

Dostoevsky was the first writer to discover that the novel could be an instrument of discovery—even a kind of prophecy. This is to say that he discovered the novel as a mode of poetry—and in a poem, form and content cannot be separated: the way in which something is said is as much constitutive of the meaning as is the content. Dostoevsky once wrote that for the novelist, the germ, the insight, came first—and one might call that the poem. Then there was the work of constructing the work of art itself, which one might call the novel. Yet the novelist who is also a poet views his potential work with the eyes of his entire culture; there is no way for a writer to write like Homer, say, or Dante in our time—or in Dostoevsky’s. In his day (1820-1880), modernity was beginning to criticize itself. Russia had been realizing all during the 18th century the effects of Peter the Great’s importation of European modes and styles; Westernizers and Slavophiles had split the Russian psyche; peasants were ever more separated from the upper classes, who had been almost completely Europeanized. Industrial progress was making cities like St. Petersburg into something Dostoevsky characterized as “fantastic.” Materialism and utilitarianism were defeating the old religious views of sobornost. Writers were caught between the censorship of the government on the right and the boycott by critics on the left. The medium just coming into serious usage was the novel—though it was viewed primarily as a narrative concerned with mundane events—domestic or political life, or the growth of a soul. When a turbulent thinker with the kind of heritage Dostoevsky possessed adopted the novel as his vantage point, the results were striking. He had the vision of a poet; but the artistic medium he had to adopt provided not simply a mechanical container for that vision so much as an integral part of it. Dostoevsky once wrote that for the writer, the germ, the insight came first—and one might call that the poem. Then there was the work of constructing the work of art itself, which one might call the novel. We might diagram his procedure in this complicated process in the following way:

First, discuss the poetic vision: (Maritain’s view)

But the poet is never simply looking into being itself. He sees something in the light of eternity, but he sees with the eyes of his people; and he possesses their memory, their attachments, their “myth.”

Then he must shape what he has seen in terms of an artistic structure (a medium—epic poem, drama, lyric, novel) So that we have something like the following:

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Dostoevsky’s own personal bent | gloomy, apocalyptic, questing for faith |
| His heritage | Holy Russia, backward Russia—threatened by |
| | Western modernity |
| The novel | Domestic life; bildungsroman; Capitalism,, utilitarianism, “liberalism,” socialism, urbanization; secularization; marginalization of the feminine; child abandonment; |

The material he worked with: human suffering (tragic); but his own Quixote-like quest for faith (comic); his concern for Russia, her past and future – (epic); his deeply religious soul (ikonic). Such diverse currents were bound to give his writing a grotesque slant. Small wonder people

have found him strange and—unless they simplify his work considerably—unpalatable.

Turgenev said of him “The most evil Christian I ever knew.”

Einstein: “I learned more from him than from any other thinker.”

Berdyayev: “His genius is enough to justify the existence of the Russian people.”

Nabokov:

etc.

But most of the quotations attributed to Dostoevsky himself are really remarks made by his characters. “Without a belief in God all things are permissible.” “Love a man even in his sin, for that is the most perfect love.” “Beauty will save the world.” “If I had to choose between Christ and truth, I would choose Christ.”

Dostoevsky had in supreme measure the ability to allow his characters freedom: he saw the different tendencies in nineteenth century Russian life and allowed them to speak. He was in an abundant degree polyphonic rather than monological. And though he was himself a thinker (as we know from his writing for journals, his *Diary of a Writer*, his letters) nonetheless, in his writing, he allowed the form—the good of the work—to take over.

Now let me speak for a moment about what my approach to *The Brothers Karamazov* will be:

When I began teaching a course in the Russian novel at TCU in 1953, I did so as a passionate New Critic, fresh from Vanderbilt, where I had studied with the Fugitive-Agrarians and became committed to poetry not as an aesthetic phenomenon or as a vehicle for other learning, but as a means to knowledge in itself. Ransom, Tate, and Davidson, along with the modernists Eliot and Pound and Joyce gave me my critical impetus. All of these were concerned with the relation of poetry to a culture. I had just published my first book—on the Fugitive group of poets—and saw the relationship between the nineteenth century Russian writers and the Southerners and presented several papers at conferences on the topic. I was already committed to the study of poetry as formed knowledge: an image, as Tate puts it, of “man in action” and I added “in a world that has meaning.” Style and technique were subordinate to the questions of form: which might be called the incarnation of insight, so that every part of a work, every element fits its role in the topography of the whole.

