art speaks powerfully and significantly to them. This can only mean that The Brothers Karamazov is not entirely conditioned by, or dependent on, its cultural context for understanding or aesthetic enjoyment. This further sug-
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gests that there are universal themes and poetic properties in this work which transcend the concrete cultural and historical conditions in which it had its birth. Indeed, it would seem that the more poetic a text, the less it depends on its contemporary historical context, the more it creates its own world, at once unique and full of universal signifiers. In Dostoevsky, this search for universals was part of his major project to synthesise his Christian ideal with aesthetic form. To discover how Dostoevsky gave poetic expression to this quest through his artistic use of memory was one of the main impulses forwarding my work.

Memory has recently become a major theme in Russian literature and literary scholarship. This interest has arisen largely as a response to those Soviet policies which aimed to suppress and efface whole areas of Russian history and culture. However, it was not only the political leaders who were bent on distorting and extinguishing the Russian past. The avant-garde movement of Russian futurism, instead of relying on experience, also espoused a contempt for the past in its single-minded preoccupation with an abstract future utopia. We are now witnessing a genuine resuscitation of Russia’s past, of its historical, cultural and literary memory. The study of the meaning and function of memory in a great work of the last century has acquired a new significance in this context.

Memory has now become topical in Russia but it is not new. The Symbolists and Acmeists, in particular V. I. Ivanov and O. Mandel’shtam, were deeply involved with cultural memory, both as poets and critics. In Russian literary scholarship we can trace a continuous interest in memory from V. I. Ivanov, one of Dostoevsky’s early interpreters, to Bakhtin and to Lotman and Uspensky in the present. And not only the Russians have discovered fertile poetic possibilities in memory as both theme and structuring principle. Joyce and Proust used memory in profoundly creative though very different ways from Dostoevsky, and from each other.

My general concepts of poetics owe most to the theoretical ideas of Roman Jakobson, Jury Lotman, B. Uspensky, F. K. Stanzel and Mikhail Bakhtin. I have found Erich Auerbach to
be a model of interpretative inspiration as well as a source for several indispensable ideas. The phenomenon of memory has long attracted the scrutiny of philosophers, theologians and, more recently, psychologists. With all this vast material I had to be very selective since comprehensive coverage was out of the question. For studies on Dostoevsky’s poetics in general I am most indebted to Bakhtin’s stimulating ideas, even though the reader will quickly see that I do not agree with him in toto. Studies on the poetics of *The Brothers Karamazov* which have proved most essential for my work are those of Jostein Børtnes, Nine Perlina and V. E. Vetlovskaja. Finally, ‘Gérard Genette’s study on Proust’s poetic use of memory offered a very suggestive contrast to Dostoevsky. From all these sources, as well as many others, I have freely borrowed and adapted ideas which seemed most pertinent to *The Brothers Karamazov*. I have not found it possible or desirable to adhere unswervingly to any one of the many scholars, interpreters and thinkers who have guided my way. Without them, though, this book could not have been written.

One also needs to have dialogues with people. I should first like to record my grateful memory of the late Dr N. Andreyev who first took me on as a research student and whose lectures on Russian literature were a source of pleasure and inspiration for generations of students at Cambridge. Malcolm Jones and Sergei Hackel gave me the benefit of their comments and corrections. Ludolf Müller kindly allowed me to participate in his seminar on *The Brothers Karamazov* at the University of Tübingen. I was also fortunate in having a memorable discussion with V. E. Vetlovskaja. Conversations with Joseph Frank were invariably stimulating and informative. I should like to record my thanks to him and to Malcolm Jones for reading my chapter on the narrator. Robert Jackson read my chapter on ‘Forgetting’ and made several valuable comments. Nina Perlina read this as a thesis and gave me much appreciated encouragement. To Bobbie Coe, my thanks for her expert, cheerful and sustaining help in preparing the typescript. I should also like to mention my special gratitude to the late Bruno Bettelheim, friend and teacher, who gave me warm
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personal encouragement and advice. My daughter, Kari Carsairs, gave me the benefit of a non-specialist’s reaction to most of my text, pointing out several obscurities. My husband, John Thompson, took on the exacting task of proofreading the whole typescript. I am most grateful to Jostein Børtnes who patiently saw this study through from its beginnings as a doctoral dissertation to its revision into book form. I thank him for his illuminating scrutiny of my work, for his generosity in reading through the whole typescript in an earlier draft version and for sharing with me his insights into Dostoevsky’s art.
Note on the text

All translations are my own. The Russian text of The Brothers Karamazov used is that of the Academy of Sciences Edition, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsatii tomakh, volumes 14 and 15 (Leningrad, 1976), abbreviated as PSS, except I have restored all Dostoevsky’s initial capitals for the divine names, pronouns and synonyms according to the Polnoe sobranie sochinenii F. M. Dostoevskogo (St Petersburg, 1911) and the YMCA-Press edition of Brat’ia Karamazov (Paris, 1954). I have also adhered to Dostoevsky’s capitalisation practice in my own text. Citations from the PSS text of the novel are enclosed in brackets with the volume number followed by the page number. My ellipses within quotations are indicated by pointed brackets.

The transliteration scheme is that of the Library of Congress, except the standard English equivalents for well-known names are used, so Dostoevsky, rather than Dostoevskii, Fyodor, rather than Fedor, etc.

Chapters 6 and 7 contain a few paragraphs, somewhat revised, from my article ‘Poetic Transformations of Scientific Facts in Brat’ja Karamazov’, Dostoevsky Studies, 8 (1987), 73–85.