SECOND READ

THE LIGHT OF "THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV"

Although Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote with wildness and urgency, he patiently insisted on asking an essential question: What are we living for?

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Illustration by Nicholas Konrad; Source photographs from Getty

Fyodor Dostoyevsky began to write what would become his last novel, "The Brothers Karamazov," in 1878. It was published in serial installments in the magazine *Russkiy Vestnik* from January, 1879, to November, 1880. Dostoyevsky had a deadline to meet every month, and his wife, Anna, later complained about the pressure he was always working under. Unlike many other contemporary writers, such as Tolstoy or Turgenev, who were well off, Dostoyevsky lived by his writing and struggled throughout his life to earn enough money. If not for this, Anna wrote, in her memoirs, after his death, "He could have gone carefully through [his works], polishing them, before letting them appear in print; and one can imagine how much they would have gained in beauty. Indeed, until the very end of his life Fyodor Mikhailovich had not written a single novel with which he was satisfied himself; and the cause of this was our debts!"

No one could claim that "The Brothers Karamazov" is polished, or even beautifully written—it is characteristic of Dostoyevsky's style that everything is desperately urgent and seems to burst forth, and that the details don't much matter. Reckless and intense: we are headed straight to the point of the matter, and there is no time. This urgency, this wildness, the seeming unruliness of his style, which is echoed in the many abrupt twists and turns in the action toward the end of the chapters—the reader must be kept in a state of suspense until the next installment—runs against something else, something heavier and slower, a patiently insistent question that is related to everything that is happening: What are we living for?

On May 16, 1878, just months before Dostoyevsky began writing "The Brothers Karamazov" in earnest, his son Alyosha died following an epileptic fit that lasted for hours. He would have turned three that summer. Dostoyevsky "loved Lyosha somehow in a very special way, with an almost morbid love, as if

sensing that he would not have him for long," Anna wrote later. When his son stopped breathing, Dostoyevsky "kissed him, made the sign of the cross over him three times," and broke down in tears. He was crushed with grief, Anna wrote, and with guilt—his son had inherited epilepsy from him. Outwardly, however, he was soon calm and collected; she was the one who wept and wept. Gradually, she grew worried that his suppression of grief would have a negative impact on his already fragile health, and she suggested that he visit the Optina Pustyn monastery with a young friend, the theological wunderkind Vladimir Solovyov. There they met the elder of the monastery—the starets—Ambrose. "Weep and be not consoled, but weep," he said to Dostoyevsky.

All of this made its way into "The Brothers Karamazov." The protagonist bears the name of Dostoyevsky's son Alyosha and many of Solovyov's traits. The monastery is central to the story, and its elder—named Zosima in the novel—comforts a woman who has lost her child, aged two years and nine months, with words that echo those uttered by Ambrose. But more important to the story than the autobiographical details, which in any case are swallowed up by the vortex of fiction, is the devastating loss of meaning that accompanies the death of a child. It runs as an undercurrent throughout the book, and, I think every time I read it, "The Brothers Karamazov" is written in defiance of this loss of meaning—that is, the abyss it stares into, the night it seeks to fill with light.

What is the light in "The Brothers Karamazov"?

It is the voices. “The Brothers Karamazov” is a novel of voices. Men, women, young, old, rich, poor, foolish, wise: all are allowed to make themselves heard in their own right—all speak with their own voice. And in each individual voice there are echoes of other voices, contemporary or past, written or oral, political or philosophical, from the Bible or from newspaper articles, rumors about town, memories of someone long dead. Everyone in the novel speaks from their own self, their specific and unique place, some of them utterly unforgettable in their magnificent individuality, but they do so using the same language. And, if some of the characters in “The Brothers Karamazov” rank all the way up there with Shakespeare’s creations, still this is not a work dominated by a single protagonist, the way “Hamlet” is Hamlet’s play, or “Othello” is Othello’s. It is the opposite: “The Brothers Karamazov” is a collective novel—it is about the profusion of voices, how they are intertwined and, though they themselves are unable to see it, how they form one whole, one connection, one chorus.

This overarching stylistic feature finds an explicit echo in two of the voices, those of the elder Zosima and of Alyosha, whose shared belief that we are all responsible for all, and that we are all guilty before all, runs as a mantra throughout the novel. That is the hope of the novel, the utopia of the novel—but not its reality. “Mama, do not weep,” says Zosima’s young brother as he lays dying, “life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we do not want to know it, and if we did want to know it, tomorrow there would be paradise the world over.” In another passage, a murderer tells Zosima, “And as for each man being guilty before all and for all, besides his own sins, your reasoning about that is quite correct, and it is surprising that you could suddenly embrace this thought so fully. And indeed it is true that when people understand this thought, the Kingdom of Heaven will come to them, no longer in a dream but in reality.”