It seemed to me that English Departments had made a fearful mistake in limiting themselves to only writing that had been done in English: that meant eliminating Homer and Aeschylus, Virgil and Dante, among others, from their curriculum: and yet their disciplines was not a particular language but literature, as that of philosophy and politics are not limited by a particular language. That is, one does not study simply English philosophy in the English language, but reads the entire philosophical tradition—in translation wherever necessary. We hope each of you will read either French or German, Latin or Greek. But we hope you will not be limited in your reading to only those texts you can read in the original.

The teaching of great literature as philology had limited the knowledge of the classics to an elite; in a university perhaps six or seven students were capable of reading Sophocles in the original, whereas in actuality, it seemed to me, the whole student body should read *Oedipus Rex*

in translation—and then quite a few of them should go on to study the Greek language. But the main purpose of education is not simply to be able to discern the word- by- word “meaning” of the original; the main purpose should be to have the experience of what it is that lies behind the words—the very life of an experience. And, as Walter Benjamin writes, in his splendid essay “On Translation”

And, as I discovered, at least to my own satisfaction, form translates. All of what Ezra Pound calls *opsis* translates: the devices of sight: bodily movements, actions, images, symbols; Even tone does, in the hands of a good translator. What is missed is *melos*, the sound of the language—and all the “insider” shades of meaning that go with familiarity with a language. Such words as cheerful, gay, happy, glad, delighted, joyful—have to depend on a good translator to convey their subtle shades of meaning. But, as I reasoned, far better to go by the choices of someone who has made that particular literature his life work, as I did not intend to do. My calling is not Russian literature, or even Dostoevsky as a Russian writer—not even the novel, but a much larger category, the reality conveyed by significant literature, which I follow Aristotle in calling poetry and dividing into four large kinds: tragedy, comedy, epic, lyric. (The novel is actually a medium, according to my system, not a genre, as is drama, and in our own day, film.) What is exciting in the study of literature is to view the great periods, when vision coincides with the medium, as in 5th century Athens and 16th century England drama and a heightened vision of the human came together—as in 14th and 15th century Italy, 19th century Germany, Russia, and New England; 20th century Ireland and the American South; —and in the latter 20th century Latin America and the Caribbean.

[Since arriving at UD forty years ago, I have come to view 19th c Russian literature, along with 20th c Southern literature, as postmodernist rather than modernist. LIST THE CHARACTERISTICS. Chiefly in its incorporation of the folk into the concerns of the poem, its reliance on polyphony, on an oral tradition; its adoption of tale telling; its turn away from elitism, its non referential style, its desertion of irony as a dominant mode, its reincorporation of the supernatural into its domain. GET CHARACTERISTICS OF POSTMODERNISM.]

The novel we are studying was published the same year its author died (1880): it marks in many ways the culmination of his achievement: the high point of his vision: that toward which he had been struggling for most of his life. Let’s take a brief look at the major outlines of that life and at the Russia that Dostoevsky loved with such fervor.

Trace his life
then the situation of Russia
Then his writing career

Go over:
Notes from Underground

“Dream of a Ridiculous Man”

Crime and Punishment

The Idiot

The Possessed

The Brothers Karamazov

The Brothers Karamazov is a complicated novel; but rather than talking about it, I had rather we would attempt to go through it together—at least at the beginning. But when one reads a novel, one has to be on the lookout for signs: its title, its epigraph; its foreword; and, above all, its opening chapter and beginning sentence.

The Brothers Karamazov: not a single protagonist, then; about a family; about brothers. These are four brothers of three mothers and one father: Dmitri, who is 27 when the novel begins, the son of Fyodor Karamazov and his first wife Adelaide Ivanovna (the romantic who ran away with a seminarian and starved to death in a garret); Ivan, 25, and Alyosha, 20, the sons of the mad girl, Sophia, and Fyodor; and the bastard Smerdyakov, the son (at least as it is commonly thought) of Fyodor and Stinking Lizaveta, the village idiot whom everyone—except Fyodor—protected.)

