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Introduction

The Brothers Karamazov has long had the reputation of being an 'important book', a 'landmark of world literature'. This is, as the present study hopes to show, a richly deserved reputation, but it is also in some senses an unfortunate one. More often than not, the novel has been approached by the new reader as a hostile peak to be scaled by the ambitious intelligence, or as a form of particularly strenuous intellectual weight-training to be endured with gritted teeth in the hope of enhanced mental muscularity and fitness. This is regrettable, for *The Brothers Karamazov* turns out to be an enjoyable and accessible novel which fully displays Dostoyevsky's mastery as a storyteller, as well as his significance as a thinker.

The main plot is remarkably simple, although it supports a wide range of secondary developments. As in many of Dostoyevsky's earlier works, murder and money dominate the action. Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, a corrupt and lascivious provincial landowner, is the father of three legitimate sons: Dmitry, a retired army officer; Ivan, a brilliant intellectual; and Alyosha, a novice monk under the tutelage of the local monastic elder, Father Zosima. Dmitry is the child of Fyodor Pavlovich's first marriage, Ivan and Alyosha the sons of his second. Fyodor is also the suspected father of an illegitimate son, Smerdyakov, the result of a liaison with a local idiot girl, Liza Smerdyashchaya. Smerdyakov now works as a servant in the Karamazov household.

When Fyodor Pavlovich is found murdered, suspicion falls on Dmitry, although we later learn that the crime was committed by Smerdyakov. Dmitry's violent nature and his conviction that he has been cheated out of his inheritance have already led to furious scenes between him and his father. What is more, father and son are locked in dangerous sexual rivalry

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over a local seductress, Grushenka, whose charms have already enticed Dmitry away from his betrothed, Katerina. All this points to Dmitry's guilt, and he is arrested. At his trial things go badly for him and he is sentenced to Siberia. Grushenka, now reformed, decides to accompany him and Katerina remains to look after Ivan, whose mental breakdown follows recognition of Smerdyakov's guilt and the role played in his father's murder by his own conversations with the lackey. But nothing can be proved. Dmitry goes to serve his sentence, Smerdyakov commits suicide, Ivan succumbs to his illness, and the novel ends with Alyosha leaving the monastery and following Zosima's advice to go out into the world.

If the novel's plot is simple, its thematic preoccupations and artistic innovations are startlingly ambitious. It addresses such major themes as atheism and belief, the nature of man, socialism and individualism, freedom and justice, and the state of European civilisation in an artistic form that both draws on existing novelistic tradition and prepares the way for many of the directions taken by the genre in the twentieth century. Essentially, it is a novel concerned with confrontations between order and disorder, justice and injustice, harmony and chaos, unity and fragmentation, and it evolves a distinctive artistic form and apt narrative strategies to convey its thematic concerns. It explores these confrontations in a variety of settings, including the psychological, the familial, the social, the moral and the metaphysical. In all these manifestations it seeks to show man the way forward from what Dostoyevsky saw as the underlying disorder of his age into a new state of moral and spiritual certainty rooted in the author's own convictions as an Orthodox Christian. In this respect *The Brothers Karamazov* is an overtly didactic work, a great achievement of Christian literature, although it manages to avoid the dogmatic and the stridently evangelical. It is not to be read simply as a religious tract: it is, in the end, the result of a lifetime's reflection on the most burning issues of the age by a novelist celebrated even in his own time for his penetrating insights, prophetic vision and revolutionary approach to the art of fiction.

I have in this study sought to avoid writing an all-embracing

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introductory prospectus to the novel. To try to cover all that it has to offer in a work of this kind would be to risk skimping on everything. In any case such a task has been admirably accomplished by the American scholar, Victor Terras (*A Karamazov Companion*). Instead, I have attempted a unified analysis centred upon the novel's preoccupation with justice, order and disorder, for it is in the revolutionary artistic treatment of these themes that its real significance as a literary landmark lies.

