

*Modern Critical Views*

FYODOR  
DOSTOEVSKY

Edited and with an Introduction by  
HAROLD BLOOM



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Harold Bloom

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## Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism available in English upon the fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Joyce Banerjee, Henry Finder, and Paul Barickman for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction offers brief readings of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, emphasizing both the strengths and the limitations of Dostoevsky's apocalyptic and transcendental stance as a novelist. Mikhail Bakhtin, legendary hero of Russian Formalist criticism, begins the chronological sequence with an analysis of how the apparently monological discourses of *Poor Folks* and *The Double* incorporate a debate with other voices.

Dostoevsky's best biographer, Joseph Frank, contextualizes *Notes from Underground* as a satire upon the Russian intelligentsia contemporary with Dostoevsky himself. *Crime and Punishment* is read by Donald Fanger as Raskolnikov's phantasmagoria, after which Gary S. Morson determines the genre of *The Diary of a Writer* as a kind of mixture of sensibility and the sublime, a personal apocalypse or "threshold art."

Dostoevsky's progression from his pre-exile *White Nights* to his post-exile *Notes from Underground* is chronicled by Michael Holquist as a gradual rejection of basing identity upon history. More complexly, Robert L. Belknap corrects the traditional misreading that Dostoevsky shares the ideas either of Ivan Karamazov or of Ivan's Grand Inquisitor, rather than the redeeming version of Father Zosima.

A. D. Nuttall, skeptically addressing himself to *Crime and Punishment*, sketches a possible psychological reduction of Raskolnikov's obscure motivations. In an astute psychoanalytical reading, Elizabeth Dalton traces patterns appropriate to epilepsy in *The Idiot* and its hero, Prince Myshkin. A related exegesis by Robert L. Jackson investigates the psychosexuality of gambling

in the parodistic *The Gambler*, which inverts Christian cosmology, and hope for the Resurrection.

Zosima, spiritual ideal of *The Brothers Karamazov*, is analyzed by Sergei Hackel as a dialectical interplay of vision and evasion. An imaginative juxtaposition of Dostoevsky's notebooks and *The Possessed* is carried through by John Jones, who finds in Stavrogin the uncanny epitome of this visionary and "unsteady" novel, and so concludes our book in a properly Dostoevskian key.

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## Introduction

### I

Rereading *Crime and Punishment*, I am haunted suddenly by a recollection of my worst experience as a teacher. Back in 1955, an outcast instructor in the then New Critical, Neo-Christian Yale English Department dominated by acolytes of the churchwardenly T. S. Eliot, I was compelled to teach *Crime and Punishment* in a freshman course to a motley collection of Yale legacies masquerading as students. Wearied of their response to Dostoevsky as so much more Eliotic Original Sin, I endeavored to cheer myself up (if not them) by reading aloud in class S. J. Perelman's sublime parody "A Farewell to Omsk," fragments of which are always with me, such as the highly Dostoevskian portrayal of the tobacconist Pyotr Pyotr vitch:

"Good afternoon, Afya Afyakiévitch!" replied the shopkeeper warmly. He was the son of a former notary public attached to the household of Prince Grashkin and gave himself no few airs in consequence. Whilst speaking it was his habit to extract a greasy barometer from his waistcoat and consult it importantly, a trick he had learned from the Prince's barber. On seeing Afya Afyakiévitch he skipped about nimbly, dusted off the counter, gave one of his numerous offspring a box on the ear, drank a cup of tea, and on the whole behaved like a man of the world who has affairs of moment occupying him.

Unfortunately, my class did not think this funny, and did not even enjoy the marvelous close of Perelman's sketch:

"Don't take any flannel kopecks," said Afya gloomily. He dislodged a piece of horse-radish from his tie, shied it at a passing Nihilist, and slid forward into the fresh loam.



Dostoevsky had his own mode of humor, but he might not have appreciated Perelman either. *Crime and Punishment* is less apocalyptic than *The Brothers Karamazov*, but it is apocalyptic enough. It is also tendentious in the extreme, which is the point of Perelman's parody, but Dostoevsky is so great a tragedian that this does not matter. Raskolnikov is a powerful representation of the will demonized by its own strength, while Svidrigaylov is beyond that and stands on the border of a convincing phantasmagoria. Until the unfortunate epilogue, no other narrative fiction drives itself onwards with the remorseless strength of *Crime and Punishment*, truly a shot out of hell and into hell again. To have written a naturalistic novel that reads like a continuous nightmare is Dostoevsky's unique achievement.

Raskolnikov never does repent and change, unless we believe the epilogue, in which Dostoevsky himself scarcely believed. Despair causes his surrender to Porfiry, but even his despair never matches the fierce ecstasy he has achieved in violating all limits. He breaks what can be broken, and yet does not break himself. He cannot be broken, not because he has found any truth, objective or psychological, but because he has known, however momentarily, the nihilistic abyss, a Gnostic freedom of what is beyond our sense of being creatures in God's creation. Konstantin Mochulsky is surely right to emphasize that Raskolnikov never comes to believe in redemption, never rejects his theory of strength and power. His surrender, as Mochulsky says, "is not a sign of penitence but of pusillanimity." We end up with a pre-Christian tragic hero, ruined by blind fate, at least in his own vision. But this is about as unattractive as a tragic hero can be, because Raskolnikov comes too late in cultural history to seem a Prometheus rather than a bookish intellectual. In a Christian context, Prometheus assimilates to Satan, and Raskolnikov's pride begins to seem too Satanic for tragedy.

Raskolnikov hardly persuades us on the level of Dostoevsky's Christian polemic, but psychologically he is fearsomely persuasive. Power for Raskolnikov can be defined as the ability to kill someone else, anyone at all, rather than oneself. I meet Raskolnikov daily, though generally not in so extreme a form, in many young contemporaries who constitute what I would call the School of Resentment. Their wounded narcissism, turned against the self, might make them poets or critics; turned outward, against others, it makes them eminent unrest-inducers. Raskolnikov does not move our sympathy *for him*, but he impresses us with his uncompromising intensity.

Svidrigaylov may have been intended as Raskolnikov's foil, but he got away from Dostoevsky, and runs off with the book, even as old Karamazov nearly steals the greater work away from the extraordinary Dmitri. Raskolnikov is too pure a Promethean or devil to be interested in desire, unless

the object of desire be metaphysical freedom and power. He is a kind of ascetic Gnostic, while Svidrigaylov is a libertine Gnostic, attempting to liberate the sparks upward. If Raskolnikov portrays the madness of the Promethean will, then Svidrigaylov is beyond the will, as he is beyond the still-religious affirmations of atheism. He lives (if that can be the right word) a negativity that Raskolnikov is too much himself to attain. Raskolnikov killed for his own sake, he tells Sonia, to test his own strength. Svidrigaylov is light years beyond that, on the way downwards and outwards into the abyss, his foremother and forefather.

The best of all murder stories, *Crime and Punishment* seems to me beyond praise and beyond affection. Dostoevsky doubtless would impress me even more than he does already if I could read Russian, but I would not like him any better. A vicious obscurantism inheres in the four great narratives, including *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*, and it darkens *Crime and Punishment*. Only *The Brothers Karamazov* transcends Dostoevsky's hateful ideology, because the Karamazovs sweep past the truths that the novelist continues to shout at us. Tolstoy did not think that Dostoevsky's final and apocalyptic novel was one of the summits of the genre, but then he liked to think of Dostoevsky as the Russian Harriet Beecher Stowe, and would have wanted old Karamazov to have resembled Simon Legree.