The epigraph: Except a grain of wheat fall to the earth and die it abideth alone; but if it die, it brings forth much fruit.”

The Word from the ‘author’ introduces our narrator, whose personality and character (and convictions) we are to come to know quite well as we go through the novel. He is someone of the town of Skotoprigonevsk, someone writing 13 years after the events he tells us about took place. He is something of a gossip, apparently, for he knows a great deal about everyone; he is concerned to be accurate, qualifying nearly everything he says; engages in circumlocution and asides; he shies away from interpreting what he tells us, though he is given to digressions that quite frequently express a surprisingly acute judgment; he imagines scenes that he could not have witnessed; conjectures about what must have happened at various times. He sees more than he tells.

As for the other characters: the novel is polyphonic, with many quite different sorts of voices contending. (See Bakhtin) It is episodic, seemingly fragmented, melodramatic, relying many times on “special effects, on coincidences, mistaken identity, the devices of comedy. For, though the novel is about the most serious of questions: salvation—it is nonetheless comic rather than tragic. Like Dante’s great poem, it attempts to get at the large questions of good and evil and to assess the motives of human beings. Etc.

The novel is divided into 12 books, like the traditional epic; and in fact, I myself consider The Brothers an epic—like the Divine Comedy, a comic epic. Most respected authorities on the novel consider it to be tragic in tone—except, finally, someone besides myself has perceived its comic cast—the translators of the new edition Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. “It may surprise some readers to learn the the BK is a comic novel,” they write in their introduction. Well, not my students over the past forty-six years that I have been teaching the novel. Maybe if I wait long

enough critics will begin seeing the “right” way to interpret Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky’s sacred idiot.

Go through text.

Themes: money, miracles, obedience, Elders, Holy Fool, buffoons, madwomen, ikons, the demonic, father-son relation, atheism, death, active love . . . these themes, the major ones of the novel, are introduced in the first two books.

Book I

- Ch I
1. Introduces Fyodor Karamazov, his first wife Adelaide Ivanovna, who deserts her husband and child and dies in a garret in Petersburg;
 2. Mitya, taken care of by the servant Grigory, is brought up by Miusov, his mother’s cousin and passed around from relative to relative;
 3. Fyodor’s second marriage, to a deeply religious, psychologically disturbed young woman, mother of Ivan and Alexey; Ivan is brought up by relatives and given a good education at the University of Moscow;
 4. The third son, Alyosha, who had come home a year before the other two, remembers all his life his mother’s holding him up to a holy icon; he comes “home” to find her grave; and shortly after locating it, he entered the monastery in the area and apprenticed himself to Fr. Zossima;
 5. The tradition of the Elders is discussed; tensions in the Karamazov family are so great that Fyodor suggests that they all meet at Fr. Zossima’s to settle their differences.

Book Two

1. Arrival at the monastery
2. they meet the Elder; Fyodor behaves disgracefully; asks what he must do to achieve salvation; the Elder replies: “Don’t lie.”
3. The Elder leaves his guests for a little while to hear the confessions of peasant women;
4. He also talks with mme. Hohlakov and her daughter Lise; counsels Mme. H. on the difference between active love and love in dreams;
5. Ivan’s article is discussed in the Elder’s cell;
6. A quarrel breaks out between Dmitri and his father; the Elder bows down before Dmitri;
7. Fr. Zossima’s commission to Alyosha and his exhortation: Be near your brothers. Rakitin plays the part of the devil to Alyosha
8. A Sandalous Scene

Page numbers for reading:

- 52 Ivan's article:
Proposes that the Church should take over the state: everything should be the Church. If the state taking over the Church is secularization (which is what liberalism does, what Europe has finally come to), then the Church taking over the state is theodicy: the sacralizing of the secular (which is what Communism does).
- 53 When Rome became Christian, the state included the church but remained pagan in many of its aspects . . . Ivan proposes that every earthly state should be transformed into the Church, should be nothing but the church;
- P. 57 Fr. Zossima's profoundly eschatological statement: at the end of time. So be it! So be it!
"Come, Lord Jesus."

Ultramontaniam; theodicy

Gregory VII–11th century pope to whom divine will is the only law; Church is the divine institution which should embrace all mankind.

Ultramontaniam: