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## Word as Bond: Rhetoric and Performativity in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

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Word as Bond: Rhetoric and Performativity  
in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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## Introduction

Has there ever been a chapter of a novel that has been marveled over and scrutinized in isolation more than “The Grand Inquisitor”? Indeed, one may purchase printed copies of the chapter alone, perhaps having found oneself assigned to read it in some university seminar on Existentialism. But the words of “The Grand Inquisitor” do not mimic the dry monologue of an academic lecture. Rather, a scene of storytelling is reproduced within the novel. *The Brothers Karamazov* is framed as the written account of an anonymous, amateurish chronicler who attempts to assemble and present an account of a family drama from the anonymous and vague perspective of someone who lived in their town. Within this frame, the narrator’s own storytelling discourse is suspended in “The Grand Inquisitor,” giving way to the depiction of a conversation between the cryptic, atheist Ivan Karamazov and his earnest and deeply religious brother Alyosha. Ivan, aware of Alyosha’s urgent curiosity to know what Ivan believes in, ironically declares that “we green youths [...] need first of all to resolve the everlasting questions,” such as the cultural tensions between Russian Orthodox faith and the rationality of Western Enlightenment, or the tension between conservative traditionalism and liberal utopianism etc. (Dostoevsky, 233-234)<sup>1</sup>. Ivan, continuing with an ironical disdain, describes how the youth of Russia have become fascinated with the “fateful questions,” to the point of arguing about them with strangers in bars, only to never see each other again for “40 years” (Dostoevsky, 234). Ivan, who has already established his intent to leave for Moscow, thus comically underlines the absurdity of their desire to “resolve,” in the span of one conversation, the “fateful questions” that linger and return throughout the whole of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

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<sup>1</sup> Every Dostoevsky citation henceforth will be quoted from *The Brothers Karamazov* unless otherwise noted.



Nonetheless, after Ivan proceeds to engage in a bizarre, conversational polemic against Christian theology, mentioning a lot about Euclidean geometry and suffering along the way. Ivan declares that while he accepts, as a logical proposition, the existence of both worlds and the truth of salvation, his own “Euclidean” mind, his own principled, proof-oriented brain, cannot approve of this logic, and thus finds itself to be morally offended by God’s design (Dostoevsky, 235). Ivan declares that, should there be Heavenly redemption for the cruel and senseless suffering perpetuated on Earth, he would reject salvation and “hasten to return [his] ticket,” insofar as this redemption would necessarily be predicated upon earthly suffering as the “manure of someone else’s future harmony” (Dostoevsky, 244-245). After Alyosha suggests that it is Christ’s own sacrifice, his own “innocent blood” upon which the “structure” of human salvation is built, Ivan reacts with joyful laughter and proceeds to recall Alyosha the famous prose poem “The Grand Inquisitor.” Although Ivan derides his legend as “an absurd thing,” a rather meaningless poem, he nonetheless tells it with fervor and passion and imbues the poem with subtle poetic allusions and figures (Dostoevsky, 246). The tale begins with Jesus Christ returning to Earth in Seville, Spain during the Spanish Inquisition. Immediately, the old, powerful “Grand Inquisitor” orders him to be arrested and takes Jesus to a dark prison for interrogation. While Jesus silently and earnestly looks upon the wrathful figure, The Grand Inquisitor begins to address the silent Jesus with a charged monologue that operates on the one hand as a condemnation of Jesus, and on the other as a confession to him. The Grand Inquisitor, as a stand-in figure for the worldly authority of the Catholic Church, tells Jesus that the Church has corrected Jesus’ idealistic and ineffective teachings of free love and devotion towards God. The Church, according to the Inquisitor, has understood that the only way to control the malcontented, rebellious nature of humanity is to supply them with food and comfort; only then will the masses accept the spiritual authority of

their rulers. The Grand Inquisitor asserts that most men are not strong enough to maintain their faith in God, that men need to be comforted and fed their beliefs so that they won't have to accept the grim, painful truth of their spiritual freedom in a world filled with senseless suffering. Although the Grand Inquisitor no longer believes in salvation, he preaches it solely out of the altruistic belief that people need to be provided with meaning and purpose in order to cope with their own suffering.

At the end of the tale, Jesus approaches the Grand Inquisitor and kisses him on the mouth. The Grand Inquisitor, undoubtedly moved, decides to let Christ go on the condition that he leave and not disrupt the efforts of the Church to establish earthly order. Alyosha, confused and upset by the tale, asks what happens to the Inquisitor, to which Ivan responds:

“The kiss burns in his heart, but the old man holds to his former idea.”

“And you with him!” Alyosha exclaimed ruefully. Ivan laughed.

“But it's nonsense, Alyosha, it's just the muddled poem of a muddled student who never wrote two lines of verse. Why are you taking it so seriously? You don't think I'll go straight to the Jesuits now, to join the host of those who are correcting his deed! Good lord, what do I care?”  
(263)

This moment, brimming with ironies that fly off in all sorts of directions, gets to the heart of a particular concern in *The Brothers Karamazov* and ultimately the concern of this very project; what do we make of the disparity between Alyosha's astonished reaction towards the poem as a reader and Ivan's cynical, dismissive laughter towards the poem as an author? What causes Alyosha to identify Ivan with the protagonist of his poem? What is Dostoevsky, a renowned writer of great piety and faith, doing in inserting a polemical prose poem that condemns Christ within his own text? Who is the author here and what in the world are they trying to achieve? Is Dostoevsky laughing at us by reproducing the very problematics of interpretation and literary criticism within his very own novel?

*The Brothers Karamazov* has for a long time been praised and canonized as a literary project of an ambition that mirrors the works of Dante, John Milton, Shakespeare, Goethe, and

other writers whose works similarly dealt with the “everlasting questions” of salvation and theodicy. On the one hand, *The Brothers Karamazov* is a novel of a seemingly infinite thematic scope, a kind of “symbolic amplification” that allows his characters to allegorically embody cultural values and beliefs (Frank, 569). On the other hand, the novel appears decentered and without direction, filled with depictions of rambling narrators, awkwardly self-conscious characters, drunken rants, philosophical argumentation, poetic allusions, an inserted saint’s life biography written by Alyosha, juridical procedures, letters, essays, tangents, alleyways, minute details, a strange mise-en-abyme account of Alyosha befriending a group of boys etc. Joseph Frank quotes E.M. Foster who claims that “the characters and situations [in Dostoevsky’s novels] always stand for more than themselves; infinity attends them; though yes, they remain individuals, they expand to embrace it and summon it to embrace them” (569). Dostoevsky’s novel largely operates as a reflection on the “breakdown of the Russian family” in his epoch (Frank, 569), yet this social issue itself becomes symptomatic of both a deeper philosophical and national subtext of the tension between Orthodox, national values rooted in faith, and Enlightenment, philosophical notions of social progress rooted in reason. The novel is thematically eschatological; the fate of the Karamazov brothers reflects the fate of Russia, which itself reflects eschatological questions about salvation and redemption from earthly sin and suffering, questions that can be traced back to biblical tales. Yet while Dostoevsky took on these issues and attempted to make a case for orthodoxy through the figure of Alyosha, the novel by no means solely operates in a broad, allegorical mode. Dostoevsky seems to leave behind no minute detail that is not charged, in the vivid description of its particularity, with a sense of a divine, symbolic relation to God and his creation. A character like Ivan Karamazov, whose superficial philosophical beliefs seem to completely contradict what we know to be Dostoevsky’s beliefs, is

treated with utter seriousness and respect. If scenes of love, laughter, and lightness bear witness to God's creation and are included, then the nihilistic and dark psychological perspectives of characters like Ivan must also do the same for Dostoevsky.

Yet for all of *The Brothers Karamazov's* literary bombast and deep philosophical subtext, its grandeur and sophistication is tempered along the way by a nervous messiness, a carnivalesque disorder, and a deep laughter that threatens to shake and subvert the very seriousness of the issues that are pursued within the novel. For while Alyosha finds himself deeply affected by Ivan's poem, we need to take into account Ivan's laughter. On the surface, Ivan's laughter is directed at Alyosha's youthful reaction to a poem. We might imagine Ivan to be amused by his own ability to cast doubt into Alyosha's faith vis-a-vis a "muddled poem." Yet those who have read the novel know that Alyosha's rueful reaction to the poem is not groundless. At a time when their own family is in great crisis due to the romantic and financial rivalry between their father Fyodor Karamazov and their brother Dmitri Karamazov, he witnesses Ivan make a philosophical justification of rejecting God and consequently the family. Alyosha listens to Ivan's passionate, lengthy quotations of the Grand Inquisitor as though Ivan were him and Alyosha the condemned Christ figure. Yet Ivan ridicules this kind of reading. After all, Ivan *is not* the Grand Inquisitor, he is not a 90 year old priest seeking to alter Christ's Word and clearly has no such aspirations, at least if we take *him* at his *word*. Ivan's status throughout the novel is that of an observer, the theoretician whose purview is one of inactive contemplation, attempting to gaze upon the highest philosophical issues from the disinterested vantage point of the writer. He has given up any hope for spiritual direction within his own life and thus can only ironically contemplate philosophical issues that in his mind bear no solution applicable within a "Euclidean" world that he seemingly detests. For all of Ivan's irony, for all of

his bitter grins and laughs, Alyosha rightfully detects tones of despair within “The Grand Inquisitor” that bear something of Ivan’s own despair. In the process of storytelling, Ivan and Alyosha become the two figures within the tale. Through allowing Ivan to become an author in the manner that he does, Dostoevsky reproduces the dynamic between himself, the author, and his reader in the text. We have a story within a story, a *mise-en-abyme*.

Yet this storytelling process itself reproduces, on the one hand, the thematic opposition between faith and reason through Ivan’s discourse and Alyosha’s reaction, and on the other, two opposing modes of interpreting poetry. Ivan believes poetry, and almost all other forms of discourse, to be a hollow play on ideas that ultimately do not matter. His Grand Inquisitor is a religious figure who conspires to redefine the Church through “miracle, mystery, and authority,” yet the Inquisitor ultimately knows these to be pretenses, clever distortions of Christ’s Word that will ultimately “conque[r] and hol[d] captive forever the conscience” of feeble humanity (Dostoevsky, 255). Poetry, for Ivan, is in its most harmless capacity a meaningless artifact of dying cultures, and in its most effective, a means of deceiving the masses and obtaining their obedience. The Grand Inquisitor does not seem to implicitly serve as a model of exemplary individual conduct, but rather shows the despair of bad faith and negative knowledge of those “intelligent people” who are in power (Dostoevsky, 261). The Grand Inquisitor eventually reveals his cards to the silent Jesus figure and declares that the secret of the Church is that they are “with *him*” (Dostoevsky, 257), the “dread and intelligent spirit, the spirit of self-destruction and non-being,” that is, the biblical figure of Satan (Dostoevsky, 251). The figure of Satan is pivotal for the Grand Inquisitor insofar as he reads Satan’s temptation of Jesus in the desert as the temptation of worldly power, of earning the obedient adoration of the masses. For the Inquisitor, Christ was fatally wrong in rejecting Satan’s promise of ruling over the hearts of men.

Yet, Satan's promises, which the inquisitor interprets as embodying the powerful ideals of possessing "miracle, mystery, and authority" (255), are more rhetorical than literal -- the secret behind the expression of power is powerlessness, the truth of "miracle, mystery, and authority" is a mask that conceals "magic, deception, and tyranny" (Terras, *RD* 123)<sup>2</sup>: "The wise man knows that the Devil, or any disciple of his, has not the power to fulfil his promises and that his disciples will likewise have to depend on fraud" (Terras, *RD* 124). The lie of poetry is that its pretense of truth is in fact a poetic obfuscation of the truth, an ideological dream that conceals its own brute intentions to dominate. However, Ivan emphatically tells Alyosha that he has no interest in power, that he simply wants to live and enjoy the pleasures of life till the age of thirty, despite life's inherent senselessness, and hence its baseness (Dostoevsky, 230). If Ivan writes poems and indulges his romantic, idealistic, poetic sensibilities, then he knows this behavior to be symptomatic, a dying token of his characteristically youthful, Russian "stupidity" (Dostoevsky, 236).

Alyosha reads through Ivan's ironic flair and reacts to his poem with great moral and spiritual urgency: "[paraphrasing Ivan] And the stick little leaves, and the precious graves, and the blue sky, and the woman you love! How will you live, what will you love them with? [...] Is it possible, with such hell in your heart and in your head? No, you're precisely going to join them [the Jesuits] . . . and if not, you'll kill yourself, you won't endure it!" (Dostoevsky, 263). For the pious Alyosha, Ivan's radical detachment and ability to live despite his complete resentment towards the metaphysical terms and conditions of life itself could not be sustainable. Either the cynical poet will become like the Grand Inquisitor and destroy the world in their hopes to make it better, or they will destroy themselves in their attitude of despair and hostility towards the

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Victor Terras' *Reading Dostoevsky* will henceforth be referred to as "*RD*." All references to his *A Karamazov Companion* will henceforth be referred to as "*AFC*."

world. For the European educated man of reason who has renounced God and tradition, poetry must necessarily be subordinated to its proper ideological, socio-political function; it must exist “for the sake of a useful cause” as the liberal, aspiring journalist Rakitin says to Dmitri Karamazov (Dostoevsky, 590). Yet if Ivan has given up his own dreams of worldly domination by means of intellect and nihilistic eloquence, his own dreams of being a Grand Inquisitor, then Alyosha can consequently only recognize in the tale precisely those aspects of Satan that the Grand Inquisitor praises -- a “dread spirit” who engenders “self-destruction.” Through Alyosha’s worldview, Ivan’s attitude can either lead to violence and domination in the pursuit of “earthly lucre” or to a violent disintegration of his own being (Dostoevsky, 260). Thus, contrasting philosophies and worldviews align themselves rather sensibly with contrasting modes of literary criticism: The man of reason views poetry as either an ideological tool of power that is either “useful” or trivial, whereas the man of faith believes that poetic expression reveals one’s most heartfelt and embodied beliefs. For Ivan, poetry appears to consist of inanimate social material that can be wielded into powerful, aesthetic expressions of dominance at best -- yet for the masses, their relationship to poetry is mostly delusional, a lost dream of cultural meaning. For Alyosha, poetry exposes those depths of the soul that are ultimately present in the most meaningful, impactful moments of decision and action.

Thus, we have identified a metatextual moment in *The Brothers Karamazov* insofar as it is a literary text that appears to concern itself with questions about the nature of literary texts and their purpose. And indeed, *The Brothers Karamazov* is filled with figures and expressions that directly and indirectly point back to the novel’s own status *qua* novel. We might wish to pick up Alyosha and Ivan’s discussion, to interrogate their respective attitudes towards literary texts, and then respond with our own theories about literary criticism. But what kind of pre-existing

attitude or belief regarding literary texts would enable us to treat Ivan and Alyosha as self-sufficient literary critics and ultimately as authors, as real people? Both are presented as authors *within* the text, but as readers of *The Brothers Karamazov* we can only treat them as products of literature rather than producers of it. Unless, of course, we concede that literature can create *actual* characters, people whose views and ideas should be treated with the same seriousness and trust that we give to real people. If we wish to continue understanding the thematics of textuality and of authorship within *The Brothers Karamazov*, we must read the text as some kind of pluralistic Frankenstein monster filled with artificially constructed personas who have the powers of human speech. Of course, they cannot tear us limb from limb, but to the extent that we can take them seriously, we can perhaps be persuaded by these characters, moved by them to act in a certain way. Like Ivan, we would have to attribute to poetry the capacity to have a powerful, deceptive influence upon its readers, insofar as it can create autonomous humans who are by nature capable of having such an effect. Like Alyosha, we would have to, at times, take the authors in the text for their word, as sincere, intending authors who are expressing an urgently spiritual worldview. How can we assess and critique this metatextual moment in *The Brothers Karamazov*, how can we develop or interrogate any kind of theory of poetics in relationship to it, without already positing our own view of what poetry is and what it is capable of? Can we begin to understand either the poetics and the theme of poetry in *The Brothers Karamazov* without establishing poetry as being either a crafty, rhetorical eloquence, capable of all sorts of sleights of hand, or a mode of communication that conveys man's deepest beliefs and convictions? If we could proceed with close reading without positioning ourselves somewhere in relation to the polarities of Alyosha and Ivan's disagreement, what might we reveal that has not already been



made evident by the text itself or by more qualified scholars of Dostoevsky? Can we practice literary criticism without a coherent theory to inform our work?

The truth is that one needn't be a refined literary critic in order to read a book and understand it. One needn't be a well-practiced reader of figures in order to appreciate a given metaphor or image. Common sense tells us that we needn't always *know* what we're doing on a theoretical level, that we can do all sorts of daily routines without thinking about them. And reading is, without question, one of these daily routines. Language is our primary societal mode of communication, and thus we see, hear, and process words constantly without having to consider the fact of it. We interpret facial expressions and bodily gestures. We sense things and then we make sense of things. The same goes with reading a book, and thus it would seem that the practice of literary criticism is in need of some justification, lest it acknowledge itself as an altogether frivolous and superfluous discourse. And indeed, why talk about *The Brothers Karamazov*? It is a seven hundred odd page canonical text that has been treated extensively in academia throughout the world. Is there anything more to add? Is there anything "useful" or socially beneficial in discussing a 19th century Russian novel in our current epoch? Is there something to be learned from an author whose spirituality, nationalism, and conservatism would be found quite at odds with the liberal values of our epoch? We find ourselves in a position similar to the narrator of *The Brothers Karamazov*, anticipating the "inevitable questions" of the reader who wonders "Why should I, the reader, spend my time" reading and absorbing the rather lengthily formulated descriptions and analyses that we are putting forth (Dostoevsky, 3). Why waste time trying to justify that which should justify itself?

These questions are not necessarily rhetorical expressions of uncertainty, but are rather the very questions that will direct the path of this project. I intend to discuss and conceptualize

*The Brothers Karamazov* through a conceptual framework of performativity, originally a linguistic concept coined by J.L. Austin in a series of lectures published posthumously as *How To Do Things with Words* that describe the capacity of language to perform social actions as opposed to simply neutrally communicating information. He writes that “it was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact,’ which it must do either truly or falsely” (Austin, 1). By paying attention to everyday situations in which language lives as discourse, rather than examine hypothetical ‘statements,’ we can see that many words do not convey meaning directly, but seem to do their own kind of work. We might describe someone’s words as “violent,” perhaps even an illegal use of “hate speech,” yet clearly this interpretation does not emerge from purely linguistic analysis; the tone of someone’s voice or the violent history that certain slurs are associated with give shape to an utterance, yet linguistics alone cannot account for these elements of discourse. J.L. Austin’s notion of the *speech act* and the broader notion of *performativity* had an almost revolutionary impact upon Western philosophy, literary criticism, social sciences, and other related fields. Yet, this impact has left a myriad of disagreements as to whether the categories Austin proposed were in need of analytical, conceptual refinement or if this strange chimaera of the speech act itself revealed a fundamental aporia in all prior attempts to comprehend language as a universal system or structure. While we will brush up against this aporia in due time, the most important disagreement for our purposes is one regarding J.L. Austin’s curious dismissal of literature as being neither a traditional “statement” nor a speech act:

[A] performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance -- a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways -- intelligibly -- used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use -- ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiologies* of language. All this we are

*excluding* from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances. (Austin, 22)

Thus, not only is literature then ill-suited for understanding everyday, ordinary situations, but its relationship to ordinary, serious discourse is parasitic. Literature saps language of having any purpose, either as a statement or as an action. Thus, it would seem utterly counterintuitive to then appropriate the notion of performativity as a conceptual tool for making sense of literature. Yet, this exclusion of Austin's, along with other idiosyncratic qualities of his writing, has largely been the source of major critical disagreements of those who have engaged with Austin's work. Can literature be performative? Is literature and art duplicitous in its relationship to reality, a hollow image of it, or do they have serious things to say and do within a particular social framework? And furthermore, what do we make of these dichotomies such as descriptive language/performative language or ordinary discourse/literature? Are there rigorous boundaries that constitute the identity of these terms or do they roughly estimate a broad spectrum of discursive possibilities?

In this essay, I would like to situate us within the problematics of performativity and literature by way of an extended reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Through considering the formal and thematic structures of the novel, I hope to ground these broader philosophical questions about language, literature, and performativity in an attentive and faithful reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* as translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. In our close reading, I will attempt to place moments of the text in dialogue with the ideas and concepts that emerge from J.L. Austin and the Yale School critics who critiqued and built upon (i.e. deconstructed) his work. While we will carefully account for and scrutinize texts written by Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and J. Hillis Miller in relation to performativity, we hope to put their insights towards the service of understanding *The Brothers Karamazov* and the important

critical literature written about it rather than vice versa. And yet I suspect that it is precisely this novel that will give us a sharper vocabulary and understanding for approaching the deeper philosophical questions at stake about literature. For if literary theory has any justification, certainly it must lie somewhere within the practice of reading literature.

Furthermore, it seems to me that Fyodor Dostoevsky is perhaps the most helpful literary interlocutor for approaching these fateful questions about the study of language and literature. The renowned 20th century Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin read the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky as a means of coining metalinguistic terms such as *dialogism* and *the polyphonic novel* that shed light not only on the nature of the novel itself but also on language as an essential structure of consciousness and life itself. Bakhtin declared Dostoevsky to be “the creator of the polyphonic novel [...], a fundamentally new novelistic genre” (Bakhtin, *PDP* 7)<sup>3</sup>. Prior novels, according to Bakhtin, tended towards *monologism* which generally entailed “a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness,” whereas Dostoevsky’s novels entailed for him “a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal right and each with its own world” that combine but never merge into a single unity (*PDP* 6). We wondered earlier how we could possibly treat the characters within *The Brothers Karamazov* as objective people who are the subjects of their own words and ideas; for Bakhtin, it is precisely in Dostoevsky’s works that the hero is freed from being “an object of authorial discourse” in order to become “a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual word” (*PDP* 5). Indeed, we will come to find that many of the curiously dynamic and ambiguous qualities of language revealed by the work of Austin and subsequent thinkers have themselves been articulated by Bakhtin long before Austin. Indeed, one of Bakhtin’s earliest works is entitled *The Philosophy of*

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<sup>3</sup> Here are the abbreviations that will stand in for each respective, cited text of Mikhail Bakhtin: *PDP* - *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, *DI* - *The Dialogic Imagination*, *TPA* - *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*.

*the Act*, in which he depicts all “acts” as “two-faced Janus[es]” that possess a cultural, semantic content and the “performed deed” which occurs as “a moment in the unity of the context of [a] once-current life” (4): “The actually performed act -- not from the aspect of its content, but in its very performance -- somehow knows, somehow possesses the unitary and once-occurrent being of life” (Bakhtin, *TPA* 28). Thus, like J.L. Austin, I can claim that in approaching Fyodor Dostoevsky’s work through the framework of performativity that I am doing nothing essentially new: “The phenomenon to be discussed is very widespread and obvious, and it cannot fail to have been already noticed, at least here and there, by others. Yet I have not found attention paid to it specifically” (Austin, 1). It cannot be doubted that Bakhtin’s works resonate greatly with the concepts of the performative and the speech act, and others have made this connection before. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson write in their exegetical work *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Creation of a Prosaics* that Bakhtin would have objected to speech act theory “insofar as it tries to describe a grammar of situations and codify context itself” (58). I assent to this assertion insofar as they are referring to the work of predominantly analytic philosophers who have attempted to refine and smooth over the precious ambiguities that Austin’s text leaves us with. Indeed, Bakhtin was largely critical of literary formalists, linguists, and other theorists who attempted to create a comprehensive system that could account for all forms of language. In this respect, we will find that Bakhtin’s thought resonates deeply with the works of de Man, Derrida, and Miller who have praised Austin’s text for its aporetic qualities rather than for the precision of its theory.

Our first chapter will begin by placing Austin’s conception of performativity in dialogue with Hannah Arendt’s remarks on speech and action in *The Human Condition*. After considering the aporia that emerges between the logical rigidity of philosophical discourse and the

paradoxical play of poetry that critics such as Derrida and Miller detect within Austin's work, we will move to a consideration of Dostoevsky's "fantastic realism" in which the role of the paradox proves to be essential. To conclude the chapter, we will end with an excursus on the works of Mikhail Bakhtin as they relate to Dostoevsky's poetics. Insofar as Bakhtin develops his own metalinguistic theories by way of reading Dostoevsky, we see in his work a precious model for our own.

Our second chapter will focus on the poetics of narration in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The first half of the chapter will focus on the incessant, yet subtle rhetorical gesturing of the narrator. In light of J.L. Austin's assertion that a literary work cannot operate performatively, we will attempt to see if the narrator's jests and ironies serve towards some purpose or if they indeed leave us empty-handed. We will consider the various attempts of literary critics to account for the narrator, to explain his otherwise absurd behavior, and then consider for ourselves whether the narrator can indeed be pinned down in such a manner. We ultimately will find that our own critical response to the narrator's performatives will reflect the dynamics between reason and belief that are thematized throughout the book.

In our third and final chapter, we will attend to the manner in which ideological positions of faith and reason, pro and contra, are dialogically embodied throughout the book. Through following the paradoxical lines of the novel, we will come to understand how dispositions of affirmation and negation find their unity in the "sensual" forces of life that inscribe both polarities within its all-encompassing center. While Ivan and Zosima may appear to be worlds apart in their beliefs, their philosophies turn out to be mirror each other, to reflect the same innate sensual desire for life, albeit "from the other end" (Dostoevsky, 234). In interrogating the thematic connections made between art, belief, and sensuality, we will come to return to our

original questions about literature and its ambiguous function. We will come to find *The Brothers Karamazov* full of poets whose distinct rhetorical styles dynamically reflect their unique, ethical positions within the novel.

“And now to business” (Dostoevsky, 4).

## Chapter I: Performativity and Literature

### **Action and the Word: (mis)Understanding Performatives**

Before we consider speech acts, we might do well to start off with a basic conceptual analysis of action. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt devotes three chapters to the “fundamental human activities” of labor, work, and action (7). While *The Human Condition* is a sober historico-philosophical work about the conditions of human existence, such as human plurality and the mediating “worldliness” of objects (7), its preface places Arendt’s philosophy within a historical moment of crisis, in which she discusses the modern advances of science and industry that have created “a society of laborers which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labor, [society that] no longer know[s] of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won” (5). In this regard, *The Human Condition* is a project in which a historical consideration of humanity, in relation to its activities and conditions, is placed against concerns that have an eschatological undertone:

[T]he modern world, in which we live today, was born with the first atomic explosions. I do not discuss this modern world, against whose background this book was written. I confine myself [...] to an analysis of those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed. (Arendt, 6)

Arendt’s underpinning fears regarding the modern age concern a loss of ability for humans to understand or think about the “things which nevertheless we are able to do” due to scientific advances (3). A techno-rational compulsion to dominate the Earth and nature itself appears to be at the core of this modern age for Arendt:

This future man, whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians. (Arendt, 2)

If Dostoevsky foresaw the patricidal violence inherent in Enlightenment thought, then Arendt found herself dealing with the actual, totalitarian embodiment of that violence in the 20th century. The question of rebellion, of rejecting the gift of life, is precisely what is at stake when Ivan says “[i]t’s not that I don’t accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket” (Dostoevsky, 245). While Arendt suggests that this modern crisis can only be dealt with through political judgment and action, activities which favor discourse and rhetoric over technical knowledge, she fears that this “future man” will be rendered incapable of understanding or even communicating the nature of his own powers. The possibility that humanity will ultimately destroy itself in its rebellion against life is at stake for both Arendt and Dostoevsky.

While advances such as automation have reduced the need for human labor or craftsmanship, human action and speech possess a unique capacity for revealing the intangible “who” of the actor (Arendt, 179). Action is not, as Austin might have us believe, just to “do things”; “things” sometimes happen, like the weather, and other times “things,” or at least non-humans, themselves “do things,” like a beaver building its dam. For Arendt, action and speech emerge from the given condition of “[h]uman plurality [. . . which] has the twofold character of equality and distinction” (175). Humans are equal insofar as they are capable of understanding each other, yet are distinct insofar as they require speech and action to “make themselves understood” (Arendt, 176). Thus, the mere “communication” of “immediate, identical needs and



wants” through “signs and sounds” does not constitute as speech for Arendt (176). Rather, the physical act itself and the accompanying word acquire their significance in the necessary communication of its purpose within the world:

The action [that the actor] begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do. (Arendt, 179)

Any given activity becomes an action in a moment of recognition. Both the purpose of the action and the unique actor who intends it can be identified within it. The action and the intention can both be perceived in the “brute form” of the act, but the revelation of the unique actor makes the action distinct, fundamentally unrepeatable. Furthermore, an action for Hannah Arendt is not always a strictly delineated, self-evident occurrence. She notes in *The Human Condition* that action in Greek and Latin has two different terms with distinct senses, with one signifying action as beginning or setting something in motion (*archein/agere*) and the other signifying action as achieving, finishing, or bearing (*prattein/gerere*) (Arendt, 189). An action often begins with an inaugural movement, but quite often this action is not complete until others have “join[ed]” in the “achievement [...] by ‘bearing’ and ‘finishing’ the enterprise, by seeing it through” (Arendt, 189). We can recall Smerdyakov finally revealing to Ivan that he indeed killed Fyodor while insisting that Ivan was somehow the primary killer: “You killed him, you are the main killer, and I was just your minion, your faith servant Licharda, and I performed the deed according to your word” (Dostoevsky, 623). If to act can simply mean to be the “start of so many consequences” as the narrator says of Ivan, it seems that one could incur plenty of guilt through the simple act of existing (Dostoevsky, 17). The extent of Ivan’s responsibility, and ultimately everyone’s responsibility, for the death of Fyodor Karamazov, including himself, is brought into question by the novel.

Before moving to Austin, how can we understand the “disclosure” of the who? An intention can be rendered intelligible through speech, but how could speech communicate the identity of the speaker himself? For “[t]he moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is” (Arendt, 181). Humans disclose themselves through speaking about their feelings, their past, their intentions, yet none of these characteristics of the person can exhaust or even explain *who* they are. And yet, the embodied, singular act, which Arendt describes as “like a second birth” (176), makes the sense of who someone is apparent “like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters” (180). To speak of *who* someone is in relation to *what* they have done is an act of faith. Indeed, stories and their telling for Arendt “tell us more about their subjects, the ‘hero’ in the center of the story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it, and yet they are not products, properly speaking” (184). These stories, while told by individuals, emerge from an “already existing web of human relationships,” a medium that “‘produces’ stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things” (Arendt, 184). While this web of action and reaction make it so that individual action “almost never achieves its purpose,” this same condition gives action its social efficacy and enables an action’s impact to outlast its ephemeral moment through storytelling (Arendt, 184). If literature can do anything, it can perhaps show us the moments of intersection between a plurality of unique actors who have failed to achieve their purpose.

We then move to J.L. Austin’s notion of the performative utterance, the speech act. While we have perhaps refined yet complicated our notion of both speech and action through a reading of Arendt, we will find that these complications become even more pronounced in *How To Do*

*Things with Words*. For this mystery of how we ever manage to get “things done” vis-a-vis words, and how we know if the thing has been done or what has been done, will be paramount to the entire scope of this project. Austin begins the text by situating himself in a philosophical tradition that has just started to shift from one of its oldest prejudices: “It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact’, which it must do either truthfully or falsely” (Austin, 1). For whatever it is worth, this prejudice will remain in play. Words, in their functioning, do seem to operate as semantic containers that express what is within and without us. When I say something such as “Get away from me!”, my words transfer and describe the truth of my feelings and my desires; they do no harm to the recipient and thus they would be foolish to say “He made me leave!” Yet, what was *I* doing *in* telling them to get away from me? It certainly indicates something about my interior state, yet perhaps I could have just said “You are making me quite upset.” The first ‘description’ of my interior state indicates much more urgency, much more of a desire on my part to be relieved of my offender’s presence. There is, of course, a difference in the mood of these two ‘statements,’ rather than a difference in intensity. The first statement is in an indicative mood with a subject, a verb, and an object. The second statement is imperative; the grammar of the statement does not necessarily indicate anything, but rather it does something; it commands. This is thus our first explicit example of a “speech act” or “performative utterance.” Austin gives a preliminary definition of the performative early on: “In these examples it seems clear to me that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (Austin, 6).

While Austin was the first to make this insight explicit, he credits himself as having merely helped to have “sort[ed] out a bit the way things have already begun to go and are going with increasing momentum in some parts of philosophy, rather than proclaiming an individual manifesto” (163). After vaguely alluding to philosophers who have recognized that not all utterances function as statements, he suggest that “[w]hatever we may think of any particular one of these views and suggestions, [...] it cannot be doubted that they are producing a revolution in philosophy. If anyone wishes to call it the greatest and most salutary in its history, this is not [...] a large claim” (Austin, 3-4). J. Hillis Miller writes with regard to Austin’s modest tone that it allows him to suggest that “[h]e is continuing only what others have set in motion, and he speaks only with their delegated authority” (25). Austin is acting, but only in the sense of *prattein*, of bearing or completing the philosophical revolution that has already been set in motion. Yet precisely in claiming that he is acting in this sense, he can both a) write with authority, as Miller suggested and b) “quietly clai[m] that he is performing the greatest and most salutary revolution in the history of philosophy” (Miller, 27). By depreciating his own efforts, Austin can assert the truth and authority of his word all the more -- a strange function of rhetoric that will be indispensable to our own understanding of how one does things with words.

*How To Do Things with Words* is a text that is brilliant in its capacity to perform the failure of a certain philosophical mode of discourse. J. Hillis Miller writes that “Austin’s genius as a philosopher is to allow his intelligence to be led, ‘by logical stages,’ to conclusions that he does not, at least not apparently, want to reach” (16). Miller describes Austin’s enterprise as a perpetual bogging down, using Austin’s own words from a passage in which he asks: “But now how, as philosophers, are we to proceed? One thing we might go on to do, of course, is to take it all back: another would be to bog, by logical stages, down” (Austin, 13). This image is

fascinating and telling. When one considers the Age of Enlightenment and its appeal to logic, reason, and science as methods for achieving political and economic liberty, one might think precisely of “light,” and ascension towards the light of Truth as in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Rather than founding societal structures on mythical and religious beliefs such as the divine right of kings, new governments and societies were to operate in accordance with the truth. Yet logic, the systematic study of reasoning and inference, here brings us down into a bog, defined as “[a] piece of wet spongy ground, consisting chiefly of decayed or decaying moss and other vegetable matter, too soft to bear the weight of any heavy body upon its surface” (*OED*, “Bog”). Austin uses quotidian, “ordinary” examples of performatives to guide his study, and something about the world of everyday encounters seems to bring his analysis of it into a bog, a soft, moist ground incapable of holding any serious mass. How then does logic guide Austin through this bog?

Austin’s theory begins with a dichotomy between constative utterances and performative utterances, yet the further Austin bogs down into all sorts of ordinary examples, the less tenable and the spongier this dichotomy appears. Austin begins with ordinary examples of actions in which language itself appears to perform the action, such as in marriage vows, a bet, a christening of a ship, or a bequeathing of property. Austin proposes to call these *performative utterances* as distinct from *constative utterances*, which are “statements” that simply indicate and assert a matter of truth. After further considering these different examples and how they operate, Austin attempts to create a schema of rules that allow for a performative utterance to be successful, to be happy. Since performatives do things rather than describe things, they cannot so much be false as they can be what Austin describes as “infelicitous,” failed and, therefore, unhappy performatives (14). The scheme Austin proposes comes down to this: There must be (A.1) an existing, accepted convention for a certain performative (A.2) the involved persons and

circumstances must be appropriate for that convention (B.1) The performative must be executed correctly and (B.2) completely (□.1) the participating persons must invoke that performative sincerely -- they must have the requisite feelings and intentions that the performative suggests (□.2) they must conduct themselves subsequently in accordance with those intentions (Austin, 14-15). These schema involve those conditions of action laid out by Arendt; human plurality (A.1/A.2 an accepted convention must exist), beginning and accomplishment (B.1/B.2 correctly and completely), and the intention of the doer (□.1/□.2 the intention must be sincere and fulfilled) (Austin, 14-15). Austin then tests these metrics by means of examples, yet each example seems to have some loophole, some puzzling quality that confounds Austin's project. Austin characterizes cases that break rules A.1 through B.2 as "misfires," acts that are purported but void due to some error in the process, and cases that break rules □.1-□.2 as "abuses," acts that may be successful in form, but are ultimately hollow abuses of the form (Austin, 16). He shows that everyday life is full of these unhappy performatives, but also that these failures occur in distinct ways, so that it is often tough to say where the performative went wrong. Our performatives often cannot be complete without the reactive performative of the other. I may be a professor with tenure, but if a student refuses to acknowledge my authority and listen to me, then the performative of lecturing will be infelicitous<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, Austin finds that certain statements can function as constatives and as performatives such as a warning in which someone says in an indicative mood "There is a bull in the field" (32). Austin relies upon "ordinary-language" so as to understand performatives in the most basic way, but this very "ground [and]

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<sup>4</sup> As Miller writes in the introduction to *Speech Acts in Literature*, "All teachers are, or ought to be, haunted by the possibility that they may not be authorized. That is on reason such a fuss is made nowadays about threats to academic tenure. Nevertheless, a lot of leeway is granted to the teacher, though there are always limits, different in each country and even in each institution. How does one determine the limits, as when we say, 'What he (or she) said in the classroom was beyond the pale?'" (5).

measure” for analysis proves to be “untidy” and full of irrational complexities (Miller, 54). As Dmitri Karamazov says, “Too many riddles oppress man on earth. Solve them if you can without getting your feet wet” (Dostoevsky, 108). Nonetheless, Austin “dusts himself off” each time and proceeds to “follo[w] the rules of philosophical discourse” to the point of “get[ting] himself in great intellectual trouble” (Miller, 18).

### **Tropes and Jokes**

In Lecture V of *How To Do Things with Words*, Austin attempts to find some kind of grammatical criterion for distinguishing between constative and performative utterances. J. Hillis Miller aptly notes that Austin “remains in his analyses at the level of grammar and logic without ever going on explicitly to the tropological or rhetorical levels” (39). A performative does not so much mean as it does act with words, units of reference and meaning that presumably do nothing in and of themselves. In a word, they are tropes, figures of speech, and like many figures of speech, they can often still function when taken in a literal, grammatical sense. The utterance “you look like a million bucks” can be analyzed purely as a statement, but the effect of the phrase emerges not from the isolated meaning of the words, but from the intangible web of human relations that situates the utterance. Depending on the context, the same phrase could be an ironic jab. How then might a rigorous, logical thinker such as J.L. Austin approach the decodification of one trope, let alone create a framework for how tropes work in general? Paul de Man in his essay “Semiology and Rhetoric” pursues this very question. De Man situates the reader in the emergence of a trend of French literary critics who took influence from the linguistic semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, which focused on how language functions in the form of “signs,” and who sought to apply these formal theories of language and grammar to the study of figures and tropes. De Man defines the question of

whether “figures of rhetoric can be included in a taxonomy [of grammatical structures] ” (6) as the “core of the debate going on [...] in contemporary poetics” (5). Indeed, J.L. Austin even attempts to create a taxonomy of performatives that includes “verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives” and “expositives,” yet even Austin claims that he is “far from equally happy about all of them,” acknowledging that his own attempt to do things with words has not been altogether “felicitous” (Austin, 150). De Man makes his own attempt at a grammatical reading of a figure, examining the role of the famous question that ends William Yeats’ “Among School Children”: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (qtd. In De Man, 11). De Man notes that most commentaries on the poem interpret the question as rhetorical, as a means of “stating [...] the potential unity between form and experience, between creator and creation” and that this reading is supported by the details of the poem which largely suggest the “possibility of convergence between experiences of consciousness [...] and entities accessible to the senses” (12). However, de Man asserts the possibility of a literal reading of the question:

It is equally possible, however, to read the last line literally rather than figuratively, as asking with some urgency the question we asked earlier within the context of contemporary criticism[.] [...] [S]ince the two essentially different elements, sign and meaning, are so intricately intertwined in the imagined ‘presence’ that the poem addresses, how can we possibly make the distinctions that would shelter us from the error of identifying what can’t be identified? The clumsiness of the paraphrase reveals that it is not necessarily the literal reading which is simpler than the figurative one[.] (De Man, 11)

De Man’s reading succeeds by virtue of its complexity. He shows how reading the question as literal actually keeps the poem’s meaning open. We might ask whether both readings are compatible; and if they prove to be otherwise, how then do we determine the correct reading? How do we know if a grapheme<sup>5</sup>, the words themselves, produce a rhetorical meaning? For de

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<sup>5</sup> A grapheme is the “class of letters and other visual symbols that represent a phoneme or cluster of phonemes,” which represent units of sound (*OED*, “grapheme”). Jacques Derrida uses the term “grapheme” in order to suggest the “writtness” of all signifying units or “marks,” and with this gesture subverts the privileged philosophical position given to speech over writing in the Western tradition: “This



Man, it is clear that the readings are not compatible, insofar as “one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other” (12). However, choice between one and the other is impossible, insofar as neither “can exist in the other’s absence” (De Man, 12): “There can be no dance [grammar] without a dancer [rhetoric], no sign without a referent. On the other hand, the authority of the meaning engendered by the grammatical structure is fully obscured by the duplicity of a figure that cries out for the differentiation it conceals” (De Man, 12). Thus, the determined, conventional dance of grammar cannot exist without a dancer to bring out its meaning. Yet, in the employment of a trope, the conventional effect of the dance becomes undermined by the possibility of a new meaning, a new take on the dance. While a dancer’s new take may take on an immediate, altered form, a change in the dance itself, the rhetorical effect of a certain phrase may be determined by a particular accent put on it by its speaker or simply by the context itself. Yet this determination lacks the rigorous, logical laws of grammar and thus always stands in opposition to grammar as a specter that “cries out for the differentiation it conceals.”