What seems to me strongest in Dostoevsky is the control of visionary horror he shares with Blake, an imaginative prophet with whom he has absolutely nothing else in common. No one who has read *Crime and Punishment* ever can forget Raskolnikov's murder of poor Lizaveta:

There in the middle of the floor, with a big bundle in her arms, stood Lizaveta, as white as a sheet, gazing in frozen horror at her murdered sister and apparently without the strength to cry out. When she saw him run in, she trembled like a leaf and her face twitched spasmodically; she raised her hand as if to cover her mouth, but no scream came and she backed slowly away from him towards the corner, with her eyes on him in a fixed stare, but still without a sound, as though she had no breath left to cry out. He flung himself forward with the axe; her lips writhed pitifully, like those of a young child when it is just beginning to be frightened and stands ready to scream, with its eyes fixed on the object of its fear. The wretched Lizaveta was so simple, brow-beaten, and utterly terrified that she did not even put up her arms to protect her face, natural and almost inevitable as the gesture would have been at this moment when the axe was brandished

immediately above it. She only raised her free left hand a little and slowly stretched it out towards him as though she were trying to push him away. The blow fell on her skull, splitting it open from the top of the forehead almost to the crown of the head, and felling her instantly. Raskolnikov, completely beside himself, snatched up her bundle, threw it down again, and ran to the entrance.

Nothing could be more painfully effective than: “She only raised her free left hand a little and slowly stretched it out towards him as though she were trying to push him away.” We think of the horrible dream in which Raskolnikov sees a poor, lean, old mare beaten to death with a crowbar, and we may reflect upon Nietzsche’s darkest insights: that pain creates memory, so that the pain is the meaning, and meaning is therefore painful. Dostoevsky was a great visionary and an exuberant storyteller, but there is something paradoxically nihilistic in his narrative visions. The sublime mode asks us to give up easier pleasures for more difficult pleasures, which is altogether an aesthetic request. Dostoevsky belongs not to the sublime genre, but to the harsher perspectives of the apocalyptic. He insists that we accept pains that transcend aesthetic limits. His authority at apocalypse is beyond question, but such authority also has its own aesthetic limits.

## II

For a critic who cannot read Russian, *The Brothers Karamazov* needs considerable mediation, more perhaps than *War and Peace* or *Fathers and Sons*. Much of this mediation is provided by Victor Terras, in his admirable commentary *A Karamazov Companion*, to which I am indebted here.

Dostoevsky’s final novel, completed only two months before his death, when he was nine months short of sixty, *The Brothers Karamazov* was intended as Dostoevsky’s apocalypse. Its genre might best be called Scripture rather than novel or tragedy, saga or chronicle. Dostoevsky’s scope is from Genesis to Revelation, with the Book of Job and the Gospel of John as the centers. Old Karamazov is a kind of Adam, dreadfully vital and vitalistically dreadful. His four sons resist allegorical reduction, but William Blake would have interpreted them as being his Four Zoas or living principles of fallen man, with Ivan as Urizen, Dmitri as Luvah, Alyosha as Los, and the bastard Smerdyakov as a very debased Tharmas. On the model of this rather Hermetic mythology, Ivan is excessively dominated by the anxieties of the skeptical and analytic intellect, while Dmitri is culpable for “reasoning from the loins in the unreal forms of Beulah’s night” and so is a victim of his own overly

sensual affective nature. The image of imaginative and spiritual salvation, Alyosha, is thus seen as the true Christian visionary, while the natural—all-too-natural—Smerdyakov represents the drives or instincts turned murderously against the father and against the self.

That there may be affinities between English Blake and Great Russian Dostoevsky is itself surprising and ought not to be magnified, since the differences between the two seers are far more serious than any parallels in mythic projection. Despite his extraordinary powers of characterization and representation, the Dostoevsky of *Karamazov* is essentially an obscurantist, and Blake would have judged him to have been a greatly exalted version of his own Smerdyakov. Tolstoy entertained outrageous moralizations about the proper modes and uses for literature, but, compared to the author of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Tolstoy will seem an Enlightened rationalist to a Western reader at the present time. Perhaps that is only to say that Dostoevsky is less universal than Tolstoy in spirit, less the Russian Homer and more the Russian Dante.