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Chapter 1

The background to the novel

Well, the novel is finished! I have worked on it for three years, and have been publishing it [in instalments] for two – a significant moment for me ... With your permission I won't take my leave of you. After all, I intend to live and write for another twenty years.
(XXX/1, 227)

The Dostoyevsky who in November 1880, just two months before his death, so announced the completion of *The Brothers Karamazov* to N. A. Lyubimov, the associate editor of *Russkii vestnik* (The Russian Herald), was far removed from the young man who in the 1840s had gained fame as the author of tales of psychological analysis and had then suffered arrest, mock execution and Siberian exile for participation in an illegal political group. This group, the Petrashevsky circle, had been broken up by the police in April 1849 and its members charged with 'revolutionary' plotting and subversive acts against the tsarist regime. Dostoyevsky and the other ringleaders were subjected to a grim reminder of monarchical power: a death sentence commuted only seconds before its execution to, in Dostoyevsky's case, four years of imprisonment with hard labour followed by a further four years of exile.

Dostoyevsky had associated with the most radical wing of the Petrashevsky circle, but his subsequent experience of the criminal mind during his years of imprisonment and hard labour had stripped him of his earlier political idealism and convinced him of the powerlessness of reason – and the moral and political programmes it supports – to resurrect the depraved human soul and usher in a new era of justice and social harmony. He retained until the end of his life a powerful vision of a Golden Age of primeval innocence, when men would live like brothers in a harmonious state of love and mutual regard, but he had lost forever the belief that this ideal might

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be achieved by political means. His experiences of the effects of capitalism and bourgeois greed during his first European tour in 1861 had further convinced him that 'we do not have a nature capable of brotherhood' (V, 81), and in his polemical account of his European travels, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (1863), he dismissed pure reason and the solutions it purported to offer as 'that unfounded fiction of the eighteenth century' (V, 78).

The period of Siberian exile thus marked Dostoyevsky's retreat from rational humanism and political idealism. Instead, he resumed his literary career at the end of the 1850s as a writer with a religious mission, dedicated to the belief that salvation could be achieved only with the complete moral transformation of human nature through love, suffering and the experience of Christ. Indeed, he confessed that he drew strength during the dark years of his imprisonment and degradation largely from his copy of the New Testament, which, battered and much-annotated, still survives in the Dostoyevsky archives. His journalistic activities and literary works of the 1860s and 1870s clearly reveal his essentially religious vision. As the editor of the periodicals *Vremya* (Time) and *Epokha* (The Epoch) in the early 1860s, he attempted first to steer a moderate course of national reconciliation through the furious political debates of the post-reform years. He then used those same platforms to express his increasingly bitter antipathy to the rationalism, atheism and vulgar materialism of the young radical intellectuals of the 1860s – the 'nihilists', as Turgenev termed them, led by the journalist-philosophers N. G. Chernyshevsky and N. A. Dobrolyubov. Throughout his journalistic career, but especially in *The Diary of a Writer* (1873–81), that crucible in which the material of his last novels, *A Raw Youth* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, was forged, Dostoyevsky consistently held up the Russian peasant as a moral ideal to which the intellectual might aspire. His 'populism', though, had little in common with that political idealisation of the 'socialist instincts' of the Russian people characteristic of members of the progressive intelligentsia such as Alexander Herzen and the Russian *narodniki* (populists). Instead, Dostoyevsky stressed the etymological link

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between the Russian words for 'peasant' (*krest'yanin*) and 'christian' (*khristianin*), and held that the simple Russian man preserved in his moral make-up, practices and institutions those elements of religiosity, native culture and communal life from which the Russian intellectual classes had been alienated by their assimilation of western reason, civilisation, and political thought. The westernised intellectual, for all his learning and material advantages, was a spiritual vagabond, denied real understanding by those very processes of understanding he had chosen to adopt. In this sense, as in many others, Dostoyevsky was in agreement with the Slavophiles, who in the great debates of the 1840s with their opponents the Westernisers had rejected the attempts of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great to force Russia into a Western European mould and had advocated a specifically religious culture and a uniquely Slavonic line of historical development. Dostoyevsky's views on the narrowness of Western man and the superiority of the apparently naive and unsophisticated Russian 'type' found their most compelling expression in his speech at the unveiling of a memorial in Moscow to the great Russian poet, A.S. Pushkin, in June 1880. The Pushkin Speech, like *The Brothers Karamazov* to which it is indissolubly linked, crowned a lifetime's reflection and allowed Dostoyevsky to reaffirm his admiration for Pushkin, whom he regarded as the most perfect embodiment of Russian national consciousness. In it he chided Russia's uprooted intellectuals for their spiritual bankruptcy and alienation from the living source of wisdom in the Russian people. It was to precisely this alienation that all Russia's contemporary ills, in particular the spread of socialism and revolution and the enmity between social classes, could be ascribed. Dostoyevsky urged the Russian westernised intellectual to 'humble himself' and to merge with the Russian people in the name of universalism and brotherhood.