Austin’s failure to understand the rhetorical nature of performatives is ultimately caused by his exclusion of those who best understand rhetoric, that is, poets. After proposing the various rules and conditions that mark the performative, Austin creates a corresponding list of infelicities, a taxonomy of “misfires” and “abuses.” Since performatives are, thus far, a category of action, the infelicities of performatives are ones that apply to “all conventional acts” that “have the general character of ritual or ceremonial” (Austin, 19). Whether there is such a thing as an unconventional action, some kind of personal, singular expression, must be put into question for now. While Austin only examines the infelicities of performative utterances, he suggests that

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structural possibility of being weaned from the referent or from the signified (hence from communication and its context) seems to me to make every mark, including those which are oral, a grapheme in general” (Derrida, 10). Thus, the words that produce rhetoric can be “weaned” from the context in which it exists as rhetoric.

all actions have “whole dimensions of unsatisfactoriness [...] features [. . . that] would normally come under the heading of ‘extenuating circumstances’ or of ‘factors reducing [...] the agent’s responsibility,’” an action committed out of duress or by mistake (21). This then leads to the final “ill” which, unlike extenuating circumstances or misfires and abuses, “infect[s] *all* utterances”:

[A] performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance -- a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways -- intelligibly -- used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use -- ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiologies* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances. (Austin, 21)

Poetry, according to Austin, cannot get anything done. Ss Smerdyakov says, “[I]f we all started talking in rhymes [...] how much would get said, miss? Verse is no good, miss” (Dostoevsky, 224). One might ask generally what Austin is doing in italicizing certain words and phrases, something he does throughout the text. “*In a peculiar way*” itself has a peculiar effect, a sort of emphasis but on what exactly? “*Peculiar, parasitic, excluding*” -- both the words and their italicization seem to invoke some kind of forbidden realm, the desire to keep poetry either locked up or banished to the realm of the private.<sup>6</sup> The italicizations seem to reflect the insidious way that poetry manages to infect “*all* utterances.” Poetry knows no discourse that it will not parasitically leech upon, emptying out its rhetoric by employing it “not seriously.”

This non-serious, non-ordinary use of language appears to consist of what Jacques Derrida calls “citationality,” a capacity for a phrase to be cited or quoted without being used in an “ordinary” sense (17). A citational use of language does something, albeit indirectly, a kind of trope in which I cite someone else’s word yet imbue it with a different meaning or effect, one that is dependent upon the context of my citation. Performatives rely precisely on this

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<sup>6</sup> “Peculiar” can be traced back to the Latin *peculiaris* which can mean “of or relating to a person’s peculium, belonging to a person, one’s own, personal, private, that characterizes or belongs to a person, thing, or place, specific, special, singular, exceptional” (OED, “Peculiar”).

citatoriality, on people using conventional forms such as “I bet” in order to perform “a bet” in the particular time and place they are operating within. It is this citatoriality, the ability for a sign or mark to be legible even when divorced from its context, that allows for performatives and all sorts of rhetorical sleights of hand to function by imbuing a literal phrase with a different force, a different effect<sup>7</sup>. After Austin abandons the constative/performative dichotomy, after finding that “to state” is itself a performative, he moves towards a scheme for analyzing utterances that include the speech itself (locution i.e. the words), the intended purpose or effect of the speech (illocution -- what is done *in* saying those words), and the actual effect of the speech (perlocution -- what is done *by* saying those words) (98-101). Austin appeared to believe that literary gestures do not have any intentional effect or purpose in the manner that “ordinary” speech acts do:

[W]e may speak of the ‘use of language’ *for* something, e.g. for joking; and we may use ‘in’ in a way different from the illocutionary ‘in,’ as when we say ‘in saying ‘p’ I was joking’ or ‘acting a part’ or ‘writing poetry’ [...]. These references to ‘use of language’ have nothing to do with the illocutionary act. For example, if I say ‘Go and catch a falling star,’ it may be quite clear what the meaning and the force of my utterance is, but still wholly unresolved which of these other kinds of things I may be doing. There are parasitic uses of language, which are ‘not serious,’ not the ‘full normal use.’ The normal conditions of reference may be suspended, or no attempt made at a standard perlocutionary act, no attempt to make you do anything, as Walt Whitman does not seriously incite the eagle of liberty to soar. (Austin, 104)

Thus a joker, in the eyes of Austin, does no more than joke, a poet does no more than write poetry. Poets do not attempt to make you “do anything” as normal humans do when they give orders, persuade, or incite humans to act. Austin is touching on a real facet of literature; when something is said on stage, the “normal conditions of reference” are in fact suspended. Indeed, this is precisely what allows the dramatic irony of Greek Tragedies to occur. And perhaps it is

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<sup>7</sup> For Jacques Derrida, this citatoriality, or what he more generally calls “iterability,” is the fundamental structure of all signifying graphemes or marks, anything that we might read, use, or respond to in the way we do with written communications (Derrida, 12). Language, of course, consists of words that have been used in particular senses and contexts over time, and thus everytime we speak we essentially “cite.” Were one to counter this assertion by suggesting that a spontaneous outburst of sound does not cite anything, someone like Derrida might ask them to consider the phonemes, the iterable units of sound, that compose this supposedly unique utterance.

even advantageous for a poet to be able to claim that they are merely “writing poetry,” as Ivan says to Alysosha. J. Hillis Miller notes that Austin’s work is latent with all sorts of literary devices, from intertextual references to Shakespeare and Greek tragedies, absurd imaginary examples, fictional dialogues, to a pervasive use of irony and mixed metaphors: “Irony says one thing and means another. It fatally undercuts the force of whatever is said. How can we take seriously a man, like Austin, who always is or always may be ironically joking?” (Miller, 42). What is the true role of the fool, the joker, and what can he teach us about the relationship between performatives, rhetoric, and literature that Austin finds himself bogged down in?

Before moving to the world of Dostoevsky and the literary criticism surrounding his work, I shall cite the words of Dmitri Karamazov when complaining to his brother about the all-too-serious, liberal, and petty figure of Mikhail Rakitin in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “And he doesn’t understand jokes -- that’s the main trouble with them. They never understand jokes” (Dostoevsky, 587). The switch from third-person singular to plural shows that Rakitin’s failure to “understand” jokes is not significant as a personal trait so much as it is symptomatic of his type. This notion of understanding, of comprehension through reason and logic, holds serious weight in the context of a novel that centers around dichotomies such as reason/faith, understanding/believing, proof/miracle<sup>8</sup>. And indeed, how could one ever *understand* a joke? David Foster Wallace gives us some insight in his speech “Laughing with Kafka” that he delivered at a symposium centered around Kafka’s work:

[G]reat short stories and great jokes have a lot in common. Both depend on what communication-theorists sometimes call “exformation,” which is a certain quantity of vital information *removed from* but *evoked by* a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient. (Wallace, 61)

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<sup>8</sup> The question of whether these categories hold precisely as dichotomies, two fundamentally separate and distinct identities that do not merge with one another, will be fundamental to my reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Thus, a joke could perhaps be best “understood” not by what is said, but precisely by what is not said, those absent associative connections that “explo[de ...] within the recipient.” Yet, should we say that the laughter of the recipient is a kind of understanding? Indeed, were they to explain their amusement at the joke to someone, the joke would immediately be “empt[ied ...] of its peculiar magic,” arousing “a feeling not so much of boredom as offense, like something has been blasphemed” (Wallace, 61). It seems that laughter is itself the byproduct of rhetoric insofar as it comes not from understanding the literal information conveyed through the locution, but from the cognitive gap caused by the “information removed.” To explain a joke would be similar to saying “Achilles is similar to a lion insofar as they are strong and fearless” rather than “Achilles is a lion.” The explanation turns the metaphor, which operated by the absent information it evokes in the reader, into a rather literal comparison, a statement that functions by virtue of what is directly stated. Besides, who is to say that “Achilles is a lion” is meant to evoke anything at all, other than what it directly says?

Thus, we may expect to learn a thing or two about understanding rhetoric from a comedian. J. Hillis Miller notes that Austin himself is a bit of jokester who finds “a kind of savage fun in promulgating a new doctrine that he knows will seem scandalous to many, in thinking of striking and often somewhat insolent examples, and in tracing with evident ironic delight the course of his own bogging down” (41). As a philosopher making an ordinary, serious use of language, how could Austin possibly take delight in his own failure? In the final lecture, Austin takes account of his work and finds that the performative/constative dichotomy is no longer tenable and that the only framework he leaves is a distinction between locution (i.e. grammar) and illocution (i.e. rhetoric). While Austin’s revolution begins with a striking new dichotomy that could overcome the classical prejudice towards the truth value of statements, he

finds that this dichotomy “is in need, like so many dichotomies, of elimination” (148). Austin’s work does not so much show one how to do things with words, but rather reveals that words are somewhat shifty, capable of doing things themselves that we may not have intended. If this book proves to be a comedy of errors, has Austin then accomplished nothing? Perhaps so, at least according to his own criteria. But a joke’s wisdom is often displayed through the failure it performs. The possibility of misunderstanding, of a phrase meaning something else, is what jokes reveal. Just as Yeats asks, “How can we know the dancer from the dance,” a joke asks something like, “How is it that communication could ever go right?” Indeed, whether that very question is rhetorical or not will be paramount to the work done here. *How To Do Things with Words* begins with the goal of showing us precisely what its title indicates, yet it ends up complicating our understanding of who is doing the doing and of what actually gets done with words.

### **Fantastic Realism: Positionality and Paradox in Dostoevsky**

At first glance, *The Brothers Karamazov* certainly does not read like the normal, ordinary, serious discourse that J.L Austin sought to analyze. We might imagine that he would look skeptically at our endeavor to understand a novel through the lens of performativity, insofar as novels are not humans and thus cannot do anything. Yet even if novels can parasitically disguise themselves as ordinary discourse, we must still admit that *The Brothers Karamazov* does not even remotely do that. The book begins with a fictionalized word from the “author,” only to reveal an amateurish, ironic clown whose language certainly does not read like an ordinary utterance emitted by the living, embodied, self-conscious ego that we call Fyodor Dostoevsky. Throughout his career, Dostoevsky found himself subject to numerous and different critiques from his contemporaries that essentially charged Dostoevsky’s work with failing to

adhere to conventional standards of literary realism. Leo Tolstoy and Vissarion Belinsky believed Dostoevsky's characters to speak in a similarly frenzied, theatrical style that they found to be unnatural (Terras, *RD* 9). Others took Dostoevsky to task for having a predilection for deranged, psychopathic characters, such as Belinsky who believed that madmen "belong in lunatic asylums, not in novels" (qtd. in Terras, *RD* 12). Others went so far as to say that Dostoevsky's work testified to "his own diseased imagination" and to a "person exhausted by a severe illness" (qtd. in Gulland and Soboleva, 139). On a more positive note, Joseph Frank notes in *The Mantle of the Prophet* that Dostoevsky's use of a "rich network of biblical and literary allusions" and an enlarged "scale of his habitual poetics of subjectivity and dramatic conflict" in *The Brothers Karamazov* gives his characters a "monumentality" that has led critics to interpret the novel as occurring in a "disembodied locale" (567-569). Similarly, the contemporary critic Timothy Jacobs has likened *The Brothers Karamazov* to an "aesthetic allegory" in which the narrator makes "the distinction between dreams/hallucinations and the narrative *reality* vague and ambiguous," a technique that betrays the narrator as having "fabulated" in order to "use aesthetics to comment on [his culture's] ideolog[y], which enhances the dreamlike feel" (Jacobs, 284). Timothy Jacob's interpretation of the dream figures and themes that permeate *The Brothers Karamazov* will be crucial to our own. He takes the text to performatively depict the act of a narrator "fabulating" a tale and interprets this gesture as serving towards a broader critique of society. Yet, what good is the figure of the dream if we take it to be *proof* of narratorial trickery and then explain that trickery as serving a distinct social *purpose*? To the extent that Jacobs reads Dostoevsky as presenting an allegorical, fantastic world, he too joins the chorus of those who find Dostoevsky's work to "suffer from the fantastic," but justifies the lack of realism by

asserting the novel's illocutionary act to be an ideological critique of society by way of allegory (Dostoevsky, 638).

19th century European novelists frequently invoked realism as a kind of philosophy of life to which their literary depictions of reality were to adhere. Honore de Balzac, a definitive novelist of the 19th century, famously wrote a collection of ninety-one novels called *The Human Comedy* in an attempt to write a "history and a criticism of [French] society, an analysis of its evils, and a discussion of its principles" ("Author's Preface"). Balzac describes the moment of inspiration in terms of the fantastic, with a turn towards the precise lawfulness of realism:

The idea of *The Human Comedy* was at first as a dream to me, one of those impossible projects which we caress and then let fly; a chimera that gives us a glimpse of its smiling woman's face, and forthwith spreads its wings and returns to a heavenly realm of phantasy. But this chimera, like many another, has become a reality; has its behests, its tyranny, which must be obeyed. The idea originated in a comparison between Humanity and Animality. (Balzac, "Author's Preface")

It is curious enough that the inspiration for a "realistic" endeavour is expressed through the figures of the dream and the chimaera, fantastic figures that signify a deformed representation of reality. Furthermore, the part of this chimaera glimpsed is that of a "smiling woman's face," revealing this endeavour towards truth to be one seemingly driven by desire, desire to behold the ephemeral woman before the chimaera "spreads its wings" and vanishes into a "heavenly realm of phantasy." However, the dream recurs, begins making demands, enforcing its will through the unconscious of Balzac. The idea that came to him was that of a "comparison," that is an analogy, "between Humanity and Animality" (Balzac, "Author's Preface"). What is at stake with Balzac deferring his own authority, his own idea, to the forces of a fleeting dream that slowly took control of him? As with J.L. Austin, he too seems to wish to have a way out from taking full responsibility for his word. Balzac's wild idea stems from a belief that, since zoology and other natural sciences have mastered the realm of "nature," there could be some bold individual who



could write a zoology of humanity, of that strange “freak” that can be characterized as “nature *plus* society” (Balzac, “Author’s Preface”). Balzac’s introduction anticipates the trouble that comes with such a project, namely that while animal behavior may be simplistic and apt for systematic categorization, “man, by a law that has yet to be sought, has a tendency to express his culture, his thoughts, and his life in everything he appropriates to his use” (“Author’s Preface”). Balzac sees it as his responsibility to not only anthropologically document the whole of French society, but to derive from it some sort of eternal law that explains it, to find the “hidden sense of this vast assembly of figures, passions, and incidents” (“Author’s Preface”). Balzac’s discourse gets caught up in a tautology of cause and effect: “Thus depicted, society ought to bear in itself the reason if its working” (Balzac, “Author’s Preface”). He finds that in a predominantly Catholic, liberal constitutional monarchy (i.e. France) that “Religion and Monarchy” are in fact the “two eternal truths [...] two necessities towards which every writer of sound sense ought to try to guide the country back” (Balzac, “Author’s Preface”). Balzac observes society and finds that society does indeed confirm itself and the ideas it supposedly expresses. Now, we may accuse Balzac of being “autocratic and self-assertive,” as he anticipates (“Author’s Preface”). And indeed, he does claim to have achieved something so great and so unprecedented that it “authorizes me, I think” to write *The Human Comedy* -- a bold allusion to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (Balzac, “Author’s Preface). Yet, if we read him in good faith, we cannot accuse him of being self-assertive, of forcing his personal standards of realism upon us, insofar as his idea was given to him, promised to him by the “smiling woman’s face” and dictated to him by the “behests” of the chimaera’s insatiable thirst to be realized. Like Dostoevsky, Balzac’s belief in Patriarchy, in God and Country, informed his realism and caused him to see the minutia of

society as part of larger divine order. Yet while Balzac was praised for his realism, Dostoevsky was often charged with being a “fantasist,” a lover of the deranged and the psychopathic.

Dostoevsky’s own conception of realism is one that expresses a similarly bold, spiritual authority: “They call me a psychologist; this is not true. I am merely a realist in the higher sense, that is, I portray all the depths of the human soul” (qtd. in Bakhtin, *PDP* 60). Dostoevsky thus similarly posits himself as a realist whose vision can penetrate the “depths” of humanity. Yet Balzac’s introduction implicitly suggests the possibility of an *episteme*, of a divinely grounded *knowledge* that can behold the eternal within the minute behaviors and attitudes of French society. Furthermore, this *episteme* engenders “the law of the writer” which resides in his “judgment” and his “absolute devotion to certain principles” (Balzac, “Author’s Preface”). Insofar as Balzac finds the monarchical principle to manifest in the form of a “necessity,” it becomes necessary for him to guide us towards it and to shed its moral, teleological light upon the otherwise ambiguous details of each story. For Dostoevsky, an idea or law that explains reality cannot be derived from observing reality. Rather, it is the “idea” which organizes reality and allows humans to perceive “reality” as such.

You must depict reality ‘as it is,’ they say, but meanwhile such reality does not exist at all, nor has there ever been such a thing here on earth, because the essence of things is inaccessible to man and he perceives nature as it is reflected in his idea, after having passed through his senses. Consequently one must give free rein to the idea and not be afraid of the ideal. (qtd. in Terras, *RD* 40)

Thus, a realistic novel is not a constative mode of discourse, but a performative one, one that makes a declaration about the truth<sup>9</sup>. Insofar as the possibility of an *episteme*, a knowledge of reality “as it is,” is denied, all epistemic judgments of truth fall into the realm of *doxa*, the illusory realm of common opinion and ungrounded belief. Balzac’s view of reality could be

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as we’ve seen, every description seems to be a declaration, insofar as constative utterances still have the performative dimension of “asserting” or “positing.”

called *orthodox*, in that his *doxa* is set “right” or “straight” by the light of *episteme* (OED, “ortho”). For Dostoevsky, an orthodox intellectual position is already paradoxical, insofar as there is no one position or point of view through which reality is wholly revealed. Indeed, a paradox as such reveals a gap within the *episteme* to the extent that the paradox cannot be understood or set straight by orthodoxy. Dostoevsky asserts that insofar as reality is not a phenomenon, but rather is the possibility and ground of all phenomena, it cannot be examined as such. If we accept Dostoevsky’s supposition that reality “as it is” cannot be known and thus does not exist for us, then Balzac’s project is paradoxical, insofar as *para* indicates that his *doxa* is “amiss,” “to the side of” reality, an “alteration” of reality, an “error,” a necessarily erroneous perception or belief about reality (OED, “para”). The term paradox denotes that which is “contrary to received opinion or expectation,” that which errs from the common view (OED, “paradox”). Yet, the root *para* itself only denotes positionality; if there is no orthodox position from which to grasp the truth, all assertions of truth become *paradoxes* and all beliefs become admissible to the extent that they only reflect the arbitrary position of those who bear them. How can we then denounce Balzac’s orthodoxy as paradoxical when such a denouncement paradoxically reasserts the primacy of having the “right opinion” about reality (orthodox) over the wrong one (paradox)?

To negate the truth of epistemology through asserting the truth of its impossibility would be to take recourse to the same dichotomy between the straight opinion and the errant opinion that we have sought to overcome. Paul de Man notes in his essay “Rhetoric of Persuasion” that Friedrich Nietzsche runs into this very problem in deconstructing the ultimate principle of logic which demands that any utterance not contradict itself; Nietzsche shows that this law emerges through an act of positing, the creation of a position, of an immutable axiom that  $A=A$ . Logic

does not state in a constative mode that “opposite attributes cannot be ascribed to [one thing],” but rather it commands that they “cannot” be described. Logic is thus “an imperative, not to know the true [*erkennen*], but to posit [*setzen*] and arrange a world that *should be true for us*” (De Man, 120-121). However, Nietzsche cannot then dismiss the possibility of *erkennen*, cannot deny the “truth” of logic, without reasserting the primacy of truth-value upon which its axioms rest. However, we see through de Man’s reading that the stakes are quite higher than just wordplay, insofar as the Nietzschean “critique of metaphysics” holds consequences for the possibility of knowledge itself (De Man, 131). Paul de Man was infamous for his suggestion that the inhuman mechanics of grammar were hostile to the ideological dreams of rhetoric. This infamy increased after his death, after which it was learned that de Man faked his P.H.D. and also had written anti-Semitic articles during World War II in occupied France. Thus, we might conclude that a paradoxical orthodoxy must necessarily cannibalize itself and lead to the possibility of a lying cretin<sup>10</sup>, a man who believes in nothing. Indeed, J. Hillis Miller says of Paul de Man that his “entire work might be defined as a warning” (150), and we might wonder whether Paul de Man’s implicit suggestion that all men of knowledge are necessarily charlatans was not itself a warning, perhaps even a confession. Yet Dostoevsky, in his own embrace of paradox, finds affirmation in God and the immortal, unfinished *logos*, thus denying our proposition that the cretin is a liar.

If we free the notion of paradox from the cannibalistic logic of epistemology, we can understand Dostoevsky’s realism as one that evokes the divine precisely through the incomplete, fragmented, and relative position of the particular. If we compare Dostoevsky’s statement about

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<sup>10</sup> The Epimenides Paradox has been attributed throughout history to a mythical seer and poet named Epimenides from Crete, who was said to have once wrote that “All cretans are liars.” As long as I’ve known of this paradox, I have misunderstood it to be the “lying cretin” paradox. In the spirit of misquotation that manifests throughout *The Brothers Karamazov*, I shall allow my mistake to stand.