*The Brothers Karamazov* is frequently an outrageous narrative and evidently has strong parodistic elements. Its narrator is faceless; John Jones calls him "a crowd in trousers." His story is told with a sly artlessness, which suits a novel whose burden is that we are all sinful, for even holy Russia swarms with sin, with the universal desire, conscious and unconscious, to murder the father. Old Karamazov is a monster, but a heroic vitalist, fierce in his drive for women and for drink. Dostoevsky evidently did not much care for Ivan either, and no one could care for Smerdyakov. Yet all the Karamazovs burn with psychic energy, all are true sons of that terrible but exuberant father. Freud's essay "Dostoyevski and Parricide" (1928) should be supplemented by his *Totem and Taboo*, because the violent tyrant-father murdered by his sons in the Primal History Scene is akin to old Karamazov, who also wishes to appropriate all the women for himself.

Old Karamazov is actually just fifty-five, though ancient in debauchery. He could be judged a Falstaffian figure, not as Shakespeare wrote Falstaff, but as moralizing critics too frequently view the fat knight, forgetting his supreme wit, his joy in play, and his masterful insights into reality. If Falstaff had continued the decline we observe in *Henry IV, Part 2*, then he might have achieved the rancid vitality of the father of the Karamazovs. Fyodor Pavlovich's peculiar vice however is non-Falstaffian. Falstaff after all is not a father, despite his longing to make Hal his son. Old Karamazov is primarily a father, the parody indeed of a bad father, almost the Freudian primitive father of *Totem and Taboo*. Still, this buffoon and insane sensualist is a fool in a complex way, almost a Shakespearean fool, seeing through all impostures, his own included. Fyodor Pavlovich lies to keep in practice, but his lies

generally work to expose more truth. He lives to considerable purpose, doubtless despite himself. The largest purpose, in one of Dostoevsky's terrible ironies, is to be the inevitable victim of patricide, of his four sons' revenge for their abused mothers.

The image of the father, for the reactionary Dostoevsky, is ultimately also the image of the Czar and of God. Why then did Dostoevsky risk the ghastly Fyodor Pavlovich as his testament's vision of the father? I can only surmise that Dostoevsky's motivation was Jobean. If Old Karamazov is to be our universal father, then by identifying with Dmitri, or Ivan, or Alyosha (no one identifies with Smerdyakov!), we assume their Jobean situation. If your faith can survive the torment of seeing the image of paternal authority in Karamazov, then you are as justified as Job. Reversing Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Dostoevsky persuades us that if we haven't had a bad enough father, then it is necessary to invent one. Old Karamazov is an ancestor-demon rather than an ancestor-god, a darkness visible rather than a luminous shadow. You do not mourn his murder, but as a reader you certainly miss him when he is gone. Nor can you hate him the way you despise the hideous Rakitin. Again, I admire John Jones's emphasis:

The old man's complicity in his own murder gets carried by the book's master metaphor. His house stinks. His life stinks. Yet his mystic complicity never quite hardens into the judgment that he deserves to die. His nature is too broad to allow that.

By "broad" Jones means simply just too alive to deserve to die, which is what I myself would judge. So rammed with life is old Karamazov that his murder is a sin against life, life depraved and corrupt, yet fierce life, life refusing death. Even Dmitri falls short of his father's force of desire. Strangely like Blake again, Dostoevsky proclaims that everything that lives is holy, though he does not share Blake's conviction that nothing or no one is holier than anything or anyone else.