In other words, the Kingdom of Heaven is nothing other than an unrealized possibility: we are merely a realization away from Paradise.

So why don’t we take that step? What is it that hinders us?

This is what "The Brothers Karamazov" is about. The novel plucks all its ideas down from the heaven of abstractions and forces them into the human realm, based on the insight that they exist only there, in human beings made of flesh and blood. As Dostoyevsky once wrote, "Man is a mystery . . .If you spend your entire life trying to puzzle it out, then do not say that you have wasted your time. I occupy myself with this mystery, because I want to be a man." In his novelistic universe, human beings are governed by emotions, driven by desire, unpredictable, imperfect, fallible—but also possessed of enormous power. In "The Brothers Karamazov," he has brought together four very different young men, with very different qualities, in one house. It is a house filled with hatred. The father, Fyodor Karamazov, is a grasping, lecherous, deceitful, and shameless widower. He has always neglected his sons; he has never cared about them, except when there was something to be gained by it. He is the father from hell. Each son is affiliated with a social institution—in the case of the eldest, Dmitri, immensely proud and of a violent temper, it is the military; for the middle one, Ivan, who is rational, cold, and analytical, it is the university; while for the youngest, Alyosha, who is warm, considerate, always accepting, it is the church. In addition, there is the servant Smerdyakov, presumed to be the illegitimate child of Fyodor and the intellectually disabled Lizaveta, nicknamed Stinking Lizaveta.

Described in this way, from the outside, this may sound schematic, with each of the brothers representing a segment of society. But Dostoyevsky's strength as an author, and much of the reason that reading his novels still yields great benefits a century and a half on, even in a world quite different from the one they were conceived in, is his ability to create characters who are distinctive individuals even as they are impossible to fully grasp. We see them from within, as who they themselves think they are, which is never the same as what they display when we view them from the outside. That so much in the characters is hidden from them, that they are driven by forces other than those which they're aware of, makes the question of who they really are seem senseless—and this is reinforced by their being seen, commented upon, understood, and misunderstood by other characters. One of the insights of

"The Brothers Karamazov" is that identity is a social construct, and part of what the novel rebels against is the notion that man is sufficient unto himself. Hell is isolation; heaven is fellowship.

At the outset of the novel, fellowship within the house of Karamazov has been torn to shreds. Dmitri is engaged to Katerina but has fallen head over heels for another woman, the voluptuous Grushenka, whom his father, too, has fallen for, while Ivan is in love with Katerina. Both brothers despise their father, for good reason. The only one who is not caught up in this sludge of desire, jealousy, and hate is Alyosha, who lives in the monastery as a sort of disciple of the elder Zosima; he bears no grudge against anyone, and no one holds a grudge against him.

The events that unfold are compressed, both in time and in space, and the pressure is enormous. When I read the novel for the first time, I was twenty, the same age as Alyosha, and I toiled through the first hundred pages driven by sheer will—why on earth should I read lengthy explications of the Russian Orthodox Church and monasticism in the eighteen-sixties and its relationship to the state? But then something happened; something seemed to catch fire. I was suddenly inside something, and wanted nothing more than to remain there, wanted nothing other than to read about these people, the three brothers and their terrible father with the turkey neck, and, not least, the women—the almost insanely proud Katerina, the unbalanced young girl Liza and her obdurate mother, and of course the alluring, malicious Grushenka. I read the novel the way I had read books as a child, with no thought of myself, no thought for my circumstances: my entire self was contained within the book. Nor did I think about what I was reading; I didn't analyze anything, didn't mull anything over—everything except feelings and presence was blotted out by the white incandescent light that reading filled me with.

Since then I have read the novel several times, and though with every reading I have understood a little more of what is going on, the sense of being self-forgetfully present is still tied to every encounter. It is as if the essential thing about "The Brothers Karamazov" is the experience of it, the feelings it

generates in the reader, and this makes it difficult to write about. The moment one steps out of the novel and describes it from a distance, by saying, perhaps, that in a fundamental way it is about freedom, and that in a fundamental way it discusses morality and obligation—to whom or to what, if to anyone or anything, are our actions obligated?—the essential thing is lost from sight. Freedom, morality, and obligation are ideas, abstractions, and if this novel is drawn toward anything it is to the place where ideas and abstractions dissolve into life. If it does battle against anything, and mightily, it is against whatever is fixed. Whatever has been determined once and for all. Whatever is predefined. Therefore, there is no privileged point of view or privileged perspective in the novel. Its meaning arises out of dissonance, which is the place of voices—between people, not within them—and it is always ambivalent.