“giving free rein to the idea and not being afraid of the ideal” to Nietzsche and de Man’s critique of metaphysical knowledge, we see that they both employ the same critique of Western philosophy, yet they nonetheless come to different conclusions. Nietzsche famously suggested the notion of the overman, a man with one foot in the future who obeys the tyranny of his own law and asserts his own values in the face of dying values; of course, Nietzsche also wrote that “[w]hoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself,” again evoking the inherent cannibalism of the paradox asserting itself as orthodox (69). Dostoevsky came to regard himself as a fantastic realist, a paradoxical assertion insofar as we take fantasy and reality to be opposed, intrinsically separate properties (Frank, *FR* 290)<sup>11</sup>. How then did Dostoevsky develop his idea of fantastic realism? Joseph Frank turns to a *feuilleton* that Dostoevsky published in 1861 called “Petersburg Visions in Verse and Prose,” in which the narrator, who Frank views as parodying the bourgeois visions of St. Petersburg life by the *feuilletonist* I.I. Panaev, describes a crucial moment of consciousness that altered his perception of reality:

“It seemed, finally, that all this world with all its inhabitants strong and weak, with all its dwellings, the shelters of the poor or gilded places, in this crepuscular hour had turned into a fantastic magical reverie, a dream, which in its turn would pass away like vapor in the dark-blue sky.” It is this vision of the insubstantiality of the world the writer says, that brought about a major change in his inner life -- a change which, curiously enough, led him to a new orientation toward reality. He ironically points up the paradox of making such a tenuous, subjective experience the basis of an apprehension of the real. “Tell me, sir, have I not been a fantasist, a mystic, from very childhood? What occurred here? What happened? Nothing, simply nothing, only a feeling -- and otherwise, everything is just fine!” (Frank, *FR* 289)

Thus, an arbitrary feeling, a dream, an altered take on reality leads to a “major change in his inner life,” a “new orientation towards reality.” Insofar as the writer asserts his subjective experience as “the real,” the orthodox man can justly call him a madman who confuses

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<sup>11</sup> All references to Joseph Frank’s article “Dostoevsky’s Discovery of ‘Fantastic Realism’” will include the abbreviation *FR*.

subjective experience for objective reality, the unreal for the real. Thus, the narrator ironically pays his dues and negates the significance of his own interior change. But what do we make of this altered perception? We have seen the dangers of taking such a state to be a “truer state,” for example, in the form of those who use psychoactive chemicals to achieve a more pure state of consciousness, be it a spiritual state or a state of numbed productivity. However, what if we take fantasy to be a mere alteration of perception, an altered view of reality? What if we take paradox to be not “opposed” to common opinion, but to be “analogous” or “proximate” to it (OED, “para”). If we suspend the possibility that  $A=A$ , that reality has one true, identifiable nature, we can begin to see the possibility of some truth to be found in seemingly paradoxical, fantastic worldviews. Yet, just as the narrator in “Petersburg Visions” ironically concedes the untruth of his new truth, we must also accept that  $A$  could perhaps be equal to  $A$ , that there is a Truth relative to which every belief takes on its significance. If all knowledge itself is based on a declaration, a performative speech act that demands that  $A$  equate to something, then we must give “free rein” to this speech act, to this “idea” as Dostoevsky called it. Roman Jakobson paraphrased Dostoevsky in his own essay “On Realism in Art,” claiming that “Exaggeration in art is unavoidable, wrote Dostoevsky; in order to show an object, it is necessary to deform the shape it used to have; it must be tinted, just as slides to be viewed under the microscope are tinted” (Jakobson, 26). However, the specter of truth and knowledge still lurks; for if Dostoevsky calls himself a realist insofar as he deforms reality, mustn’t we acknowledge every author, every written work as a work of fantastic realism, insofar as it came from a consciousness necessarily possessed and altered by an “idea?” If reality consists of a myriad of positional consciousnesses, which position is most indicative of, most contingent to, most parasitic upon the Truth? How does Dostoevsky manage to portray “all the depths of the human soul?”

## **Towards an Ethical Reading: Bakhtin and Dostoevsky**

In his work on the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin largely critiqued the attempt of literary critics to systematically account for the novel. In the *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin describes his work as an attempt to overcome the “divorce between an abstract ‘formal’ approach” in literary criticism that focuses on the linguistic forms of poetics “and an equally abstract ‘ideological’ approach” that focuses on art’s capacity to communicate ideas about reality as it exists outside of the text (259). Implicit in Bakhtin’s work is a critique of modern systemization, the tendency of philosophers to analyze various phenomena as particular embodiments of universal criteria, no matter whether the criteria lie in the rules of grammar and logic or in the “nonverbal ‘outside,’ to which language refers” (De Man, 3), i.e. reality. Yet before his well-known objections made to such modes of literary criticism, Bakhtin found himself addressing the very same split between “formal-ethics” and “content-ethics” in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, one of his earliest works that was published posthumously in 1986 (22). The difference between these two branches of ethics lies in how they conceive of the ethical “ought,” the imperative that calls for humans to act in a particular manner deemed ethical. In formal ethics, the ought is a fundamental “category of consciousness,” yet the truth of an individual’s particular ought can only be grounded insofar as the ethical norm that informs it can be universally applied (Bakhtin, *TPA* 25); it thus attempts to conceive of a “theoretical consciousness” that ignores the particular circumstances of any given ethical situation (Bakhtin, *TPA* 25). In content ethics, ethical norms are justified by the very principles and evaluations that they contain, yet these principles can only be blindly posited as such. For Bakhtin, both branches fall short in seeking to locate the “ought” through the truth-value of a given norm. For Bakhtin, the “ought” can emerge for the ethical subject only in the

unique, concrete unity of their life, and only they can be “individually answerable” for their decisions (*TPA* 28).

Bakhtin’s view of the act encompasses the whole of the life process: “Every thought of mine, along with its content, is an act or deed that I perform -- my own individually answerable act or deed [...]. It is one of all those acts which make up my whole once-occurrent life as an uninterrupted performing of acts” (*TPA* 3). While Arendt and Austin lay out various criteria for action that allows a given action to be, while complex in nature, legible, Bakhtin understood life itself to be an endless act. While Arendt and Austin come to find speech itself to be a form of action, Bakhtin takes it further by characterizing the private and intangible movement of thought as an act. Indeed, the very “act” of living is done as “an actual living participant in the ongoing event of Being” (Bakhtin, *TPA* 2), which is to say that to live itself is to occupy a “unique and never-repeatable” position in any “given once-occurrent [spatio-temporal] point” in life (Bakhtin, *TPA* 40). Both formal-ethics and content-ethics take positionality to be unessential in the determination of the ethical “ought,” yet for Bakhtin an ethical understanding of any situation must begin with an acknowledgement of a given life as unique and never-repeatable. If ethics has generally conceived of the “ought” as a norm to be applied to particular situations, Bakhtin radically reverses this by deriving the ought from the particular situation itself; in this regard, no one person’s “ought,” their sense of individual answerability, can be the same as another’s. A theoretical ought that is communicable within “the objective unity of a domain of culture” constitutes a moment within the act, indeed a moment that the actor can take into consideration (Bakhtin, *TPA* 2). Yet the “ought arises only in the correlating of truth (valid in itself) with our actual act of cognition, and this moment of being correlated is historically a unique moment: it is always an individual act or deed that does not affect in the least the objective theoretical validity



of a judgment” (Bakhtin, *TPA* 5). Thus, while theoretical discourses from psychology to biology can comprehend an action from a certain mode of interpreting behavior, this theoretical “transcription” is not equivalent to the actual moment of action as perceived and thought by the doer (Bakhtin, *TPA* 11). Though the actor can be aware of their own action as driven by some sort of theoretical law, this special answerability is meaningful only to the extent that the actor deems it to be so: “It is not the content of an obligation that obligates me, but my signature below it -- the fact that at one time I acknowledged or undersigned the given acknowledgement” (Bakhtin, *TPA* 44). As we found earlier, an action may possess a form and content that can be conventionally understood, but the performative effect of that action is brought about by the effect of the signature, the disclosure of the doer.

For Bakhtin, ethical systems tend to fall short in comprehending ethical action as a moment of theoretical judgment:

The ongoing event can be clear and distinct, in all its constituent moments, to a participant in the act or deed he himself performs. Does this mean that he understands it logically? That is, that what is clear to him are only the universal moments and relations transcribed in the form of concepts? Not at all: he sees clearly *these* individual, unique persons whom he loves, *this* sky, and *this* earth and *these* trees [...]. He intuits their inner lives as well as desires; he understands both the actual and the ought-to-be sense of the interrelationship between himself and these persons and objects -- the truth of the given state of affairs -- and he understands the ought of his performed act, that is, *not* the abstract law of his act, but the actual, concrete ought conditioned by his unique place in the given context of the ongoing event. (Bakhtin, *TPA* 30)

Bakhtin’s remarks on the particularity of the world that the actor participates in echoes the very words of Ivan Karamazov when admitting an instinctual love for life to Alyosha: “I want to live, and I do live, even if it be against logic. Though I do not believe in the order of things, still the sticky little leaves that come out in the spring are dear to me, the blue sky is dear to me, some people are dear to me, whom one loves sometimes [...] without even knowing why” (Dostoevsky, 230). Ivan’s ultimately errs in conflating logic with “meaning.” Alyosha tells Ivan that he should indeed love life “before logic,” and not in opposition to it, and that “only then will

[he] also understand its meaning” (Dostoevsky, 231). For Bakhtin, one needs to love, to have skin in the game, before they can truly understand the “meaning” of the world they participate in. Rational abstractions cannot help us understand our actual relation to objects and persons in the world insofar as rational thinking divests its object of its unique, unrepeatable presence in the world. The categorical imperative can abstractly represent the possibility of certain ethical situations, but it cannot comprehend or describe the ethical significance of a particular act. Rather, the ethical significance emerges precisely in the “emotional-volitional tone” that accompanies any action, a tone that reflects “a certain ought-to-be attitude of consciousness, an attitude that is morally valid and answerably active” (Bakhtin, *TPA* 36). Rather than suggesting human emotion to be fortuitous or even harmful to the possibility of ethical action, Bakhtin seems to suggest that ethics begins with an affirmative and active desire to realize what “ought-to-be.” The active answerability of the subject does not, however, take on the “contentual constancy of a principle” or a law, but rather can only be characterized as a “faithfulness [being-true-to]” in relation to the world one participates in (Bakhtin, *TPA* 38). For Bakhtin, every consciousness experiences the world around them as “an architectonic whole from which [their] deed issues or comes forth” (*TPA* 57), in which things take on their sense and acquire value in relation to the center of the participating consciousness. He suggests that the possibility of “representing” such a structure could only begin with a consideration of aesthetic sight:

The unity of the world in aesthetic seeing is not a unity of meaning or sense -- not a systematic unity, but a unity that is concretely architectonic: the world is arranged around a concrete value-center, which is seen and loved and thought. What constitutes this center is the human being: [... a]ll possible Being and all possible meaning are arranged around the human being as the center and the sole value. This does not mean, however, that it is the hero of a work who must be presented as a value that has a positive content, in the sense of attaching some positive valutional epithet to him, such as ‘good,’ ‘beautiful,’ and the like. On the contrary, the epithets may be all negative, the hero may be bad or pitiful or someone defeated and surpassed in every way. Nevertheless, it is upon him that my *interested* attention is riveted in aesthetic seeing, and everything that constitutes the best with respect to content is disposed around *him* -- the bad one - - as around the one who, in spite of everything, is the sole center of values. In aesthetic seeing

you love a human being not because he is good, but, rather, a human being is good because you love him. (Bakhtin, *TPA* 61-62)

Thus, a faithful act of reading cannot proceed through scrutinizing the hero in accordance with our own values; rather, our ability to understand their unique, value-governed position can only begin with a disposition of faith, of understanding their existence to be necessary and their values to emerge from their necessary and unique participation in the world. While we may still come to find the hero to be “bad,” to act unethically, our understanding of what is “good” can only come through imagining their position and the world of values that it constitutes.

Mikhail Bakhtin ultimately found Dostoevsky’s works to be a masterful expression of the radical novelty and unfinalized nature of the novel as it emerged historically. For Bakhtin, the study of the novel was thrilling due to the complications it posed for literary theory: “[T]he novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted. The forces that define it as a genre are at work before our very eyes [...]. The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities” (*DI* 3). Yet, at the same time, the failure for critics to find “a purely poetic formulation” in the novel led to the idea that the novel was not a poetic but a purely rhetorical form, an “artistically neutral means of communication” that allows for “purely thematic analyses” of the text (Bakhtin, *DI* 260-261). If the novel lies somewhere in between grammar and rhetoric, between idle poetry and practical communication, how can we characterize its performative attributes? For there are certainly aspects of both; *The Brothers Karamazov* has moments of deeply spiritual, poetic allegory and other moments of crude, humorous dialogue between all-too-human personas. Indeed, the “novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” (Bakhtin, *DI* 261), including forms such as “direct authorial literary-artistic narration”; “stylization of [...] oral narration [skaz]”; “stylization of [...] semiliterary (written) every day narration”; “extra-artistic

authorial speech (moral [...] or scientific statements [...], ethnographic descriptions [etc.]”); and, of course, “the stylistically individualized speech of characters” (Bakhtin, *DI* 262). The prominence of the direct authorial voice in novels had led critics to subsume the novel under “epic style,” taking the narration to be the primary element (Bakhtin, *DI* 265). But while the “authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it [...] is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendent,” the novel is “determined by experience,” a “zone of contact” that “passes through the intermediate stages of familiarization and laughter” (Bakhtin, *DI* 15). Indeed, the novel descends from the literary genres of the past, yet it “sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness” (Bakhtin, *DI* 7).

For Bakhtin, the historical phenomenon of the novel uniquely reveals and portrays the dialogic qualities of “heteroglossia” that have always been present in language and the verbal arts. Bakhtin notes that this quality of the novel emerges precisely from its internal stratification of different voices which are put into dialogue, i.e. dialogized, in the novel (*DI* 262-263). While a “direct authorial voice” may appear to organize and control the text, the emergence of other voices, whether through direct speech or in the dialogized speech of the narrator, renders the text to be essentially dialogic. In his essay “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin attempts to situate these qualities of the novel historically at a moment of “rupture” in European civilization: “[Europe’s] emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships” (Bakhtin, *DI* 11). Yet this sense of linguistic contact emerges not only from exposure to other languages, but occurs internally within a given language:

The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generation and age groups, tendentious languages, language of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions,

languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases) -- this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. (Bakhtin, *DI* 263)

Thus, the novel's tendency towards dialogue, to put separate voices and languages into contact, reflects the "dialogized heteroglossia" that occurs within all languages (Bakhtin, *DI* 263).

Bakhtin suggests that while the "centripetal forces" of linguistic unification are always at play, these forces are countered and undone by the "centrifugal, stratifying forces" of heteroglossia that occur with every new utterance (*DI* 272). The modern "writer of artistic prose" finds the object of his story to be already "surround[ed]" by the "Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object" (Bakhtin, *DI* 278). Thus, each word in the novel is "shaped [through] dialogic interaction with an alien word" (Bakhtin, *DI* 279). For example, after the conniving, liberal Rakitin tells Dmitri about various scientific studies regarding the human brain and behavior, Dmitri comically refers to Rakitin and others who place their faith in science as "Bernards," in reference to a renowned French scientist of the 19th century named Claude Bernard (Dostoevsky, 588). Dmitri's ability to characterize a whole social group through citing a proper name reveals how a word does not simply attach itself to one object, but becomes shot through with the words and intonations of others each time it is employed.

In his reading of Dostoevsky in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin found Dostoevsky's innovative "polyphonic novel" to provide a framework for understanding not only the dialogic form of the novel, but of language and life itself. In the prior excursus on paradox and realism, we asked how it was that Dostoevsky managed to "portray all the depths of the human soul" as he claimed to do. For Bakhtin, the answer was in Dostoevsky's radically innovative form of the polyphonic novel:

*A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What*

unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a *plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. Dostoevsky's major heroes are [...] *not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse*. In no way, then, can a character's discourse be exhausted by the usual functions of characterization and plot development, nor does it serve as a vehicle for the author's own ideological position [...]. The consciousness of a character is given as *someone else's* consciousness [...] yet at the same time it [...] does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness. (Bakhtin, *PDP* 6-7)

We can identify this moment as one that brings together Bakhtin's earlier work on ethics and aesthetic sight with his later, more well-known contributions to literary theory. As discussed, Bakhtin envisioned an "architectonics" of aesthetic sight that would attempt to understand any action or utterance as it relates to the "actual, concrete center of values" that resides in the unique and unrepeatable act of living (*TPA* 61). If Bakhtin ever found anything close to such an architectonic, it must have resembled the polyphonic structure of Dostoevsky's novels, one whose lack of a determinate, authoritative center ultimately rendered the reader "a participant" in the dialogic interaction of consciousnesses depicted (*PDP* 18). Although Dostoevsky makes use of a direct, authorial narrative voice, such as in *The Brothers Karamazov* in which the narrator is the fictionalized author of the text, the narrator's discourse "is one discourse among many" (Bakhtin, *PDP* 250), and the author's discourse "about a character is organized as discourse about *someone actually present* [and] *capable of answering him*" (Bakhtin, *PDP* 63). Thus, Dostoevsky's works, while masterful aesthetic expressions, are also highly ethical, insofar as he respects the individual answerability of his heroes. There are moments in which the narrator omnisciently depicts the most private, internal movements of thought and feeling within a character, yet this mode of awareness is only one amongst many, as characters are depicted from a variety of perspectives, none of which exhaust the character's ability to speak and answer for themselves. The "polyphonic novel" ultimately reflects the unfinalized, dialogic, processual nature of life and consciousness, yet at the expense of obeying conventions of literary realism.

As we begin our close reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*, we will grapple with the vague narrator-author who appears to control and organize the multiform voices of the text. The possibility that this narrator-figure has simply concocted the whole story, presenting us with fantastic yet impossible moments of vision into the soul, has been considered by scholars of the novel. Insofar as Dostoevsky presents his narrator as living in the world he depicts, the moments of omniscient, epic narration that emerge seem unrealistic, the work of authorial fantasy. In the following chapter, we will seek to understand how Dostoevsky's attempt to paradoxically depict "all the depths of the human soul" ultimately makes a case for the truth-value of fiction, the necessity of fiction in our attempts to comprehend reality.

## Chapter 2: Narrative Poetics and Rhetoric

The complex figure of the narrator in *The Brothers Karamazov* has baffled critics. Attempts to classify narration tend to follow logical lines of distinction in which a narrator is identified by his spatial and temporal distance from his story, as well as his psychological distance measured "by the degree of his involvement" in the tale" (Thompson, 26-27). We will see from Diane Thompson's analysis of the narrator that he seems to occupy different temporal, spatial, and psychological perspectives throughout the novel, thus "creat[ing] a complementary narrative system wherein he compensates for the limitations of the one with the advantages of the other" (27). Furthermore, the narrator in *The Brothers Karamazov* does not confine himself to a storytelling mode, but will interrupt the novel to discuss the theme of jealousy in Shakespeare's *Othello* (Dostoevsky, 380) or talk about social issues related to Russian politics and literature. Victor Terras writes that "Dostoevsky likes to introduce a literary subtext into his dialogue, a trait that runs the danger of deconstructing its realism, as the reader's mind is directed to the text quoted or alluded to and away from the situation at hand" (Terras, *RD* 9). The

peculiar, anarchical style of the narrator resists traditional narrative analysis and has caused Dostoevsky's detractors to accuse him of inserting his own voice into the utterances of the narrator and the character. And there would seem to be merit, as critics such as Joseph Frank have demonstrated that Dostoevsky's narrative techniques are remarkably similar in his novels and in his own journalistic publications:

Dostoevsky's column [called *Diary of a Writer* in a journal called *The Citizen*] attracted immediate and favorable attention. Whether one agreed or not with his views, it was impossible not to appreciate the vigor, ingenuity, and expressiveness of his writing and his novelist's gift for dramatizing his ideas in the form of thumbnail sketches and sharply etched dialogic exchanges. These imparted an irresistible freshness and animation to whatever subject he addressed. Mikhail Bakhtin [...] also remarked on this feature of his expository style. His "manner of developing a thought is everywhere the same: he develops it dialogically, not in dry logical dialogue, but by juxtaposing whole, profoundly individual voices; in his polemical articles he does not really persuade but rather organizes voices, yokes together semantic orientations in some form of imagined dialogue." (Frank, 87)

Indeed, it is rather easy to see that plenty of the statements made by the narrator and other characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* echo statements and ideas conveyed by the actual Fyodor Dostoevsky. And yet, the voice consistently recognized as being *Dostoevskian* is precisely a lack of a unified voice; whether in his opinion pieces or in his novels, Dostoevsky's "manner of developing a thought is everywhere the same," which is to say that he constructs a narrative dialogically, through voices that are not omniscient, outside of the text, or authoritative, but rather are addressed to and in communication with other voices. We recognize Dostoevsky through the mark of his own self-effacement. Dostoevsky's apparent violence towards the conventions of realism was in the name of precisely a "higher realism," in which truth is never statically organized by a higher authority but rather is embodied in dialogic communication between self-conscious humans. To confront the reader with numerous forms of mediacy, narratorial masks, and poetic styles could be seen as the text "deconstructing its own realism," but only in the sense that it shows reality to be an experience mediated by mediacy. To call a



narrator unreliable, in the way the concept is usually employed, would ultimately be tautological to Dostoevsky, insofar as all narration relies on an ethical plea of reliability. Who could be a more reliable narrator other than an omniscient, God-like figure? Yet we recall that the orthodox view paradoxically forgets its own position in relation to the truth and substitutes its “realism” for reality.

