

The Brothers Karamazov on the Page and the Stage

by Andrew McKenna, Ph.D.

When we read *The Brothers Karamazov*, as when we see its fine distillation that the Lookingglass Theater has presented us, we have the feeling that, for all the violent extremes of behavior and emotional extravagance of Dostoevsky's characters, their intertwined stories hang together; that they cohere in a way that makes wonderful sense. We feel that for all the wild intensity of his dialogues the novel is talking to us about us, though we may not fully discern how or in what way. As Virginia Woolf wrote, his novels lead us to "understanding more than we have ever understood before, and receiving such revelations as we are wont to get only from the press of life at its fullest." *Notes from the Underground* concludes with a remark that spells out our eerie proximity to Dostoevsky's seemingly outlandish creations:

"For my part, I have merely carried to extremes in my life what you have not dared to carry even half-way, and, in addition, you have mistaken your cowardice for common sense and have found comfort in that, deceiving yourselves. So that, as a matter of fact, I seem to be much more alive than you."

The Brothers Karamazov intensifies and magnifies ideas, relationships, and conduct that we all experience and that we only dimly comprehend.

In his masterful four volume biography of Dostoevsky, Joseph Frank invents the expression "thought feelings" for what draws us to these characters, for whom apparently abstract ideas--the existence, or not, of God, the presence, or not, of meaning in life--are urgently felt; ideas have a strong emotional charge because in fact they do not emerge from a realm of philosophical speculation, but from regular association with others, from human interaction. One reason that Lookingglass' stage adaptation of *Brothers Karamazov* works so well is that for all the novel's length and breadth, it consists mostly of monologue and dialogue. Its many high-pitched conversations seem wrought from the outer limits of lucid self-consciousness, which is just Dostoevsky's point about his underground man, and is true for all his characters. Another quote from *Notes* clarifies this anguished and precise self-analysis that his characters exhibit; here the narrator is talking about the distinct features of Russian romantics, and on this topic we need only recall how much later Russia came to ideas that issue from the European Enlightenment, and so how much more strident and lively their expression became:

"[T]he characteristic of our romantics are the exact opposite of the starry-eyed European variety, and not a single European standard applies here. The characteristics of our romantics are to understand everything, to see everything and to see it incomparably more clearly than the most positive of our thinkers; to refuse to take anyone or anything for granted, and at the same time not to despise anything; to go round and round everything and to yield to everything out of policy;.... Our romantic is a man of great breadth of vision and the most consummate rascal of all our rascals, I assure you--from experience."

These remarks do not limit or reduce Dostoevsky's characters to a specific historical period, still less to anything like a mere literary movement. Romantic here means the more contentious side of the spirit of the age, of any age in conflict with its traditional beliefs and institutions. The high volume conversations seem to border on hysteria because they reach so quickly and acutely into the social implications of ideas and into the theological implications of family and social relations.

This is a conscious strategy in Dostoevsky, a hard won contest with experience and utterance to which he himself gave the label "fantastic realism," and it shows up by name when Ivan Karamazov prefaces his tale of the Grand Inquisitor by saying we are "corrupted by modern realism" if we "can't stand anything fantastic." As Dostoevsky wrote elsewhere "reality [in art] is fantastical and exceptional and that is the essence of the real." This explains, too, what we experience as the peculiar harmonies of tragic and comic inflection inhabiting one and the same discourse or episode at times: think of Captain Snegiryov's diatribes, Mitya's report on his own self-destructive behavior, or his father's on his, or Katerina's on hers, or, best of all, the dialogue between Ivan and the devil, a shabby caricature of demonic malevolence whose cheap ironies and French phrases mirror back to Ivan his weirdly proud self-contempt.