These ideas may be traced back to Dostoyevsky's articles in *Vremya* in the 1860s and his advocacy, along with A.A. Grigoryev, of a 'cult of the soil' (*pochvennichestvo*). They also underlie his sustained polemic with Chernyshevsky and the other 'men of the 1860s' over the essential nature of man.

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Following the death of Nicholas I in 1855, Russian intellectual life was reinvigorated after the enforced intellectual conformity and passivity of the old regime. A new generation of social and political thinkers, led by Chernyshevsky, impatiently brushed aside the naive and vapid idealism of their 'fathers', the generation of the 1840s, and proclaimed a new and radical realism that sought to approach man and the moral, social, political, and aesthetic problems confronting him in a rigidly rational and 'scientific' manner. In works such as *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy* (1860) and his novel *What is to be Done?* (1863), Chernyshevsky rejected metaphysics and affirmed that man is governed by material needs and the rational desire to gratify these. A rational social order was thus one which allowed the greatest number to achieve the most self-interest. Dostoyevsky could not accept Chernyshevsky's rejection of dualism in human nature or his insistence that all man's actions could be rationally deduced from natural self-interest. Chernyshevsky's doctrine of 'rational egoism' threatened to reduce man to a mere series of conditioned reflexes and chemical reactions. His views did not allow for the presence of the metaphysical in nature or in man and they thus precluded the salvation which, in Dostoyevsky's view, only a religious consciousness could offer.

Dostoyevsky's ideas on human nature, on the bankruptcy of reason and materialism, on the superiority of the Russian people and the need for a specifically religious culture were not confined to his journalistic writings. The series of great novels which he began soon after his return from Siberia confirmed his religious rebirth. In *Notes from Underground* (1864) he sought to expose the absurdity of rational egoism by affirming the crucial role of the irrational as a spring of human behaviour. His protagonist, the Underground Man, may be seen as the first Existentialist hero in his vigorous attempts to preserve moral freedom and personal choice in the face of the threats posed by reason, contingency and self-interest. He deliberately acts against his own self-interest, spurning both reason and the laws of nature, in order to assert his independence. Dostoyevsky recognised that there was a danger too in such wilful rebellion,

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and his hero's revolt subsides into egoism, petty petulance and Hamlet-like inertia as he tries to avoid defining himself through his actions. We leave him simpering in his underground world, a valid reproach to Chernyshevsky's view of a rational humanity, but possessed of a sterile freedom which he cannot exercise. Dostoyevsky did not intend to offer his hero or the underground as worthy alternatives to reason. Instead he hoped to show his hero's recognition of the need for Christ, but this design was frustrated by the censor. 'That swine of a censor.' Dostoyevsky wrote to his brother in March 1864. 'The passages where I jeered at everything and sometimes blasphemed *for form's sake* he let through, but he suppressed the place where from all this I deduced the need for faith and Christ' (XXVIII/2, 73).

The need for faith and Christ is something which the hero of Dostoyevsky's next novel, *Crime and Punishment* (1866), also comes to recognise. Raskolnikov is a young student imbued with the materialism of the 1860s, who attempts to devise a rational, utilitarian morality that will justify the murder of a useless old pawnbroker who feeds off the misfortunes of others. Through his crime and the doubts that assail him afterwards Raskolnikov is forced to the realisation that a moral system grounded only in man's intellect and notions of utility is more likely to lead to violence, disintegration and despair than to a harmonious social order. He discovers a sense of true morality in the hidden irrational depths of his soul as he strives to come to terms with his actions. Under the influence of the meek, Christian prostitute, Sonya, he embarks upon the path of suffering which will lead to his salvation.