Most critics of the novel have noticed that the narration is at some points expository, personal, and in the first-person, while at other times it reverts to a minimal, dramatic, third-person representation of the characters speaking and acting. In the first-person mode, the narrator often seems unreliable and acknowledges the limitations of his impressions, while other moments of third-person narration reveal details regarding interactions and events so private that the narrator could not have witnessed them himself. This has led Joseph Frank to suggest that there are “two narrators provided [...] one who comes to the foreground and is indirectly characterized in various ways [...] another who allows the characters to express themselves in lengthy monologues or in dramatic confrontations with hardly any commentary at all” (572). While Frank’s suggestion entails a rather unorthodox personification of the narrative function, this division does then reconcile the breakdown of “realism” that would occur if the two functions were to be personified by one narrator. Literary critic Timothy Jacob, whose work will be discussed later in this chapter, suggests in his comparative reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Infinite Jest* that both novels can be read as “(twice) fabulated by their respective chatty narrators who convey the narrative events like an ‘amateur writer’ [...] and who tell magnificent and wide-ranging stories” (Jacobs, 279). Jacobs suggests that Dostoevsky not only fictionalized his own narrator as an author, but that his own narrator fabulates and, thus, lies about the tales that he tells. However, this fictive status does not devalue the novel’s content, but

rather allows it to be represented as an “aesthetic allegory” with poetics that capture the strange, uncanny feeling of a dream (Jacobs, 289). Jacobs’ analysis only seems to show that literature, regardless of its fictive status or the fictiveness of the narrator, has a function and thus can “do things” performatively. Yet, if we wish to truly understand the narrator’s poetics, we cannot seek to offer fictional or rhetorical premises that account for the narrator, but rather we can only follow the rhetorical lines of the text.

### **“From the Author”: A Failed Introduction**

Through fictionalizing the narrator as the author of the text and providing a fictional preface, Dostoevsky establishes a consistent “literary subtext” throughout the text, but to what end? Literary prefaces have most likely existed at least as long as self-proclaimed authors have been publishing their work in various mediums. As we saw with Honore de Balzac’s introduction to his *Human Comedy*, such a statement allows the author to explain, and thus implicitly justify, their goals or intentions behind writing a certain work. While modern printed novels tend to include the author’s introduction along with the printed novel, there is generally a clear demarcation that separates it from the rest of the text; and for good reason, as the author’s statement of intention must necessarily occur outside of the text, in a clearly different mode or form. If we think through the terms of Austin, only the author’s preface can truly be performative, insofar as it is not suspended from the ordinary circumstances of everyday life. One of these prerequisites of real life as told by Austin is that the subject of the performance must intend to convey the conventional effect associated with the performative. The author of fictional works does not intend the words he writes and even attempts to create the effect of someone else intending those words -- a curious, parasitic mockery of real life. If we take an author to generally be a joker, then what do we make of the prominence of these prefaces

throughout literary history? The comic explosion of a joke would be totally lost if it was preceded by a serious, dry discourse that announced the joker's mischievous intentions. Yet even if we accept the wisdom of jokes and the performativity of literature to be truthful premises, we then must view the author's preface as the real parasite here, insofar as its dry, constative mode keeps us from the play of figural reading. If a reading of a text operates along such figural lines, then an author's preface could only attempt to impose some fixed semantic order upon the play of rhetorical figures. While any given passage or word within a text can magically evoke that which is absent from it, an author's preface often disenchants this magic through providing explicit, intended semantic lines along which to read the text. It is often for this reason that many readers choose to read such forewords after they have finished reading the work itself.

The narrator's preface establishes a dialogized voice that will appear throughout as the voice of an author who controls the text. While an author's preface generally operates in a measured, constative mode that counteracts the playful performativity of the text, here the very concept of authority and intention are brought into the realm of play. An authoritative discourse functions in relation to the ethical authority of the Author, the one who speaks and intends his words. Literary discourse seemingly cannot be authoritative insofar as it is inherently playful and self-effacing. Yet the performance of authority is one that attempts to blot out any trace of its own performance: "Another's discourse [as authoritative discourse] performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth -- but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world" (Bakhtin, *DI* 342). Similarly, such a performance in literature leads to the appearance of the monologic narrator whose "monologic design" constructs a "closed" hero with defined "semantic boundaries" presented within an "objective authorial world, objective in relation to the hero's consciousness" (Bakhtin, *PDP* 52).

Thus, monologic narrators are somewhat totalitarian; they create the objective conditions and boundaries of a world in which the subjective, heroic consciousness is ideologically trapped. The hero becomes an object, a figure to be understood through analysis, in relation to the more direct word of the narrator.

In his very first words, the narrator establishes his discourse as dialogic, performative, and parasitic upon monologic, ordinary discourses. Rather than writing with an unselfconscious voice of authority, the narrator immediately situates us in the depicted present of his own writing act: “Starting out on the biography of my hero, Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov, I find myself in some perplexity” (Dostoevsky, 3). If we were to compare Leo Tolstoy, an equally essential Russian voice of the 19th century, as a traditional foil to Dostoevsky, we might cite the opening lines of *Anna Karenina*: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy, 1). Tolstoy does not announce his own commencement of the novel explicitly, but rather begins it with a simple, monologic utterance. But with our narrator, we are dealing with a joker who shows his own cards from the get-go. If the parasitism of literature consists in its mimicry of serious discourses, then our narrator will not even attempt to pull the wool over our eyes. Or will he? Indeed, what kind of literary performative might we classify this opening locution as? What is he doing in writing about his own writing of the novel? Of course, he is explaining, he is justifying his work, yet the problem is that our narrator anticipates and announces his own failure to do so: “I find myself in some perplexity. Namely, that while I do call Alexei Fyodorovich my hero, still, I myself know that he is by no means a great man” (Dostoevsky, 3). While a bolder, more professional writer might simply declare “Alyosha” to, in fact, be “a great man,” this timid amateur of a narrator anticipates that such an authoritative performative may not be so felicitous. For while he “calls” Alyosha “my hero,” he ultimately

“know[s] that he is by no means a great man.” The logical contradiction manifests from the implicit suggestion that a “hero” need be “a great man,” and thus we find that there is a disparity between the name assigned, “hero,” and the figure itself, Alyosha. To call a “by no means [...] great man” a “hero” is an infelicitous performative, a misfire, specifically a “misapplication” insofar as it breaks rule A.2 which requires that “the particular persons and circumstances [...] must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked” (Austin, 15). Insofar as the conventional hero need be “a great man,” Alyosha is an inappropriate person for such a procedure. Yet the narrator would not be wrong per se but would merely be unsuccessful in his performance. It is also possible that his failure may not be due to Alyosha’s inappropriate qualities, but rather may be due to the absence of an existing convention in which a “hero” may be understood as something other than a “great man,” a breaking of rule A.1 (Austin, 15). In such a case, the narrator’s anxiety wouldn’t seem so foolish but might instead appear as a melancholic acknowledgement that the conventional, “orthodox” view does not permit a fellow like Alyosha to be accepted as a “hero.” It seems as though we can see Dostoevsky’s own anxiety that the *doxa* of the Russian intelligentsia would blind them to the possibility of seeing Alyosha’s greatness. In such a case, his performative would be a failure, but an inevitable one, a failure inscribed by the public. If the failure is a misfire due to the lack of a suitable convention, the narrator can then subtly shift the blame onto his reader. He is like the professor who cannot successfully lecture because his students refuse to recognize his authority as a professor and thus do not listen to him.

The possibility then lingers that this performed confusion or naivety is actually a veiled slight against the reader. For the narrator claims that he “can foresee the inevitable questions such as: What is notable about your Alexei Fyodorovich that you should choose him for your

hero? What has he really done? To whom is he known, and for what? Why should I, the reader, spend my time studying the facts of his life” (Dostoevsky, 3). The final question is ultimately the most significant for the narrator and for us: “This last question is the most fateful one, for I can only reply: perhaps you will see from the novel” (Dostoevsky, 3). If we take our narrator to be as foolish as he presents himself, this solution to a paragraph of prolonged, chatty dialogue with an imagined reader proves to be comically unnecessary. In nearly one hundred words, the narrator effectively says by way of preface, “Why should you read this book? Well, perhaps you will know once you read it,” reducing the whole preface to an unnecessary rhetorical question. If literary theory can only be justified by literature, then it would make sense for us all to be quiet and let literature stand for itself. What is the use of all these foolish gestures of apology and self-effacement on behalf of the narrator? The narrator’s dialogic address towards the imagined reader seems to bob and weave, treating us as hostile critics rather than as faithful readers. In degrading himself, he attempts to anticipate our criticisms before we have the chance to voice them, a characteristic quite typical of Dostoevskian heroes and narrators (Bakhtin, *PDP* 53). Yet what is this effect of this circular, self-conscious anxiety, what is the narrator getting at? If he is simply a joker, a true poet, then we can only waste time in dissecting his joke as such. To take his joke seriously would be the kind of indulgent, unnecessary literary criticism that he is simultaneously performing and critiquing. Yet, if we take the narrator to be a more clever rhetorician, a poet with a goal in mind, then this question may still indeed be “fateful” for us.

The narrator continues: “But suppose they read the novel and do not see, do not agree with the noteworthiness of my Alexei Fyodorovich? I say this because, to my sorrow, I foresee it. To me he is noteworthy, yet I decidedly doubt that I shall succeed in proving it to the reader” (Dostoevsky, 3). It is evident enough that the narrator’s fretting is superfluous, insofar as every

novel is conditioned by the possibility of criticism. It is only natural that some people will not view Alyosha as heroic, and thus cannot call Alyosha any hero of theirs<sup>12</sup>. And indeed, to the extent that the narrator gives us a “hero” whose religious beliefs affirm Russian Orthodoxy in the face of an intellectual climate increasingly inclined towards atheism and socialism, such a reaction may rightly be foreseen. But it is due to this very matter that the original question then becomes eschatological, once concerned with the fate of Russia and man. The narrator describes the question as fateful precisely because his only response is that they will see from the novel; the fate of the question rests upon the fate of the novel. If the book turns out to be infelicitous, if we find Alyosha to in fact be no hero of “ours” in a time like our own, then the fate of these two questions will be answered in the negative: A) Should we read *The Brothers Karamazov*? and B) Is there a case to be made for an Orthodox, Christian hero, either in Dostoevsky’s epoch or our own? If these two fates rest upon each other, then the narrator is right to “doubt that I shall succeed in proving it [the noteworthiness of Alyosha and the subsequent value of the book] to the reader.” Yet why should the success of a book be contingent upon its conforming to a dominant *doxa*? Indeed, Dostoevsky often found himself quite at odd with his literary contemporaries. Dostoevsky’s ideological and aesthetic tendencies went directly at odds with the “positivist social determinism” that informed the socialism and liberalism of many prominent Russian writers and critics (Terras, *RD* 8). It is also true that Dostoevsky’s works were in a sense ideological and that *The Brothers Karamazov* is a work that, by all appearances, attempts to seduce the reader into Christian love through the vessel of Alyosha. Victor Terras suggests that the reader’s own ideological beliefs may inevitably shape their judgment of Dostoevsky’s writing:

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<sup>12</sup> We might wonder if a hero can be a hero without being “someone else’s hero” and thus an object whose merit emerges from the subjective judgments of the one who beholds it.

Other charges related to the moral aspects of Dostoevsky's works are also a matter of ideology. Such are the charges of unctuousness and 'rosy Christianity.' The former is a matter of faith: a nonbeliever like Nabokov will find the reading of the Gospel that brings together 'the murderer and the harlot' to be simply in bad taste. The believer will find it moving and edifying. (Terras, *RD* 12)

In light of this comment, the narrator's performative dismay becomes rather appropriate; if non-belief increasingly shapes mainstream ideology, and if literature itself can only function in relation to mainstream ideology, then even Dostoevsky himself would be right to foresee his failure to "prove" to his critics that a Christian hero, in fiction and in reality, would be "noteworthy." This ideological function attributed to literature reflects Ivan's ironic critique of Russian "boys": "Naturally, I will not run through all the modern axioms laid down by Russian boys on the subject, which are all absolutely derived from European hypotheses; because what is a hypothesis there immediately becomes an axiom for a Russian boy" (Dostoevsky, 235). Indeed, must the success of some "muddled poem" or novel really be "proved" along logical lines in accordance with the posited axioms of Russian *doxa*? If we agree with the implicit premise that literature, as a performative, can only be felicitous if "accepted convention" deems it to be, then it would seem that the socialists have won. Literature itself becomes subordinated to the logical positivist thinking of Russian liberals.

After acknowledging the inevitable failure of justifying his hero, the narrator nonetheless doubles down and proceeds to justify his noteworthiness in the same ironical, hedging tone:

The thing is that he does, perhaps, make a figure, but a figure of an indefinite, indeterminate sort. Though it would be strange to demand clarity from people in a time like ours. One thing, perhaps, is rather doubtless: he is a strange man, even an odd one. But strangeness and oddity will sooner harm than justify any claim to attention, especially when everyone is striving to unite particulars and find at least some general sense in the general senselessness. Whereas an odd man is most often a particular and isolated case. Is that not so? (Dostoevsky, 3)

Every positive assertion the narrator makes is immediately qualified: "One thing, perhaps, is rather doubtless[.]" This "perhaps" lurks behind every positive assertion, threatening to render everything simple and clear "indefinite [and] indeterminate." He begins to suggest that Alyosha



does make a “figure,” as a “hero” takes on the form of a recognizable, heroic convention, yet it is an unclear figure with an indeterminate meaning. As the narrator proceeds to build a hypothetical reader’s case against his own novel, his nervous apology begins to smack of mockery, for it would seem that “strangeness and oddity” is precisely that which can “justify any claim to attention.” The narrator attributes this supposed fact to their “present,” cultural epoch in which “everyone” expects literature to serve towards the goal of “unity,” towards making the particular hero a universal hero. Yet again, the narrator is only attributing his failure to the inevitability of public opinion. After stupidly and rhetorically asking, “Is that not so,” he shows his cards once more and doubles down, suggesting that it is the public that is truly lost:

Now if you do not agree with this last point and reply: “Not so” or “Not always,” then perhaps I shall take heart concerning the significance of my her, Alexei Fyodorovich. For not only is an odd man “not always” a particular and isolated case, but, on the contrary, it sometimes happens that it is precisely he, perhaps, who bears within himself the heart of the whole, while the other people of his epoch have all for some reason been torn away from it for a time by some kind of flooding wind. (Dostoevsky, 3)

In this moment, it becomes, perhaps, a bit more certain that the narrator’s tone has been ironic and rhetorical, a kind of self-effacement that shifts its naivety and nervous laughter upon the reader through anticipation. In making himself appear foolish in relation to his own critics, the narrator sets himself up to violently reverse this dynamic through his redefinition of the hero. Instead of a hero being a great man to be revered by the public for his ideal qualities, the hero becomes the man who is ahead of the public, who stands in the face of that “flooding wind” that threatens to sweep everyone away. Yet, in this figure, the “flooding wind” is not some kind of enemy or any particular natural conflict, but rather are the cultural forces of Enlightenment that blow from Europe towards Russia. This figure of the wind emerges later when the father Fyodor Karamazov confides the following to Alyosha: “[P]eople like Ivan are not our people, my friend, they’re a puff of dust . . . The wind blows, and the dust is gone” (Dostoevsky, 175). Thus, if

there are more Ivans, if Russian culture becomes confined to a dust-like state of unmitigated rationalism, then Alyosha will certainly never receive his due public praise. Yet Dostoevsky's definition of the hero also conforms to notions of heroes and great men as those who precisely can see beyond the present-mindedness of public opinion into the future, someone who can lead the public towards that future. Thomas Carlyle writes the following about "the hero as poet" in his book called *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*: "[The poet or prophet] is to reveal [...] to us [...] that sacred mystery which he more than others lives ever present with.

While others forget it, he knows it; -- I might say, he has been driven to know it; without consent asked of *him*, he finds himself living in it, bound to live with it" (69). Thus, it is the odd man, the one who insists on what the orthodox man forgets, who ultimately "bears within himself the heart of the whole." While the odd man is isolated, particular, and out of place, it is precisely his out-of-placeness that is characteristic of the truth which eludes us. If truth is positional, then one whose position is radical, either in its ancient profundity or unprecedented newness, is the one who can lead us towards "the latent, still unuttered Word" (qtd. in Thompson, 326).

While such a poetic, rhetorical slight against his critics may have been a suitable ending for a fictional author's preface, the narrator then continues to babble on, reverting back to naive stupidity:

I would not, in fact, venture into these rather vague and uninteresting explanations but would simply begin without any introduction -- if they like it, they'll read it as it is -- but the trouble is that while I have just one biography, I have two novels. The main novel is the second one -- about the activities of my hero in our time, that is, in our present, current moment. As for the first novel, it already took place thirteen years ago and is even almost not a novel at all but just one moment from my hero's early youth. It is impossible for me to do without this first novel, or much in the second novel will be incomprehensible. Thus my original difficulty becomes even more complicated: for if I, that is, the biographer himself, think that even one novel may, perhaps, be unwarranted for such a humble and indefinite hero, then how will it look if I appear with two; and what can explain such presumption on my part? (Dostoevsky, 3-4)

To paraphrase, the narrator's "original difficulty" has been doubled insofar in that he must now justify "two novels" centered around a hero who is unintelligible to public sensibilities. Furthermore, the first novel "is even almost not a novel," but is just "one moment" from Alyosha's youth, yet a moment that, if omitted, will render the second novel "incomprehensible," thus ruling out the possibility of skipping straight to it. If we read this preface as the real voice of the author, this denouement of the second novel renders the whole situation laughable, if not frustrating. For why would anyone read a seven-hundred odd page novel just as a biographical supplement to the "main one?" Dostoevsky's later novels are dense and long, the sort of novel that certainly might necessitate some "proof" as to why one should read it. Yet we ourselves know that this second novel has not been written, that *The Brothers Karamazov* was Fyodor Dostoevsky's last novel to be published. Joseph Frank reads the narrator to serve as a sort of ironic cipher through which he could both "insinuate his own point of view without arousing an instantly hostile response" and "challeng[e] his critics" (573-574). In this line of thinking, Frank reads the narrator in light of the historical Dostoevsky's recorded beliefs and notes, and thus laments that "Dostoevsky never lived even to begin" this second novel (573). Should we read *The Brothers Karamazov* as unfinished, the fragment of the "main novel" that Dostoevsky never lived to write? Timothy Jacobs, in response to Frank's supposed conflation of the narrator and Dostoevsky, suggests that this second novel is a ruse, a "jest" of which the falsity does not "diminish [the] respective truth" of the amateurly aestheticized, dream-like allegories that make up *The Brothers Karamazov* (284). If we imagine the narrator to be the author, this denouement of the second novel allows us to take the narrator to be either an ambitious fool or a shrewd joker who is pulling some kind of writerly prank. Since we know this narrator himself to be a figure, a product of Dostoevsky's writing, we can either take this second

novel to be an allusion to Dostoevsky's true intentions of a sequel or some kind of jest that nonetheless forces us to consider the truth of the fragmented particular, to find the heart of the whole within any given "moment."

The narrator reveals his cards once more, yet these cards turn out to be worthless:

Being at a loss to resolve these questions, I am resolved to leave them without any resolution. To be sure, the keen-sighted reader will already have guessed long ago that that is what I've been getting at from the very beginning and will only be annoyed with me for wasting fruitless words and precious time. (Dostoevsky, 4)

If we take the the declaration of Alyosha's oddity to be something like an Ace of Spades, that strange card that is numerically worth two yet can overpower an entire monarchy, then the narrator's resolution to leave the hypothetical reader's demands for justification "without any resolution" reveals the narrator to have been bluffing the whole time. Yet, how exactly has the narrator been bluffing? He has so far suggested his inability to "prove" Alyosha's worth, telling the hostile reader that he has only bad cards to play. While the narrator suggests that his card is an odd one, an "indefinite" card whose value is eccentric yet universal, he then reverts to acting as if he has no cards, no justification for writing the novel. All the while, he figuratively "goes all in" by suggesting that he has a second novel to which *The Brothers Karamazov* is effectively a biographical preface, thus forcing us to either fold and put the book down, or to "go all in" and read the book despite the labor of reading it will require of us. If we take the narrator to be serious, then his denouement of the second novel is utterly foolish and the absurdity of the gesture will only make it easier for the hostile critic to win over the author, to show that the author has nothing to justify the risk he takes in writing. Yet if we, as "keen-sighted reader[s]," have known, along with the narrator, that he has no proof, why then did he go "all in" in the first place? Our metaphor breaks down here, for the literary game, while similar in form to the trickery of Texas Hold Em, never seems to lay down the final card that completes the sequence

of a single hand of poker. For the possibility remains that the narrator's declared bluff is itself another bluff:

To this [the keen-sighted reader's hypothetical irritation at the narrator's wasting of time] I have a ready answer: I have been wasting fruitless words and precious time, first, out of politeness, and, second, out of cunning. At least I have given some warning beforehand. In fact, I am even glad that my novel broke itself into two stories "while preserving the essential unity of the whole": having acquainted himself with the first story, the reader can decide for himself whether it is worth his while to begin the second. Of course, no one is bound by anything; he can also drop the book after two pages of the first story and never pick it up again. (Dostoevsky, 4)

The narrator's declaration that he has a "ready answer" displays the nature of his rhetoric. He builds the case against himself and reveals the supposed lack of intention or purpose behind his novel in order to be safe from the reader's judgment. The performative mode of the introduction thus shifts from an *apologia*, a justification of his hero, to an actual apology for his own anticipated failure to justify, to a "warning." Insofar as the narrator has declared that he has "no proof," no justification for calling Alyosha "my hero," we cannot then attack him on those terms. We can either decide from the first novel or from these very first "two pages" of the novel to either dismiss the novel or else find some other purpose for reading it. The fictional narrator's dialogic, rhetorical address towards an imaginary reader uses naivety and folly as a ruse for shifting the burden of justification onto the reader. The trick of the joker lies not in his failure to do anything, as Austin would have it, but through his ability to succeed through failure, to implicate the reader and their expectations in his parodic performance of failure.