For instance, there is no doubt that Alyosha represents an ideal for Dostoyevsky—he bears the name of his dead son, Alexei Fyodorovich, and is the character who, in thought and in action, is most closely associated with the novel's consistent notion of the good. But in comparison with the presence of Dmitri and Ivan—perhaps that of Dmitri in particular—he pales. And, since the power of a novel is tied to presence, what Dmitri and Ivan stand for shines forth more strongly. It is as if Dostoyevsky invested more in Dmitri and was carried away, as he wrote, by his magnificence, as childish and impulsive as he is violent and cruel. For me, the novel's most glorious scene is when Dmitri leaves town to party one last time, splash rubles about, and get dead drunk: his carriage tears along, and there is blood on his hands, but he is also excited, expectant, perhaps even happy; Grushenka will be there—he is going to see her one last time. How can a kindly, God-fearing, and ascetic novice monk compete against that? It is a bit like the feeling one can get reading Dante's Divine Comedy—the author has invested so much more in, and has got so much closer to, hell than heaven. What should we infer from that?

And then there is Ivan. Sharp and cold as a knife, he brings Alyosha's entire world view into question in his tale about the Grand Inquisitor, an indictment

of Christ so compelling that it is unthinkable that Dostoyevsky didn't write it from the heart, out of his own doubt. The passage is a high point of his œuvre and, by extension, in the history of literature. But one can't read it separately, detached from the novel; first, one has to get there. The thoughts it expresses come from somewhere—not just from Ivan, with his neglected childhood and his father from hell, but also from the Russian society of the mid-eighteen-sixties of which he was a part. The misery of that time and place is inconceivable today: a quarter of all infants died in their first year of life; in 1865, the year before the novel is set, the average life expectancy was less than thirty years. The vast majority of the population was illiterate. The autocratic czarist regime ruled with an iron hand and suppressed opposition through censorship, banishment, and executions. Revolutionary groups, often recruited from universities and the intelligentsia, were soon carrying out terrorist attacks in the cities. Political and social unrest, misery and want—such was the world "The Brothers Karamazov" was written in, and the world that gave rise to Ivan's thoughts.

In a sort of overture to his story of the Grand Inquisitor, Ivan reels off various episodes involving the sufferings of children. They are mistreated, raped, killed. His descriptions of the abuse are graphic and detailed. A five-year-old girl is first beaten, flogged, and kicked by her parents, then they smear her eyes, cheeks, and mouth with excrement and force her to eat it. "And it was her mother, her mother who made her!" Ivan says. Dostoyevsky had found this example in a newspaper article. It must have been important that it was a real event, that it had really happened, so that he could say, Look, this is how the world is. This is what people are like.

Ivan's tale is an indictment of Jesus Christ. He returns to earth, is thrown into a prison cell by the Grand Inquisitor, and is called to account. He could have prevented all want, all suffering, but he chose not to. Instead of bread, he gave humanity freedom. Having to choose between good and evil, in the Grand Inquisitor's view, is a burden that human beings are too weak to bear. They long for someone to relieve them of it. And that is what the Grand Inquisitor

offers them. Jesus is silent; he just sits there listening to this high priest of materialism until he is done. Then he walks over to him and kisses him on the lips, before disappearing into the streets of Seville.

In a way, it is as if all the novel's various themes, attitudes, and events come together here, in that kiss. It is entirely in keeping with the spirit of the novel that Jesus responds not with arguments, not with words, dogma, or abstraction, but rather through something physical and concrete: an act. It occurs there and then, and it concerns the two of them. It is interpersonal. And its significance cannot be fixed. Is it a refutation? Is it an act of forgiveness? Is it an example? At least as important is the fact that the kiss appears in Ivan's story, that it is he who has conceived of it: the ambivalence is his. And, as we read it, it becomes ours.

What are we living for?

"The Brothers Karamazov" seeks the answer in the little life, among the small people, in the frail, the fragile, the fallible, the failed. If, contrary to the nature of the book, I were to attempt to sum up in one sentence what it is about, it would have to be a quote from a conversation between Ivan and Alyosha: "Love life more than its meaning."

I write this in the certainty that this interpretation, too, will dissolve as soon as you open the book and begin to read it anew. This is what makes "The Brothers Karamazov" a great novel. It is never at rest. ♦

(Translated, from the Norwegian, by Ingvild Burkey.)

This is drawn from the introduction to a new edition of "The Brothers Karamazov."