The Idiot (1868) affords Dostoyevsky the possibility of bringing his ideal of 'the positively good man' into conflict with a society riddled with the vices of a godless age, where money, materialism, egoism and calculation effectively disallow all true brotherhood and harmony. Prince Myshkin is presented as a Christ-like figure adrift in an apocalyptic setting, his trust in beauty, love and compassion sadly out of place in a nineteenth-century Babylon. If Dostoyevsky's sense of artistic truth insisted that his hero must fail, then this was in no way

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to detract from the validity of the ideals he embodied. The 'positively good man' is reduced to idiocy, but it is the world that is rotten, not he.

This vision of a world rotten to the core and inhabited by demons forms the heart of *The Devils* (1871–2), Dostoyevsky's most stridently anti-nihilist novel. The work's bitter parody of socialism and political revolutionaries is only one aspect of its call for a return to spiritual values. Its central character, Stavrogin, represents the void left when man's soul has been consumed by the false Western values of egoism, artificiality and atheism. Like the Underground Man, he is the victim of a craving for personal freedom that leaves him hopelessly alienated and incapable of any act apart from suicide. Crushed by the burden of freedom without moral responsibility, he takes his own life in a moment of profound ennui. Only the old Westerniser, Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, finds salvation by abandoning his past and discovering the Russian people.

The moral collapse of a contemporary society which has abandoned God in favour of the material and intellectual gifts of Western civilisation is explored in *A Raw Youth* (1875) through the metaphor of a disintegrating, 'haphazard' family, whose members are no longer united by bonds of love. The illegitimate Arkady Dolgoruky's quest for his father becomes a quest for wholeness and 'harmony' (*blagoobraziye*) in the face of contemporary 'chaos' (*bezobraziye*). The fact that he finds this ideal not in his natural father, the Westernised and ultimately empty Versilov, but in the man who has raised him since childhood, the simple Russian peasant Makar Dolgoruky, effectively illustrates the central tenets of Dostoyevsky's moral vision.

Dostoyevsky's major novels before *The Brothers Karamazov* thus reveal his profound sense of the discordant, fragmented and unstable nature of contemporary reality and his recognition of the need for new religious harmonies to replace the delusive rational harmonies of Western civilisation. His character Lebedev in *The Idiot* had expressed this idea perfectly when he spoke of contemporary society's lack of 'a binding idea',

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some core of moral certainty around which man's life could coalesce. In the notebooks for *A Raw Youth* Dostoyevsky had confirmed Lebedev's diagnosis: 'There are no bases to our society ... One colossal quake and the whole lot will come to an end, collapse, and be negated as though it had never existed. And this is not just outwardly true... but inwardly, morally so' (XVI, 329). It was against this background of perceived cultural collapse that Dostoyevsky wrote *The Brothers Karamazov* as an affirmation of man's need for God. The work was conceived by its author as nothing less than a 'civic deed', transcending mimetic art and the mere exposure of reality and devoted to the complete rout of those forces which had brought humanity to the verge of catastrophe. As he remarked after his Pushkin Speech in June 1880: 'The main thing about me they don't understand. They extol me for not being satisfied with the present political state of our country, but they don't see that I am showing them the way to the church' (cited in Magarshack, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. xxiii).

By the early 1870s Dostoyevsky's personal and social circumstances had also changed. His second marriage to Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, the young stenographer who had helped him meet the deadline for his novel, *The Gambler* (1866), had inaugurated a period of relative tranquillity, financial stability and domestic harmony which endured until his death. After their return from Europe in 1871 the Dostoyevskys had taken an apartment in St Petersburg and, from 1872, a summer house in the small town of Staraya Russa, where the writer was able to work without distraction. Staraya Russa was to serve as a model for the town of Skotoprigonyevsk in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Both officially and unofficially, Dostoyevsky's stature in Russia was now very considerable. To his readers, and to the younger generation in particular, he was a political martyr, an ex-political prisoner, whose novels, despite their increasingly anti-radical stance, had touched the nerve of Russian life, championed the ordinary Russian, and probed the hidden restlessness and moral aspirations of contemporary man. To many he was no less than a prophet, and his daily

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