After this clever shift, the narrator reverts again to antagonizing his hypothetical critics, after ironically encouraging them to throw the book down:

But still there are readers of such delicacy that they will certainly want to read to the very end so as to make no mistake in their impartial judgment. Such, for instance, are all Russian critics. Faced with these people, I feel easier in my heart: for, in spite of their care and conscientiousness, I am nonetheless providing them with the most valid pretext for dropping the story at the first episode of the novel. Well, that is the end of my introduction. I quite agree that it is superfluous, but since it is already written, let it stand.

And now to business.

(Dostoevsky, 4)

The performance shifts once again from a warning to a dare. Although he has given his reader the “most valid pretext” for not reading his work, he knows that they cannot dismiss his work without actually reading it. Through all of these textual masks and rhetorical sleights of hand, it would seem as though Dostoevsky, as a writer, is asking the critics to justify their own practice. For while critics will forever critique authors through the scrutiny of literary methods and conventions, their practices can ultimately only be justified by the merit of literature itself. And if the merit of literature comes in the form of affirming the proper ideology, then why read something that fails to do so? Indeed, if we deny literature the possibility of doing anything other than affirming our own beliefs, why then waste our time reading the false dreams of other people? If we examine literature as a purely ideological, rhetorical form, then Dostoevsky’s playful poetic tricks, such as this preface, will be rendered “superfluous,” pure poetry that does nothing. Since tropes necessarily deny the rhetorical meaning they wish to perform, they cannot be accepted by the truth-value criterion of reason. Ivan, in recognizing this quality of poetry, ultimately understands poetry to be no more than a performance of power, a sleight of hand that conceals the lie of rhetoric. If literature becomes subject to a criterion of *proof*, then its poetic power dissipates and reveals a meaningless arrangement of grammatical forms. Does the narrator’s resolution to leave the critics’ questions “without resolution” ultimately suggest that the tension between orthodox ideology and the paradoxes of poetry cannot be resolved?

The narrator’s rhetoric ultimately calls attention to the reader’s own critical position in relation to these “fateful questions” regarding the “noteworthiness” of a hero such as Alyosha and the broader role of literature. For once we demand the purposes or intentions of an author, in order to make sure those purposes are in line with our own reasons for reading, then literature itself has been subordinated to a specific function. If we are reading a text in order to dissect

figures, we will manage to find, to already see, figures throughout the text. If we read a text for the purposes of either affirming or negating what the text posits to be true, then our critique will be subordinated to what we already *believe* to be true. Someone who asserts knowledge as intrinsically opposed to “belief” ultimately asserts their knowledge precisely from a position of belief. If the truth is eternal and positionless, then all knowledge becomes analogous to the truth while falling short of it. If literature operates along similar lines of analogy, using its likeness to other discourses in order to convey the positionality of truth as such, then we might read in order to understand a certain position of truth. While we may not agree that Alyosha is worthy of being christened a hero, we might continue reading so as to put our own notions of the hero in dialogue with the narrator’s. We can come to see how Alyosha, from a certain vantage point, is indeed a hero, yet our comprehension of this position, through the aesthetic empathy of reading, cannot be a social scientific “understanding”:

The hero interests Dostoevsky not as some manifestation of reality that possesses fixed and specific socially typical or individually characteristic traits, nor as a specific profile assembled out of unambiguous and objective features which, taken together, answer the question “Who is he?” No, the hero interests Dostoevsky as a *particular point of view on the world and on oneself*, as the position enabling a person to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surrounding reality. What is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself. (Bakhtin, *PDP* 47)

Thus, if we examine the words or deeds of the character in accordance with a certain view of reality or in line with the criteria of psychological profiling, then we have again subordinated literature to a certain ideological view of the world. If we wish to learn anything from literature, if we wish it to do anything, we somehow must take its fiction as reality, and judge Alyosha not as the figure of a hero, but as the possibility of a real hero. Even if the second novel has not been written, we must read *The Brothers Karamazov* as though a second novel could have been written. This is not to say that we must deny the essential fictiveness of the novel. Rather, fiction

itself must be seen as analogous to the truth. If fiction can do nothing but be true or false in its correspondence with reality, then there is presumably very little we can say about it.

What then is the figure, what is the performance that we have sketched out thus far in this author's preface? Does the author's preface do or perform anything in particular? And if it does do something, if it does justice to the dance it performs, does it do anything worthwhile for us? By now, it is fair to say that these questions can only remain suspended between literal and rhetorical. If we read them rhetorically, we can only conclude that literature certainly does something or it certainly doesn't. If we read the question literally, as de Man proposes that we read Yeats' famous line "How can you tell the dancer from the dance," then we are left with a complication. On the one hand, we have shown in our reading that there is almost an overflow of performative activity from the narrator; he moves quickly from an author's apologia to an amateur's apology, then shows the whole preface to be not only a warning, but a dare. This rapid shift in the tone of his discourse ultimately leads us to see the narrator as a joker, somebody who does not mean what he literally says. If we align ourselves with Austin, we can only see a joke as a failed performative, a performance of failure itself. Yet as we have seen, joking and performing can often be more productive than serious discourse. Rather than being left with a simplistic affirmation or critique of the subject at hand, a joke leaves us suspended between what it communicates and what it evokes. While this suspension is ultimately a lapse in knowledge, a gap of sorts, this gap proves itself to be a productive source of wisdom. For while the narrator presupposes the inability of the public to identify the odd man precisely as the "hero," in doing so he rhetorically teaches us to reconsider how we define a hero. His performative amateurism and nervous anticipation of his listeners introduces us to a common mode of speech for Dostoevsky's characters and sheds light on the inherent "double-voicedness" of all rhetoric



(Bakhtin, *PDP* 73). His complete joke of a “second novel” teaches us to reorient how we think about the terms that are being dubiously employed such as “hero,” “biography,” “moment,” “author,” “proof,” and “novel.” To read Dostoevsky is to risk altering one’s perception, to take seriously the position of this or that hero or narrator to the point of even reorienting our own position in relation to the “Truth” as such. A metaphor, like a drug, does not bombard one solely with false images, but rather forces one to see in a new way, to look differently and thus see different images. If we read literature in good faith, and take literature to operate in good faith, then such good faith applied to a reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* should ultimately lead us to what we already believed in our hearts to be true; literature has unlimited, performative potential, to the point of altering reality, changing the world as we know it. Yet if someone were to demand us to *prove* what we have suggested in our reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*, then we must ultimately take the dismayed, self-effacing position of the narrator and admit that we have nothing good to offer them.

### **Disfiguring the Narrator<sup>13</sup>**

The figure of the narrator does not lend itself easily to the classifications of narratology. The narrator’s only consistent quality is his shiftiness, his tendency to suddenly switch between different voices and spatio-temporal modes of representation. Insofar as narrative classifications require that the “narrator’s point of view must be stable enough to give him a continuous identity” as Robert Belknap suggests, our narrator cannot be given a stable identity (Belknap, 73). This very notion of identity is based in logic, in the law of identity which demands that the narrator, as a signifier, designate the same qualities each time. To the extent that the narrator is himself a character within the world that he depicts, the possibility of identifying him becomes

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<sup>13</sup> This section title is a reference to Barbara Johnson’s brilliant essay “Disfiguring Poetic Language.”

problematized. A third-person, omniscient narrator appears to operate consistently “outside” of the text and can therefore easily be classified as such. A closer reading of such an appearance of externality, itself a tropological effect, might easily complicate such a designation, but it is nonetheless evident that we can speak of a “narrator” due to the repetition of certain textual features. We can recall from Jacques Derrida’s notion of *iterability* that all signatures, identities, written or spoken statements etc., are the product of repeatable graphemes whose functioning persists in the absence of an identifiable speaker or “author.” A narrator is identifiable and unique because he is composed of recognizable, conventional units of meaning that are themselves iterable and not self-identical. Yet, nonetheless, it cannot suffice to simply scrutinize the semantic and syntactic properties of the text -- no amount of scrutiny or logical reduction can penetrate the inner essence of the word, for its identity, its unique sense, lies precisely in the ghostly absence of rhetorical meaning, the absence of identity itself; rather, we must do something, we must respond to the performance of the text with our own performative gestures. Thus, as we analyze the narrator, we must remember that we are engaging in a ritual, a summoning of textual ghosts. As much as we scrutinize the figure of the narrator, he ultimately retains the final word for himself in the manner of a Dostoevskian hero (Bakhtin, *PDP* 53). No matter how much we discuss the narrator, it is his performative utterances and not his objectively depicted tendencies that allow us to respond to him in the first place. We shall see that the narrator’s unreliability is ultimately that which is most reliable, most human, about him.

For Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the novel’s major differences from the epic and other Hellenic genres was its temporal mode of awareness:

In ancient literature it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power of the creative impulse. That is how it was, it is impossible to change it: the tradition of the past is sacred. [...].

The novel, by contrast, is determined by experience, knowledge and practice (the future). In the era of Hellenism a closer contact with the heroes of the Trojan epic cycle began to be felt;

epic is already being transformed into novel. Epic material is transposed into novelistic material, into precisely that zone of contact that passes through the intermediate stages of familiarization and laughter. When the novel becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline. (Bakhtin, *DI* 15)

One may recall Homer's famous invocation of the muses in the *Odyssey*: "Tell me, Muse, about the man of many turns, who many/Ways wandered when he had sacked Troy's holy citadel" (Homer, 3). Since the historical figure of Homer is a subject of debate and remains historically untraceable, the possibility of such a successful incantation becomes imaginable -- we might easily picture a blind bard who has truly been endowed with storytelling powers by the muse. In Robert L. Belknap's *The Structure of The Brothers Karamazov*, he begins his chapter on the narrator through a reference to Plato's characterization of epic narration in which the narration consists in "pure narration" and "narrative" by way of mimesis i.e. the direct relaying of other characters' speeches (69). For Belknap, novelistic writing generally employs a "pseudo-epic form," in which pure narration, the voice of the narrator, is itself mimetic (69). The narrator in the world of the novel is ultimately a figure, an imagined person who embodies the voice of the text. Insofar as the 19th century novel grounds itself in the realistic depiction of experience, any sort of narration that the author didn't directly experience must itself be imagined, mimetically depicted as the view of another person. As an "agent of mediation," the narrator is "just as much a creation of the author's imagination as are the characters and their world" (Thompson, 27) and the very "principle of selection reveals the author's evaluations of what he thinks is more or less significant, persuasive and aesthetically appropriate" (Thompson, 30). It would seem then that the creative act of imagination, of shaping and presenting material, is *a priori* operative in the mediacy of communication.

In situating the main events of his tale thirteen years prior to his writing it, the narrator looks upon the events "backwards from the present" (Thompson, 32). The narrator's present and

the present of the character's are never bridged temporally, and there is no depicted contact between the narrator and any of the people of which he speaks. This separation allows the narrator to convey an impression the "absolute past" when recalling the youth of Alyosha. Thompson and other critics have noted that the narrator's disposition to Alyosha often resembles that of a hagiographer writing a saint's life. Indeed, *The Brothers Karamazov* itself contains a text written by Alyosha that tells the words of the Elder Zosima on the night of his death. Like *The Brothers Karamazov*, the "Life of Zosima" is depicted in the present-tense even though it had been compiled it long after the event that it relates. Both texts also have the character of portraying so many profound words and relayed events that they appear synthetic and unrealistic. The narrator attempts to demystify the narrative coherence of Alyosha's manuscript for the reader:

Here I must note that this last talk of the elder with those who visited him on the last day of his life had been partly preserved in writing. Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov wrote it down from memory some time after the elder's death. But whether it was just that conversation, or he added to it in his notes from former conversations with his teacher as well, I cannot determine. Besides, in these notes the whole speech of the elder goes on continuously, as it were, as if he were recounting his life in the form of a narrative, addressing his friends, whereas undoubtedly, according to later reports, it in fact went somewhat differently, for the conversation that evening was general, and though the visitors rarely interrupted their host, still they did speak for themselves, intervening in the talk, perhaps even imparting and telling something of their own [...].  
(Dostoevsky, 286)

This is one of the many moments of literary subtext throughout the novel in which the narrator refers directly to the artistic craft of narrative. The narrator acknowledges the possibility that Alyosha may have embellished and fabulated portions of the story, although he himself says that he "cannot determine." The narrator attributes this skepticism to vague "later reports," the sort of anonymous knowledge and "information" of the newspaper age that Walter Benjamin bemoans in "The Storyteller." Inasmuch as he admits that Alyosha must have at least altered the story a little, the narrator gives up the possibility of pure objectivity; the possibility of proving the

trustworthiness of his own text, which resembles the unrealistically dramatic and miraculous nature of Alyosha's text, becomes lessened. Although the narrator has already dismissed the possibility of proving his case to the readers, he constantly finds himself switching between discussing the details of gossip and official reports and depicting intensely upclose, nearly sacred images relayed through creative memory. Yet Alyosha's own hagiographical work sheds light on the narrator's relationship to Alyosha. The notion that the narrator synthesized *The Brothers Karamazov* through numerous conversations with Alyosha would even seem realistic by many metrics: "Three characters are united by this hagiographical memory parallel; Zosima is Alyosha's hero just as Alyosha is the narrator's hero, but only Alyosha is a hagiographer pure and simple. The retrospective deciphering of the true import of things is one of the chief functions of memory. Dostoevsky cast this function in the form of a hagiographical word" (Thompson, 106). Indeed, the narrator's main disposition towards the hero and their word in these texts is one of fidelity. Alyosha's text shows deference towards Zosima's word, a deference and love that is manifest throughout their depicted interactions in the first six books of the novel. The narrator even admits at a crucial moment that "the entirety of the love for 'all and all' that lay hidden in [Alyosha's] young and pure heart [...] was at times as if wholly concentrated, perhaps even incorrectly, mainly on just one being [...] on his beloved elder" (Dostoevsky, 339). This same sort of biased reverence, the fidelity of the hagiographer to the saint, is reflected in the hedging qualifiers that accompany the narrator's remarks on Alyosha. Bakhtin's early work on aesthetics and ethics shows this fidelity to be indispensable to a "responsible" author who, in creating a uniquely answerable hero, must "act in good faith" and "surmount content with 'loving form,' which in turn has the capacity to redeem" (Morson & Emerson, 72). While the form thus necessarily shapes the image of the hero, the author must ultimately use form to redeem the

hero's word. In turn, each of these relayed words itself consists of a relayed word -- the narrator reveres Alyosha, who in turn reveres Zosima, who in turn reveres his late brother Markel, who in turn reveres the family maid and the birds etc. Although the author's word is always conspicuous and shaping the subject at hand, the content itself relays a chain of a perpetual *logos*. Yet this mnemonic reverence, this word about the word of another necessarily buries them in resurrecting them, insofar as the moment of their word, of their unique, unrepeatable presence in the world is lost.

*The Brothers Karamazov* is a text that dramatizes the author/text relationship through direct commentary or dialogue on the theme, such as in the tavern scene of the "Grand Inquisitor" or in the novel's fictional preface, but also through the narrator's tendency to insert, withdraw, or alter the effect of his voice throughout the novel. Both Robert Belknap and Diane Thompson ultimately refer to the narrator as the "instrument" of Dostoevsky's creative process (Thompson, 40), as a figure interposed between the author and the reader:

Dostoevsky needed a narrator through whom to communicate with the readers because the narrator, having learned about the world and remembering it, was more psychologically and mnemonically acceptable to the reader than the author who knew this world through the uncomprehend processes of the creative intellect. [... I]n *The Brothers Karamazov* [Dostoevsky] separated the processes of expression and creation, making the former conspicuous in the person of the narrator, and the latter almost invisible through this interposed figure. The fact of memory, moreover, operates directly to stimulate the reader's memory, as has been shown above. (Belknap, 70).

Belknap suggests that Dostoevsky made a conscious decision to "separate" the activities of creation and expression through the narrator. Dostoevsky, as it were, renders himself "almost invisible" through his literature. Both Belknap and Thompson astutely analyze how the narrative techniques subtly shape both how one remembers the text and how the reader relates to memory as such. For Thompson, the authorial "principle of selection" is essential to the activity of remembering, to the mediacy of memory, and thus the very mention of certain characters'

memories or the narrator's own memories immediately becomes significant to the tale (18-19). Belknap suggests that having a narrator remember and assemble the stories, as opposed to presenting a purely "authorial mode" to be attributed to omniscient (and thus inhuman) memory, ultimately serves to stimulate the reader's memory of the novel. What these authors do well to demonstrate is that memory in the novel is not significant for its accuracy, but precisely for the "personalised accents [and] evaluations" that characterize it (Thompson, 19). What we remember does not just speak to the content of the memory, but to the performative effect of the impression, the precise manner in which we remembered and understood the event. Yet while both of these critics understand and articulate an essential task of mediacy that is done through the expression of memory, they undermine their very argument by attributing the fictional aspects of "memory" and "expression" to the hidden activities of Fyodor Dostoevsky, to an originary moment of creation. Thompson's analysis of the dichotomy of "imagination/memory" ultimately reveals her own attempt to have it both ways:

In fact the narrator owes much of his 'omniscience' to the benefit of informed hindsight and imaginative empathy. He relies on his memory for assembling the facts about them. Then, to the fragmentary testimonies and impressionistic memories of others, he joins his own intuitive, sympathetic and imaginative reconstructions, based on what he knows and remembers about them. He stitches their experiences together, makes the expository transitions and thereby creates a plexus of interconnections. But it is Dostoevsky's imagination which turns the material into an aesthetically coherent narrative and his fictional narrator is the instrument by which he achieves this. Indeed, the narrator is most significant aesthetically in his recreation of other peoples' memories. And right here, at the borderline between imagination and memory, is where we can mark a critical divide between the author and his narrator. (Thompson, 40)

Thompson creates a convincing, fictional explanation for the fictional author. She suggests that the narrator's authority within the fictional world of the book would be that of a memoirist who "aims at an authentic reconstruction of the past by bearing contemporary witness," one who works with real events and memories yet uses them along with "informed hindsight and imaginative empathy" to form a broader narrative (Thompson, 42). This mnemonic function of

the narrator thus serves to appeal to the reader, to win their trust through his personable tone and willingness to qualify his knowledge; insofar as the narrator is a memoirist, we both can allow for some “fictional” reconstruction and also trust that our author is ultimately telling the truth, that he is not simply imagining a made-up world. Yet to the extent that *The Brothers Karamazov* reproduces the “actual” creative process of which it is the product, these analyses must necessarily abound in confusions and ironies. The very opening of the cited passage from Thompson presents a contradiction, as “the narrator” never *is* in fact, but in fact is always fictional -- indeed perhaps “in fact” is always *in* fiction. Belknap suggests that Dostoevsky ultimately stands “[b]ehind the narrator” as the one who “manipulates the story and characters at will” (70); Thompson suggests that it is “Dostoevsky’s imagination” which “turns the material into an aesthetically coherent narrative” (40). If the act of storytelling necessarily places itself in between the moment of creation and expression, rendering the former “nearly invisible” and the latter “conspicuous,” then what text could ever present itself as the pure imagination, the pure fiction of the author? Both critics identify the complex manner in which Dostoevsky masks himself and therefore unmask him; but if we know the narrator to be a fiction, then what *in fact* is Dostoevsky’s imagination doing? Could we, in fact, identify it?

In order to shed light on the problem of our narrator, we shall turn to Robin Feuer Miller’s account of the narration in *The Idiot*. In *Dostoevsky and The Idiot*, Miller traces the trajectory of Dostoevsky’s relationship to his critics and the reading public throughout his private letters. Dostoevsky believed that the public tended to mistake his characters’ wild personas for his own views and that they ultimately failed to notice the subtle attention he gives to the “particular” through the eccentric characters that he confronts the reader with (Miller, 20). Dostoevsky understood this problem as a tension between the instinct of amusement that guides



reading and a readerly will-to-truth that ultimately can discern the broader and more relevant truths that lie beneath the fictional material. As a writer of performative *effect*, who understood “narration as a strategy[,], a subtle means of persuasion rather than as a simple vehicle for a direct expression of his thoughts” (Miller, 12), his early writings express an anxiety similar to that of the narrator’s in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

In our public [...] there is instinct, but there is no education. [...]. They are accustomed to seeing the ugly mug of the author in everything; I have not shown mine. And they haven’t even guessed that Devushkin is speaking and not I, and that Devushkin cannot speak in any other way. They find the novel to be overlong, but there is not a superfluous word in it. They find me in a new, original spring consisting in the fact [...] that I go into the depths and by examining the atoms I search for the whole. (qtd. in Miller, 14)

Even before his later novels, Dostoevsky conceived of himself as self-effacing, as being the one author who did not simply reproduce his own ideological view (“ugly mug”) of the world.