In his *Notebooks*, Dostoevsky insisted that "we are all, to the last man, Fyodor Pavloviches," because in a new, original form "we are all nihilists." A reader, but for the intercessions of his superego, might like to find himself in Falstaff, but hardly in Fyodor Pavlovich. Yet the honest reader should, and does, and no one wants to be murdered. As an apocalypse, *The Brothers Karamazov* forces identification upon one. The father in each male among us is compelled to some uncomfortable recognition in Old Karamazov; the son in each can choose among the three attractive brothers (Zosima is hardly a possibility). It cannot be said that Dostoevsky does as well with women;

Grushenka and Katerina Ivanovna may divide male fantasy between them, but that is all. Dostoevsky does not match Tolstoy as a portrayer of women, let alone Shakespeare.

Much of the permanent fascination of *The Brothers Karamazov* invests itself in the extraordinary differences between Dmitri and Ivan, and in Ivan's two phantasmagorias, his "poem" of the Grand Inquisitor and his mad confrontation with the Devil. Dmitri, though he yields us no phantasmagorias, is more endless to meditation than his half-brother, Ivan. Dostoevsky evidently saw Dmitri as the archetypal Great Russian: undisciplined, human—all-too-human, lustful, capable of all extremes, but a man of deep feeling and compassion, and an intuitive genius, a poet of action, an authentic comedian of the spirit, and potentially a Christian. Ivan is his father's son in a darker sense; turned inward, his ravening intellect destroys a sense of other selves, and his perpetually augmenting inner self threatens every value that Dostoevsky seeks to rescue. If Dmitri is the exemplary Russian, then Ivan is the Western intellectual consciousness uneasily inhabiting the Russian soul, with murderous consequences that work themselves through in his parody, Smerdyakov.

The legend of the Grand Inquisitor has achieved a fame that transcends *The Brothers Karamazov* as a whole, hardly a result Dostoevsky could have endured, partly because Ivan's parable tells us nothing about Dmitri, who is the authentic center of the novel, and partly because, out of context, Ivan's prose poem can be mistaken for Dostoevsky's, which is *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan's legend is one that Dostoevsky rejects, and yet Ivan also, like Old Karamazov, is Dostoevsky, even if Dmitri is more of Dostoevsky. The Grand Inquisitor stamps out human freedom because humans are too weak to endure their own freedom. If Dostoevsky really intended Zosima to be his answer to the Inquisitor, then he erred badly. Zosima, to an American ear anyway, is a muddle, and his interpretation of the Book of Job is the weakest failure in the history of theodicy. What is least acceptable about the Book of Job, its tacked-on conclusion in which God gives Job a perfect new set of sons and daughters, every bit as good as the old, is saluted by Zosima as the height of holy wisdom. It is difficult to answer the Grand Inquisitor with such sublime idiocy.

But then the Grand Inquisitor speaks a sublime idiocy, despite the grand reputation that the Legend has garnered as an excerpt. Dostoevsky is careful to distance himself and us, with the highest irony, from Ivan's dubious rhetoric. The Inquisitor rants on for too long, and just does not frighten us enough; he is more Gothic than we can accept, just as Ivan's Devil is too much a confused projection of Ivan. To be effective, the legend of the Inqui-

sitor should have been composed and told by Dmitri, but then *The Brothers Karamazov* would have been a different and even stronger novel.

Freud, for polemical and tendentious reasons, overrated *The Brothers Karamazov*, ranking it first among all novels ever written, close to Shakespeare in eminence, and finding the rather lurid legend of the Grand Inquisitor to be a peak of world literature. That latter judgment is clearly mistaken; the status of the novel among all novels whatsoever is perhaps a touch problematic. The book's enormous gusto is unquestionable; the Karamazov family, father and sons, sometimes seems less an image of life, a mimesis, and more a super-mimesis, an evocation of a more abundant life than representation ought to be able to portray. There cannot be a more intense consciousness than that of Dmitri in a novel; only a few figures elsewhere can match him. Doubtless he speaks for what Dostoevsky could not repress in himself: "If they drive God from the earth, we shall shelter Him underground." If you wish to read "God" there as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and Jesus, you are justified; you follow Dostoevsky's intention. I am willing to read "God," here and elsewhere, as the desire for the transcendental and extraordinary, or Dmitri's and Dostoevsky's desire for the completion of what was already transcendental and extraordinary in themselves.