This tonal amalgam informs the opening remark by Pevear and Volokhonsky in their preface to the translation used for the Lookingglass production: "this is a joyful book." Tragic themes abound: nothing less than parricide and incest, a son's war with his father for his inheritance but also for the possession of a woman; the rivalry of Ivan and Mitya for the heart of Katerina, of Katerina and Grushenka for Mitya. Less shrill contests proliferate elsewhere; that of Ivan and the elder Zossima for the soul of Alyosha, who knows his faith is being "tested" by his brother; and, in tandem, the rivalry between Alyosha and the demonic charlatan whom Ivan despises in and as his very own self: in Alyosha's view, "Ivan will either rise into the light of truth or perish in hatred, taking revenge on himself and everyone for having served something he does not believe in." Mitya cries out that God and the devil are at war in the heart of man and throughout all this there is an admixture of hilarity and heartache that striates the dialogue because, as Dostoevsky confided in a letter, "life is full of the comic and is only majestic in its inner sense."

The strangely joyful tone that permeates Dostoevsky's fiction is born of his conviction that literature continues a Biblical revelation that is host to essential insights into human behavior and that is being lived out in our relations with one another. These are the insights that René Girard explores in his book *Dostoevsky: Resurrection from the Underground* (which Pevear and Volokhonsky in their preface to *Demons* recommend strongly). Girard argues that the systemic pattern of rivalries besetting us issues from pathologies of desire that are mimetic, being inspired by models, peers or parents, and that these dynamics are revealed in the dialectics of pride and shame and of offense and forgiveness that span Dostoevsky's novels. These contortions are expertly choreographed in Lookingglass' production when Mitya bows worshipfully before Katerina's self-abasement for the sake of her father, offering her body to pay his debts, with the result

that Katerina bows in turn to Mitya's generosity in giving her the money without demanding sexual favors.

There are still other patterns, which we might call those of discipleship: on the angelic side, we find that of Alyosha in relation to the holy elder Zossima, and it is extended in the burgeoning discipleship that the friends of the dying Ilyusha forge with Alyosha. After Alyosha urges them fondly to keep the memory of their friendship alive in all their later dealings as adults, the boys shout "Hurray for Karamazov." This praise bears not on him in particular but on the truth of loving reconciliation that he has modeled for them and that they can model for others. The shout echoes the experience by which Dostoevsky styled his own creative process; as he said of himself, "it was out of the crucible of doubt that my Hosanna has passed."

On the dark side, there is the discipleship of Smerdyakov in whom Ivan discovers a grotesque embodiment of his own nihilism: his bastard half-brother states that he carried out the murder of old Karamazov "according to your word," in a parody of the biblical language of filial obedience because Ivan, to his horrified chagrin, is like a god for this forlorn and self-hating creature. It is Dostoevsky's view that when we stop believing in God we will not install rational utopia among us but will become gods for one another, however grotesquely. This is in fact what Katerina explicitly states as the goal of her seemingly noble, self-sacrificial conduct towards Mitya. For Dostoevsky, much of the torment that humans inflict on one another comes from God relations that have been twisted and misdirected.

Proust stated tellingly that all of Dostoevsky's novel could be called *Crime and Punishment*. The same can be said for *The Insulted and the Injured*, the non-fiction work rooted in the novelist's tribulation as a convict in Siberia. The title evokes all the fierce imbroglios that Dostoevsky's novels illuminate, as they explore the harm we do to others to avenge real or imagined offenses, and the reciprocal damage, the mimetic reprisal, we call down upon ourselves in turn. Old Karamazov admits burlesquely to a virtual addiction to offending people out of a sense of shame that his offenses only nourish. Suzanne Ross's *The Wicked Truth* is a non-*pareil* briefer course on this commonplace mayhem. Girard's writings help us to see here the logic of scandal, of offense replicating offense, indefinitely, and definitively in the case of too many of us; it is the logic that Jesus seeks tirelessly to cure in his disciples and that he diagnoses concisely in the Sermon on the Mount. The alternative is a hell on earth which is very much of our own making, which is why Ivan surmises that man made the devil in his own image and likeness--his maddening double in fact. Dostoevsky leaves Ivan on the cusp of madness, which is where he leaves us as well.