“There is not a superfluous word in it” because the characters “cannot speak in any other way.”

Miller suggests that Dostoevsky eventually began to distinguish between his “reader” and the reactions of his contemporaries and the sentiments of the crowd: “Dostoevsky referred not to the public but to the reader. This reader assumed a personal rather than a collective shape; he was someone with whom the author was forging an intimate relationship” (Miller, 16). Indeed, by the time Dostoevsky wrote *The Brothers Karamazov* he had experienced great public acclaim, in spite of his ideological differences with many of the young, nihilistic readers of his time, and he wrote to a friend that “I decidedly am not expecting approval from our critics. The public -- the readers -- are another matter; they have always supported me” (qtd. in Miller, 21).

By 1876, Dostoevsky understood his method to consist in pushing “ideas,” which Dostoevsky identifies as “paradoxes,” towards their end:

Set up any paradox that you like, but do not take it to its end, and you will be considered witty, subtle, and *comme il faut*; but take some risky word to the end, suddenly say, for example: “And here is the Messiah” -- directly, and not by hinting, and no one will believe you precisely because of your naivete, precisely because you took things to the end and said your very last word.

However, on the other hand, if many of the most famous wits, like Voltaire, for example, instead of mockeries, allusions, hints and reservations, had suddenly decided to express all that they believed, had showed their whole secret, their essence, all at once, -- then, believe me, they would not have obtained even a tenth of their former effect. Worse than that, they would only have been laughed at. Indeed, on the whole, man somehow in no way likes the last word of a “spoken” thought, and says that, ‘The thought spoken is a lie.’ (qtd. in Miller, 12-13)

Thus, if someone pushes a paradox to the end, to point of an authoritative proclamation, then people will cease to believe them. According to Miller, Dostoevsky considered it his “artistic” function to seduce the reader through form, through witticisms and ironies, so that once “immersed, [...] the reader start[s] to uncover the poet’s idea” (26). Through suspending the final word, through leaving the “last word” to the reader as the narrator does in the author’s preface, Dostoevsky paradoxically forces his readers to become faithful to the characters, to fill in the word of the characters with their own. Could we not imagine that if our narrator were more direct, he might not say something exactly like what Dostoevsky had written in this letter? As if the connections between text and author were not any more conspicuous, we can detect this very same idea in the famous “Devil” dream chapter in which Ivan Fyodorovich has a hallucinatory discussion with his double in the form of a banal devil who shares Ivan’s crudest ideological (non)-beliefs: “A new method, sir: when you’ve completely lost faith in me, then you’ll immediately start convincing me to my face that I am not a dream but a reality -- I know you now; and then my goal will be achieved. And it is a noble goal. I will sow just a tiny seed of faith in you, and from it an oak will grow -- and such an oak that you, sitting in that oak [...] will drag yourself to the desert to seek salvation” (Dostoevsky, 645). Ivan asserts throughout this scene that the Devil is “the embodiment of [himself...], of [his] thoughts and feelings, but only the most loathesome and stupid of them,” thus recognizing himself in the dream figure (Dostoevsky, 637). We ourselves can identify the voice of Dostoevsky -- curiously enough, Dostoevsky would appear to be speaking through the Devil, revealing his intentions to his atheistic readers to “sow

a seed of faith” in them. Victor Terras recognizes in the devil figure “the image of a man who, in one way or another, accompanied Dostoevsky through virtually all of his adult life, Ivan Turgenev” (Terras, *RD* 116). And indeed, the events and characters of *The Brothers Karamazov* are no doubt influenced by historical and “autobiographical material,” yet both must “pass through the filter of a fictional character’s personality” (Miller, 24). This “last word” left to the reader allows us to recognize seemingly everyone and no one in the eccentric characters of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The narrator’s ambiguous ontological status emerges from the tension between creation and expression, and ultimately that of rhetoric and grammar, that is inherent not only to the novel, but to all graphemes as such. Miller clarifies the role of the narrator in *The Idiot* through creating a distinction between the literal narrator and the narrator’s “posited reader” and the rhetorically “implied author” and “implied reader” (128). Miller views the narrator and his ironic addresses towards his reader as a kind of a ruse that forces the reader to consider the intentions of the “implied author” and to realize ourselves as the “implied,” or perhaps implicated, reader:

The moments of pure narrative digression are the moments when the author-Dostoevsky is farthest removed from his real or actual reader. The narrator’s reader responds to these digressions as though they had come from the author; the implied reader presumably recognizes the presence of a narrative mask and tries to look behind it in order to maintain his sense of collusion with the implied author. (Miller, 131-132)

Although Miller’s analysis applies to *The Idiot*, her findings resonate with Thompson and Belknap insofar as she subordinates the narrator, as a textual device and as a fictionalized persona, to the realm of “expression,” rendering him to be an entertaining, rhetorical vessel through which Dostoevsky’s true intentions can be subtly communicated to the reader. Miller writes that “[t]he tendentious author manipulates his reader unsparingly, but he must preserve the reader’s illusory sense of freedom” (39). Insofar as these critics have demystified and demasked the narrator, how can we say that Dostoevsky effectively “preserve[s] a sense of freedom” for

us? If the form is ultimately meant to get the reader to declare, out of love for Alyosha and other Christian heroes, that “here is the Messiah,” then what do we do now that we have exposed him? If Dostoevsky’s performance can be considered felicitous, what does it get done for us other than reveal his hidden intentions? If Dostoevsky uses the rhetorical device of a narrator for an ideological-rhetorical cause, then it has failed to the extent that we can recognize his rhetoric as such and can distance ourselves from its luring effects. Yet what if we attributed such a rhetorical technique to Dostoevsky’s narrator? What if the narrator, as the fictional author, is “in fact” aware that he is playing with the reader’s sense of faith in his storytelling? Do we then apply what was said of Dostoevsky’s intentions to the narrator? Dostoevsky’s reproduction or fictionalization of the creative process redoubles the problematics of reading, the problem of understanding the author’s true intentions in relation to his text. Rather than attempt to provide a “final word” about who the narrator is within the text or why he functions as he does in relation to Dostoevsky’s rhetorical intentions, perhaps we should consider what “the narrator” is doing throughout the text and the lines of performative play that are opened up through his own gestures. In order to strengthen our faith in the narrator, we need to take his paradoxes seriously in the hope that we might “go beyond them” (Miller, 13).

### **Dreams of Narration: Threads of Consciousness in *The Brothers Karamazov***

The narrator’s comments on his own narratorial decisions both serve to heighten the significance of the moment yet also serve to call our attention to the performative, and thus somewhat dubious, act of storytelling. As we recalled earlier, Thompson partially sought to explain the narrator within his world as a memoirist, which thus renders his story to be true in the historical events and persons it speaks of, but fictional in the events that are imagined and rhetorical insofar as his authorial decisions aim to manipulate the memory and interest of the

reader. Insofar as we take the narrator to be telling a true story, we might concede that the parts of the tale that tell of the private actions or inner thoughts of certain characters might necessarily be imagined. After a crucial exchange between Ivan Karamazov and Smerdyakov, in which Smerdyakov subtly and rhetorically manipulates Ivan into tacitly approving of his father's death, the narrator follows Ivan, whose mental state within the moment is erratic and fragmented:

It was already very late, but Ivan Fyodorovich was still awake and pondering. That night he went to bed late, at about two. But we will not relate the whole train of his thought, nor is it time yet for us to enter into this soul -- this soul will have its turn. And even if we should try to relate something, it would be very hard to do, because there were no thoughts, but something very indefinite, and, above all, too excited. He felt himself that he had lost his bearings. (Dostoevsky, 275)

What do we make of this ominous utterance: “[T]his soul will have its turn.” The narrator tells us that he won’t “relate the whole train of his thought,” let alone the movements of his soul, yet proceeds anyway to indicate the strange desires and feelings that Ivan was struck with in bed. Yet whatever the “something” to be related is, whatever “it” is that would be hard “to do,” “it” is “very indefinite, and, above all, too excited.” Thus, he does not so much say that Ivan is excited, but rather that there is some excited thing located in the “there,” wherever there is, in which “there are no thoughts.” The narrator’s vague, deictic language resembles the very language one might use to express inarticulable thoughts and feelings. The narrator refers back to Ivan as though he had spoken to him later, saying that “he himself had felt he had lost his bearings.” Shortly after, the narrator relates a humorous anecdote about a sudden desire within Ivan to “give Smerdyakov a beating”: “[B]ut if you had asked him why, he would have been decidedly unable to give one precise reason” (Dostoevsky, 275). Indeed, perhaps Ivan, whose fate is left looming at the end of the novel, lived to tell the tale. The narrator nonetheless creates a foreshadowing effect in this moment by explicitly telling us of his creative intentions to “enter into this soul,” as if the narrator could magically possess the souls of his characters. The narrator’s ominous

foresight could almost be read as an over-excited moment of narration, as though the narrator is eager to personally inflict moral torture upon Ivan in his creative reimagining of Ivan's inner torment.

While the narrator tells us of his future intentions in the novel, other moments of narratorial commentary have the opposite effect of inscribing the reader's forgetting of certain moments, such as when he describes the origin of Smerdyakov and Fyodor Karamazov's two other servants, Grigory and Marfa, in the beginning of Book II:

[Smerdyakov] was employed as a cook. I ought to say a little more about him in particular, but I am ashamed to distract my reader's attention for such a long time to such ordinary lackeys, and therefore I shall go back to my narrative, hoping that with regard to Smerdyakov things will somehow work themselves out in the further course of the story. (Dostoevsky, 100)

If the narrator reveals his cards too quickly to us in the case of Ivan, then we might describe this moment as blatant act of "bluffing." Just as the narrator depreciates his efforts in the preface and suggests that he cannot "justify" writing so much about such an "indefinite" hero, the narrator here suggests that he has wasted his time on such "ordinary lackeys" and that he hopes that "things will somehow work themselves out in the further course of the story." If the narrator has figured out his plans for Ivan, he has not yet incorporated Smerdyakov who is later revealed to be the murderer. Indeed if we pretend that *The Brothers Karamazov* is a memoir in which we place good faith in the empathetic imagination of the author, then this moment proves the memoirist to be unreliable, to purposely mislead us. Or is that what is actually going on here? Indeed, insofar as we have read the narrator's act of self-deprecation in the preface to be a rhetorical challenge to his critics and a way of proving his own point, we might reconsider how we respond to the narrator's performance in similar moments. Indeed, the narrator later recalls his impressions of the trial scene and begins to tell us, "I may have taken secondary things for the most important, and even overlooked the most prominent and necessary features . . . But

anyway I see that it is better not to apologize. I shall do what I can, and my readers will see for themselves that I have done all I could” (Dostoevsky, 656). This moment late in the book seems to signify a change in character. The reference to “my readers” echoes the sense of Dostoevsky’s “personal reader” with whom he forges an intimate relationship. Yet what does the silence of the dash denote? Does the narrator in this moment realize that we realize that whenever he says “secondary” or “ordinary,” he really means “primary” and “fantastic?” Have we figured out his game or does he trust our ability to look past his tricks well enough to no longer play them?

While the narrator’s shifting modes of awareness allow him both to “enter” a character, as it were, and to operate as a more traditional third-person narrator, there are certain moments where the narrator and character’s word dissolve into each other through free indirect discourse. After the narrator gives us brief biographical sketches of each member of the Karamazov family in Book I, Book II brings us into the primary present of the novel through a hilarious episodic book entitled “An Inappropriate Gathering,” in which the Father Zosima meets with the Karamazov family to heal the financial and romantic rivalry that has emerged between Fyodor and Dmitri Karamazov. Along with the family comes Pyotr Miusov who is Dmitri’s first cousin once removed, who is explained to be there in the hopes of settling a lawsuit he had with the monastery relating to monastery activity on land that he owned. A distant relative of Miusov named Kalganov also arrives. The narrator humorously describes the comedic effect of the wrong people, an odd young man and an arrogant Russian liberal, in the wrong place, a monastery whose resident beggars approach the Karamazovs as they enter:

Beggars immediately surrounded our visitors, but no one gave them anything. Only Petrusha Kalganov took a ten-kopeck piece from his purse and, embarrassed for some reason, hastily shoved it at one woman, saying quickly: “To be shared equally.” None of his companions said anything to him, so there was no point in his being embarrassed; which, when he noticed it, made him even more embarrassed. (Dostoevsky, 35)

The perspective of the passage is mostly that of an ordinary, third-person omniscient discourse, although the narrator's locality is, as it is throughout the book, evident in the utterance "our visitors." We might even take the narrator to be aligning his perspective with the monks insofar as he refers to them as visitors. Yet even in the narrator's seemingly ordinary discourse, his description of the situation is shot through with a certain value judgment towards the notion of embarrassment. If we take this passage to be purely the voice of the narrator, then Kalganov ultimately seems foolish; to the extent that there is "no point" to Kalganov's embarrassment, it should logically follow that he would cease to be embarrassed. If embarrassment has a social, performative function of displaying embarrassment, then Kalganov fails to even be embarrassed insofar as no one acknowledges the event of his embarrassment. If we follow the narration as the voice of a distant third person, in which embarrassment has an objective rather than subjective function, Kalganov would presumably be caught in a loop of recursive embarrassment. For how can one communicate embarrassment over the failure to communicate embarrassment? Clearly embarrassment can operate as a performative, but unless we take Kalganov to be a fool for feeling embarrassed, we might empathize and take his embarrassment to be internal, a private feeling insofar as no one acknowledges it. The narration does not objectively state the cause of his embarrassment but only says that he is so "for some reason," for a cause that could only be interpreted or inferred. Clearly his embarrassment is contingent to the act of awkwardly giving money to beggars, but was he embarrassed before or after the act? Is he embarrassed about his relative wealth in relation to the beggars, in the realization that this is indeed the sign of an "inappropriate gathering?" But certainly, from the perspective of the beggars at least, it is only appropriate that they approach people for money. It might have been more appropriate for Kalganov to not have been embarrassed. What then *is* the point to embarrassment? The



possibility of embarrassment, of performing the wrong way or engaging in a ritual in which the expectations are not clear, seems to linger over every performance. If embarrassment is performative, then its performance functions as an ironic corrective in which the embarrassed subject mimics the shame implicit in their original failure. Yet it is entirely unclear whether the narrator is judging Kalganov or actually empathizing with him and bearing witness to his unacknowledged performance. The very act of describing someone, of acknowledging their behavior in a certain way, is thus already dialogic; the “embarrassment” that is described through narration is proper neither to the narrator or to Kalganov, but rather is the communal substance, the interpretant that connects and bridges a plurality of perspectives.

Shortly after this moment, the narrator’s free indirect discourse becomes more blatantly polemical with regards to Pyotr Miusov. Diane Thompson notes that the narrator’s personal, mnemonic relation to the tale ultimately allows for the reader to detect various emotional-volitional tones throughout the book. He speaks of Alyosha and Zosima with “hagiographical accents of reverent affection” (Thompson, 29). In Book VII, Alyosha momentarily “rebels” and finds himself “murmuring against God” after the shameful crowd reaction to the stench of Zosima’s corpse in which everyone, even the monks, become tempted by the possibility of a miracle, the possibility that the corpse will miraculously remain uncorrupted (Dostoevsky, 340-341). At this moment, the narrator frets for two pages in which he both refuses to apologize for Alyosha’s actions yet also defensively, yet honestly attempts to relate Alyosha’s moment of doubt, of complicated, shaken feelings of faith; indeed, this two-page narratorial digression, filled with performative declarations, renunciations, and all sorts of speech acts, signifies both the “meaning” of the event for Alyosha and the narrator’s absolute adoration for Alyosha. While one might believe objective meaning and subjective feeling to be in tension, we recall Bakhtin’s

belief in the need for authorial fidelity to the character. The narrator expresses “sympathetic indulgence” for Dmitri’s Russian simple-heartedness and reserves his sarcastic “double-voiced phenomena such as parody and irony” for the characters who embody liberal values (Thompson, 29). Before we analyze the narrator’s “double-voiced” description of Miusov, it is important to note that his attitude towards liberals is not purely ideological. For example, the narrator speaks of Ivan with “uneasy ambiguity” and “distanced respect” (Thompson, 29). The narrator’s descriptions of Fyodor’s buffoonery indicate his wickedness, yet it also reveals a subtle understanding of how the public enables Fyodor’s behavior. In the very beginning of Book I, he raises Fyodor, who is depicted in all his sensuality and cruel miserliness, to the form an allegorical figure for the modern Russian man: “Again I say it was not stupidity -- most of these madcaps are rather clever and shrewd -- but precisely muddleheadedness, even a special, national form of it” (Dostoevsky, 7). While the narrator does not hide his sympathies for characters such as Alyosha who embody belief in God and in the people of Russia, his perspective towards other characters proves to be more nuanced than a purely ideological consideration could account for. Nonetheless, the narrator’s mockery of Pyotr’s voice is heavy-handed and comic:

It was odd, however; they should, in fact, have been met, perhaps even with some sort of honor: one of them had recently donated a thousand roubles, and another was the richest landowner and, so to speak, the best-educated man, on whom everyone there somewhat depended as far as catching fish in the river was concerned, subject to what turn the trial might take. And yet none of the official persons came to meet them. Miusov gazed distractedly at the tombstones near the church, and was on the point of remarking that these tombs must have cost the relatives a pretty penny for the right to bury their dead in such a ‘holy’ place, but he said nothing: mere liberal irony was transforming itself in him almost into wrath. (Dostoevsky, 35)

The narrator takes pleasure in his imaginative depiction of Miusov’s hypocritical, arrogant view towards people unlike him. The narrator has shown to be quite respectful towards and knowledgeable about the monastery and would never refer to their “official persons.”

Furthermore, there is a hilarious and implicit critique of the uselessness of the absentee landowner -- Miusov proves to have no real interest in anything other than winning a lawsuit against an institution he doesn't understand and doesn't care for. Yet we see that this double-voiced phenomena can only be effective in its contrast to the narrator's more direct narration about his Miusov's "liberal irony." The comic emerges as the effect of the disparity between different perspective that are forced to merge in "an inappropriate gathering." The narrator ironically mocks Miusov, but when Miusov begins to think like an ironic liberal, the narrator ceases his imitation and attributes a rather blasphemous thought directly to Miusov. The narrator seems to be aware that he can only "perform" as Miusov for so long before losing the effect. His unwillingness to directly mimic a blasphemous thoughts shows his awareness of a performative's capacity to realize that which it merely mimics. And we might wonder if the narrator, in his creative reconstruction of every character, does not in some ways become them, blend in with the character so that we cannot distinguish the story from the storyteller, let alone the dancer from the dancer.

The narrator's primary arc follows each Karamazov brother at different points in the novel in which each brother goes through an episode of torment and anguish that culminates in a crucial dream vision for each character. As Miller suggests in *Dostoevsky and the Idiot*, the narrative function serves to bring the reader into the story through its playful gestures of invitation and misdirection rather than through creating the illusion of a consistent perspective. Instead of sustaining a narrative position predicated on epic memory or subjective recollection in an effort towards a consistent, and thus "realistic," poetic vision, the narrator will performatively adjust his perspective in order to depict a scene from the most aesthetically alluring vantage point. Indeed, this fluidity allows the novel to move from the seemingly mundane, particular, and

ordinary straight to the monumental, universal, and allegorical. Furthermore, the narrator's shift in rhetorical mode, tone, and perspective ultimately allow him to depict the polyphonic chain of consciousnesses that form the book's world. Many critics have noted that Dostoevsky collapses time into space, displaying numerous events and conversations that all occur within the same span of time. In turn, "space is turned into a stage, where characters who have to meet just happen to cross each other's paths" (Terras, *AKC* 84). Yet these sudden shifts in moments and perspectives are not solely for dramatic effect, but serve to faithfully recreate the subjective, mediated experience of his characters: "The world is present to each character in a particular aspect -- and in keeping with that aspect its representation is constructed. It is impossible to find in Dostoevsky a so-called objective description of the external world" (Bakhtin, *PDP* 23). The narrator makes use of theatrical and aesthetic forms to reproduce the actual experience of drama in life. We can thus see the efficacy of the "dramatic" or "fantastic" precisely in its fidelity to actual, lived experience. One of the most powerful, rhetorical uses of this effect is in the manner in which Dostoevsky presents "the effect" first only to show the cause long after the fact (Terras, *RD* 101). This becomes most significant with regard to Dmitri Karamazov and the question of his guilt over his father's murder: "The central plot is carefully constructed so as to lead, with irresistible logic, to the conclusion of Dimitry's guilt; [. . . T]he reader is thus constantly confronted with the discrepancy between what reason might conclude and the intangible mystery of the human personality, capable even at the very last instant of conquering the drives of hatred and loathing" (Frank, 572). Yet while this device of the "effect" serves well towards this particular aspect of the plot, its most effective use comes in the manner in which it tracks the movements of the respective brothers. Throughout the first seven books, the narrator primarily follows Alyosha as he goes from character to character in an attempt to both understand resolve

the various financial, romantic, and familial tensions that are at hand. We come to see the plot unfold largely through Alyosha's anxious and confused perspective, and we see several strange details and random events that go unexplained until much later in the novel. The narrator later follows Dmitri through his desperate attempts to gather three thousand roubles and through the fatal moment in which he was tempted to kill his father. After Dmitri has been arrested and is preparing for trial, the narrator dedicates book XI, coldly titled "Brother Ivan Fyodorovich" as opposed to the other brothers' books which bear their diminutives, to the movements and inner torments of Ivan as he copes with this guilt. In Alyosha and Mitya's cases, they both go through great spiritual torment and different temptations, only to find spiritual redemption in the culmination of beautifully depicted, stylized dream scenes. Ivan's book also ends in a dream, yet Ivan is left at the end of the novel on the brink of madness with the possibility of his death lingering. These dream scenes ultimately force the reader to consider the status of the "dream" on a deeper level, to understand how the ephemeral cognitive activities of memory, dreaming, and imagination ultimately synthesize to form a deeper, spiritual meaning in the novel and in reality.