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN

*The Hero's Monologic Discourse  
and Narrational Discourse  
in Dostoevsky's Early Novels*

Dostoevsky began with the epistolary form, a type of discourse in which the speech of the letter-writer refracts the anticipated speech of the recipient. Apropos of *Poor Folk*, he writes to his brother:

They [the public and the critics—M. B.] have become accustomed to seeing the author's mug in everything; I didn't show mine. And it doesn't even occur to them that Devushkin is speaking, and not I, and that Devushkin cannot speak in any other way. They find the novel long-winded, but there is not a superfluous word in it.

(Letter of February 1, 1846)

In this novel the main characters, Makar Devushkin and Varenka Dobroselova, do the speaking; the author merely distributes their words: his intentions are refracted in the words of the hero and the heroine. The epistolary form is a variant of the *Ich-Erzählung* (first-person narrative). Discourse in this genre is oriented on the anticipated reactions of an auditor (*double-voiced discourse*), and in the majority of cases it acts as the compositional surrogate of the author's voice, which is absent here (*the unidirectional variant* of double-voiced discourse). We shall see that the author's conception is very subtly and carefully refracted in the words of the hero-narrators, although the entire work is filled with both obvious and hidden parodies, with both obvious and hidden (authorial) polemics.

But for the present we are interested in examining Makar Devushkin's speech only as the monologic utterance of a hero, and not as the speech of



a narrator in an *Ich-Erzählung*, a function which it in fact performs here, since there are no other speakers besides the heroes. The speech of any narrator, employed by the author for the realization of his artistic plan, itself belongs to some specific type of discourse, apart from that type which is determined by its function as narration. Of what type is Devushkin's monologic utterance?

The epistolary form in and of itself does not predetermine the type of discourse which will be found in it. In general this form allows for broad verbal possibilities, but it is most suited to the *active type* of double-voiced discourse, which reflects *the speech act of another person*. A characteristic feature of the letter form is the writer's acute awareness of his interlocutor, the addressee to whom it is directed. The letter, like a line of dialogue, is addressed to a specific person, and it takes into account his possible reactions, his possible reply. It can do this more, or less, intensively. In Dostoevsky's work this attention to the absent interlocutor has an extremely intensive character.

In his first work Dostoevsky develops a style of speech, characteristic of his entire oeuvre, which is determined by the intense anticipation of the other person's speech act. The significance of this style in his subsequent work is enormous: the most important confessional self-revelations of his heroes are permeated by a hypersensitivity to the anticipated speech acts of others about them and to others' reactions to their own words about themselves. Not only the tone and style, but also the internal conceptual structure of these self-revelations is determined by the anticipation of another person's speech, from the reservations and loopholes which stem from Golyadkin's easily offended nature to the ethical and metaphysical loopholes of Ivan Karamazov. The "servile" variant of this style began to develop in *Poor Folk*—speech which seems to cringe with timidity and shame at the awareness of another's possible response, yet contains a stifled cry of defiance.

This self-conscious awareness is manifested above all in the halting speech and the reservations which interrupt it that are characteristic of this style.

I live in the kitchen, or, more correctly speaking, here next to the kitchen is a little room (and I would like to point out that our kitchen is clean and bright, a very good one), a little nook, a humble little corner . . . that is, to put it even better, the kitchen is large, with three windows, and along one wall there is a partition, so it is as if there were another room, a supernumerary one; it is all roomy and convenient, and there is a window, and it is all—in a word, it is convenient. Well, so, this is my little corner. Well now, my dear, don't think that there is anything strange here,