While Timothy Jacobs rightfully notes that the fictionalized author-figure draws attention to the fictional, dream-like qualities of the text, his argument overlooks the way the novel's "dream-logic" is actually faithful to its own realism and thus does not necessarily betray itself as an "aesthetic allegory" (289). Timothy Jacobs' essay "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," published in 2007, is a brilliant comparative essay that does incredible justice to both works, particularly insofar as it brings Dostoevsky's dialogic literature into a contemporary discussion and simultaneously locates in the convoluted, playful, and seemingly "postmodern"

forms of *Infinite Jest* in the tradition of Dostoevsky's radical method of fictionalizing the "accursed questions," the cultural and spiritual anxieties, of a given epoch. Jacobs reveals a multitude of stylistic and thematic parallels between Wallace and Dostoevsky, from the chatty and somewhat dubious narration, to the myriad literary forms that are inserted within the text, to its moments of dream-like uncanniness where story and storyteller blur. Yet while Diane Thompson ultimately finds, through a similar analysis of the text's multi-dimensionality, a trustworthy memoirist, Jacobs essentially calls the narrator's bluff; Jacob's performative reply to the text is ultimately to read the narrator as an author who not only partially, but completely fabricates the tale. Jacobs' take the novel's trial scene, in which all the material of the novel appears to be echoed, to be the culmination of the narrator's game:

In the trial sequence, the narrator is relentlessly intrusive and full of caveats regarding his inability to recount the events [...]. [H]e chooses to quote verbatim the highly amusing but utterly irrelevant questioning of the Moscow doctor over whether he had given an apple or a bag of nuts to Dmitri as a boy (12.3.674); and he quotes the attorneys' closing statements at what would appear in toto, yet the narrator claims that he will not provide the speeches in detail but will "only take some parts of [them], some of the most salient points" (12.10.728). [my italics] *The courtroom proceedings are so heavily mediated, contradictory, and comical that the impression one has is of being on the receiving end of a spoken story, but one in which the events related did not necessarily occur.* (Jacobs, 285)

I have italicized the last line of this passage so that I might ask the following with regard to it; does this description of the courtroom scene in the novel not describe with brilliant accuracy what a court of law is actually like? Indeed, Jacobs perceives the sense of paradox that shapes Dostoevsky's poetics, but he does not push it far enough, does not proclaim, "And here is the Messiah!" Furthermore, a deeper interrogation of the thematic connections between philosophical tropes of dreams, belief, memory, the fantastic, and the ordinary would not have lead Jacobs to take Dr. Herzentube's memory of giving a grateful Dmitri a "bag of nuts" as a "highly amusing but irrelevant" episode.

Jacobs' argument rests largely on his insight into the manner in which thoughts instantaneously emerge in the minds of characters:

The narrator goes to great lengths to emphasize that Alyosha's thoughts are instantaneous, do not emerge from previous thinking, as though they are planted or embedded into his consciousness: "this strange little observation flashed like an arrow through the sad mind of Alyosha" and "for some reason he suddenly noticed" (264) and "Alyosha suddenly had a *flash of recollection* that the day before, when he left his brother and gone out the gazebo, he had seen, or *there flashed before him*, as it were, near the fence, a low, old green garden bench among the bushes" (5.2.223, emphasis added). He is frequently baffled and puzzled about how he arrived at these, quite often, peculiar thoughts which tend to have a significant impact on the novel's events[.] (Jacobs, 277-278)

Jacobs concludes that "the sudden introjection of thoughts into Alyosha's mind draws attention to the narrator, who inserts these random thoughts that significantly alter spot, or *direct it*" (278).

If we take the narrator to be a writer, as Jacobs does, then the fact that he is "writing" and that his writing not only alters but *is* the plot should not be shocking to us. However, the act of writing, of "go[ing] to great lengths" to write in a certain way, is already suspicious for Jacobs. He views the conspicuous attention drawn towards the act of writing in the book as a trope, a technique used by Dostoevsky towards a certain effect, rather than as the honest word of the narrator.

Indeed, Jacobs has very little faith in the narrator as a self-sufficient author, but he finds aesthetic redemption in the way novel "use[s] aesthetics to comment on [his] culture's ideolog[y]" (284).

In defense of our narrator, to whom we have tried to remain faithful -- why shouldn't we believe his story? Why should we assume that the novel, were it to communicate nothing about Russian *doxa*, would merely be a farce, a poorly told story? Why must we move past the "artificiality" of the actual tale straight to the supposed actuality of its rhetorical motives (Jacobs, 279)? For if we go back to the prior passage, we might suggest that it does not "perform" a false truth so as to imply the real truth, but that it is actually indicative of how thought operates. Thought does not emerge in a purely linear narrative, but does indeed "flash" instantaneously for reasons that are not immediately apparent. Alyosha's ability to recall minor, seemingly trivial events proves to be

vital in Dmitri's trial when Alyosha recalls Dmitri hitting himself on the chest at the very spot where Dmitri claimed to have sewn up the crucial three thousand roubles. Indeed, Alyosha recalls in the trial that "some thought flashed through me that the heart isn't in that part of the chest at all" (Dostoevsky, 678). If we take the skeptical position of Jacobs, we might suggest that it is entirely artificial for such an event to have worked out so perfectly, but then what sort of realism would we be hypothetically demanding of our narrator were he an actual person? Indeed, Jacobs' reaction to the realistically impossible "dream-logic" of the book ultimately betrays the latent effects of the "environment" of atheism of which Jacobs speaks with regard to Dostoevsky and Wallace's literary valorizations of belief (267). Jacobs mentions that "specific words and phrases are spoken and recalled by other, unrelated characters" (270). Indeed this phenomenon happens at almost every level in the book; In chapter five of book four, the word "strain" moves from appearing in the hysterical Madame Khokhlakov's comments on the romantic tension between Ivan Karamazov and Dmitri's fiancée Katerina Ivanovna to taking on a broader thematic function in the text:

The word 'strain,' just uttered by Madame Khokhlakov, made him almost jump, because precisely that night, half-awake at dawn, probably in response to a dream, he had suddenly said: 'Strain, strain!' He had been dreaming all night about yesterday's scene at Katerina Ivanovna's. [Madame Khokhlakov's assurance] that Katerina Ivanovna loved his brother Ivan, and deliberately, out of some kind of play, out of 'strain,' was deceiving herself and tormenting herself with her affected love for Dmitri, out of some kind of supposed gratitude -- struck Alyosha: 'Yes, perhaps the whole truth indeed is precisely in these words!'" (Dostoevsky, 186)

Madame Khokhlakov does not stimulate Alyosha's realization through her precise logical explanation, but rather through the performative effect of a word; the word *nadryv*, which can also be translated as "laceration" or "wound," does not have an intrinsic connection to the situation at hand, but its succinct form and painful connotations ultimately cause the narrator to name the whole book "Strains," in which the "strained performances" become a shared, communal personality trait in the novel's world. The narrator's comments find themselves



refracted in the words of various characters; the character's very words often form the chapter titles such as, "So be it! So be it!" The prosecutor and defense speech's directly use phrases that form the novel's episodic chapter titles such as "Over the Cognac". Yet while these echoing effects no doubt produce an uncanny feeling, they also depict the dialogic resonance and communal bonds that certain words and utterances form in a given community. Many characters recognize in each other's words the "accursed ideas" that haunt the Russian intellectual scene. In the *mise-en-abyme* tale in which Alyosha befriends a group of schoolboys, the arrogant, Ivan-like Kolya spouts trending liberal slogans, witticisms, and cliches; Alyosha responds that "it [...] occurred to me that you were using words that weren't yours" and insists that he knows that someone has been teaching him "crude nonsense" (Dostoevsky, 554-556). Yet it becomes clear that this echoing, this communal fabric of language, does not solely function to perform a dream effect, but also shows the way words move and performatively act upon people throughout the world of the novel. In Dostoevsky's world, the word travels infinitely from dreams to reality.

### Chapter 3: Pro and Contra: Professions of Faith

We have thus far seen in our analysis of *The Brothers Karamazov* that the narrative function, in all of its seemingly self-referential, ironic gestures, reproduces on the level of reading the very tensions of belief and reason that are embodied in the book. Furthermore, while critics have done well to note the heavy-handed sense of theater and the wealth of artistic allusions and forms that are employed, they have ultimately sought to justify this otherwise unjustifiable play, this onslaught of artistic forms, through interpreting them as vessels to be negated through an understanding of Dostoevsky's rhetorical and ideological intentions. Yet, at the same time, we cannot simply dismiss the narrator as a buffoon, as a clown with no purpose,

as so much of the “public” in *The Brothers Karamazov* does to Fyodor Karamazov. Nor should we do the same with our own Fyodor Dostoevsky. Rather, the heavy-handed, yet cunning and sneaky uses of rhetoric and form do not necessarily lead us back to the historical Fyodor Dostoevsky so much as they lead us back to life itself, to the dynamics of communication, thought, imagination, and memory that are made conspicuous through the figure of the narrator. Furthermore, our decisions as to how we rhetorically explain or conceptualize the narrator figure ultimately reproduces the way attitudes of faith and reason, pro and contra, lead characters to properly define and interpret reality within the book. For Dostoevsky, the literary realist claim to depict things “as they are” is one of bad faith, insofar as a perspective, a momentary and positional grasp of truth, can never be immediately adequate to the Truth, the whole of everything “as it is.” A sense of belief, a conviction that cannot be proved logically, gives the world form and meaning. Thus, a participative, dialogic approach to understanding Truth entails a kind of bridging between worlds through the word. Yet these bridges, like the people who build them, are both momentary and yet eternal; while an utterance is singular and unrepeatable, the individual graphemes that compose our utterances can paradoxically bear the history of those utterances. When we read *The Brothers Karamazov*, we can see quite directly how certain words and phrases are singular yet unoriginal, unconsciously echoing past words that have been spoken. And insofar as our own words are always shaped, anticipated by, and anticipative of alien words, we must see individual discourses not as ideologically isolated or separated into types, but rather as dialogically interconnected with all other discourses. In order to have conversations about the existence of God, we must at least be able to agree on the conventional meaning of certain words. And yet is precisely the dialogic activity of achieving consensus, of mutually interrogating and reorienting conventional concepts, wherein a sense of greater truth for

both is achieved. For words, in order to do something, cannot just neutrally communicate information, but must produce an effect, invoke a revelation of truth-made-present in the mind of the other interlocutor. Yet this revelation cannot be explained insofar as one demands some sort of semantic “proof”; the reduction of discourse to logic and grammar ultimately saps an utterance of its meaning to the extent that a word becomes replaced by the thing it is presumed to designate. Sometimes the word is the thing, sometimes speech is the action.

In our final chapter, we shall ultimately try to understand how Dostoevsky thematizes and structures the great eschatological debate between faith and reason, “pro” and “contra,” that manifests in the novel. Yet needless to say, it would not be enough to simply understand and articulate the ideological positions of the characters, nor will it be enough for us to situate the characters’ ideas through understanding their iterable, characteristic traits. Indeed, the efficacy of “understanding” as reduction or explanation of a singular event, a single word, is problematized by the novel. We shall attempt to simply read the text with an attentiveness to the embodiment of these ideas, insofar as an idea need be mediated should they be communicable. In his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that his analysis focuses on “discourse, that is, language in its concrete living totality, and not language as the specific object of linguistics” (181). In a similar mode of thinking, we will not be able to make head nor tail of the great eschatological debate that occurs within this novel if we reduce it to its abstract content -- as ethical readers of the text, recalling *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, we must attempt to somehow unite the content-sense and the unique performance and form that engenders each expression. To the extent that reading is an act, we are already doing this. And yet, in an effort to be conscious and directed, we shall attempt to analyze “pro” and “contra” as, at least initially, mere attitudes of affirmation and negation that can be discerned in even the slightest bodily

movements. For if there is at least one thing that connects affirmation and negation, it is the object of those dispositions, which is life itself. Believers and non-believers alike have bodies and are embodied in a world. Although the interpretations and attitudes towards that world wildly differ, they nonetheless are faced with it and with one another. They share the same world and the same words, the same worldly, given stuff that they interpret and respond to in different manners. Dostoevsky ultimately finds the unity between “pro” and “contra” in their relationship to *sensuality*. Although sensuality in its literal meaning denotes lechery, it becomes dialogically transformed into a signifier of vitality, “life-force” as it were. If people say yes or no to the world, the sensual, bodily, embodied experiences of people are the vehicles through which they performatively receive and address the world.

### **Faces and Bodies: The Semantics of Physiognomy**

While *The Brothers Karamazov* is a magnificent work about the Word, it is also a novel about appearances, the physiognomy of things. In the exposition “A Nice Little Family,” in which the narrator roughly traces the biographical backgrounds of the major characters, there is a chapter called “Elders” in which the narrator explains the cultural position of the monastery Elders, whose rituals and practices are seen as suspect by other monks and laymen alike. In particular, the practices of prophecy and faith-healing are problematized insofar as these rituals imply a certain power on the part of the Elders, a divinely-given power. The narrator’s tone with regards to these rituals, as we see, is one of ambivalence that toes the line between natural explanation and an acceptance of miracles. We see this in the narrator’s discussion of Zosima’s uncanny ability to read faces:

Many said of the elder Zosima that, having for so many years received all those who came to him to open their hearts, thirsting for advice and for a healing word, having taken into his soul so many confessions, sorrows, confidences, he acquired in the end such fine discernment that he

could tell, from the first glance at a visiting stranger's face, what was in his mind, what he needed, and even what kind of suffering tormented his conscience; and he sometimes astonished, perplexed, and almost frightened the visitor by this knowledge of his secret even before he had spoken a word. But at the same time, Alyosha almost always noticed that many people, nearly everyone, who came to the elder for the first time for a private talk, would enter in fear and anxiety and almost always come out bright and joyful, and that the gloomiest face would be transformed into a happy one. (Dostoevsky, 29)

Once again, the polyphony of voices and perspectives, mediated through the narrator's word, clouds the narrator's tone regarding faith-healing. Insofar as Zosima is simply a good "physiognomist," as "many said," then we might understand him to be simply a prescient psychologist, many of whom masquerade even today, in our time, as possessors of psychic power. Yet the narrator does not explicitly characterize this ability as such; indeed, were one truly able to read someone's mind through a rigorous understanding of facial movements, which artificial intelligence technologies can now track to perfection, would we consider this a natural or divine ability? Once again, the narrator leaves that word for us. Yet Alyosha, endowed with a sense of ethical reliability by way of the narrator's loving word, "noticed" that people's faces, which signify their need of a "healing word," are indeed "almost always [...] transformed." Although Alyosha has complete faith in Zosima, he does not in this moment declare that the transformation occurred, but simply "noticed," an innocent form of perception and Alyosha's primary mode of perception throughout the novel. And indeed, regardless of whether the healing is real or not, it certainly has a performative effect; the joyful physiognomy bears witness to the healing word.

While the narrator tends to scrutinize his characters' faces when they make their first appearance in the novel, these moments tend to emphasize the ambiguity of their fate rather than the logical certainty of it. The polyphonic mode in which characters are depicted ultimately give narrative moments of close, physical scrutinization a particular effect. In the exposition, a sense of Dmitri's character is built up through biographical sketches, yet while Alyosha and Fyodor are

described in terms of physical features, Dmitri is not embodied until he arrives to meet with his family and Father Zosima in the hopes of mediating his romantic and financial conflicts with his father. Ivan, in contrast, is never described physically until he begins to become physically and mentally ill later in the novel as he struggles with his feelings of guilt. When Dmitri arrives, the narrator's description of his appearance ultimately finds his appearance to embody, and perhaps signify, the ambiguity of his mood:

Dmitri Fyodorovich, a young man of twenty-eight, of medium height and agreeable looks, appeared, however, much older than his years. He was muscular and one could tell that he possessed considerable physical strength; nonetheless something sickly, as it were, showed in his face. His face was lean, his cheeks hollow, their color tinged with a sort of unhealthy sallowness. His rather large, dark, prominent eyes had an apparently firm and determined, yet somehow vague, look. Even when he was excited and talking irritably, his look, as it were, did not obey his inner mood but expressed something else, sometimes not at all corresponding to the present moment. "It's hard to know what he's thinking about," those who spoke with him would occasionally say. Others, seeing something pensive and gloomy in his eyes, would suddenly be struck by his unexpected laughter, betraying gay and playful thoughts precisely at the moment when he looked so gloomy. (Dostoevsky, 67-68)

With Alyosha depicted as "well-built, red-cheeked [...], clear-eyed and bursting with health" (Dostoevsky, 25), and Ivan not depicted physically at all, Dmitri's appearance splits the difference, signifying neither "youthfulness" nor refusing to signify at all. He appears strong, yet there is something sickly in his physiognomy. His look is "firm and determined" yet also "vague." Although the narration indicates that his face is often opposed to his actual mood, it doesn't then suggest that his facial expressions are always paradoxically signifying the opposite. Furthermore, this sense of an important, yet murky goal expressed in behavioral attributes is also invoked in the narrator's description of Alyosha: "In his childhood and youth he was not very effusive, not even very talkative, not from mistrust, not from shyness or sullen unsociability, but [...] from some inner preoccupation, as it were, strictly personal, of no concern to others, but so important for him that because of it he would, as it were, forget others" (Dostoevsky, 19). Alyosha, meanwhile, reads this same inner preoccupation in Ivan's lack of expression: "For

some reason he kept thinking that Ivan was preoccupied with something, something inward and important, that he was striving towards some goal, possibly a very difficult one, so that he simply could not be bothered with him, and that that was the only reason why he looked at Alyosha so absently” (Dostoevsky, 31). Indeed, the idea that the Karamazovs are important, that such a name could be associated with heroic, national memory and not just with the image of “A Nice Little Family,” is thus planted in our minds through suggestion.

If we look at Smerdyakov, the possible bastard, fourth child of Fyodor Karamazov, we see that this sense of destiny, implicit as potentiality signified by the character’s face, can ultimately be “pro,” in the direction of spiritual glory or “contra,” in the direction of terrible destruction:

A physiognomist, studying [Smerdyakov], would have said that his face showed neither thought nor reflection, but just some sort of contemplation. The painter Kramskoy has a remarkable painting entitled *The Contemplator*: it depicts a forest in winter, and in the forest, standing all by himself on the road, in deepest solitude, a stray little peasant in a ragged caftan and bast shoes; he stands as if he were lost in thought, but he is not thinking, he is “contemplating” something. If you nudged him, he would give a start and look at you as if he had just woken up, but without understanding anything. It’s true that he would come to himself at once, and yet, if he were asked what he had been thinking about while standing there, he would most likely not remember, but would most likely keep hidden away in himself the impression he had been under while contemplating. These impressions are dear to him, and he is most likely storing them up imperceptibly and without realizing it -- why and what for, of course, he does not know either; perhaps suddenly, having stored up his impressions over many years, he will drop everything and wander off to Jerusalem to save his soul, or perhaps he will suddenly burn down his native village, or perhaps he will do both. There are plenty of contemplators among the people. Most likely Smerdyakov, too, was such a contemplator, and most likely he, too, was greedily storing up his impressions, almost without knowing why himself. (Dostoevsky, 126-127)

The description of Smerdyakov’s “contemplation” wavers between mechanical unconsciousness and a “greedily” private, yet conscious mode of thought. The idea that these impressions will one day, without warning, be put to some service is implied, both in this passage and later when Fyodor says to Ivan with regards to Smerdyakov that “[D]evil knows what he’s going to think up for himself” (Dostoevsky, 132). And indeed, this half-conscious creature might either be moved towards the ends of salvation or the ends of Satan or both. The narrator’s decision to relate

Smerdyakov's appearance first through that of a Russian painting of a peasant, then to generalize "contemplators" as a personality type characteristic of Russia, ultimately achieves by casual means the effect of symbolic amplification that Joseph Frank discusses in *The Mantle of the Prophet*. One might be tempted to read Smerdyakov allegorically as a sort of unconscious embodiment of the Russian peasants, whose uneducated loyalty will perhaps ultimately come to determine the ideological fate of Russia. Indeed, Ivan says of him that "he's a lackey and a boor. Prime cannon fodder, however, when the time comes" (Dostoevsky, 132). Ivan's intellectual dismissal of the "lackey" Smerdyakov, who has taken to admire Ivan and ultimately will take Ivan's parricidal philosophy to an extreme, is ironically turned upon him once he realizes that Smerdyakov has manipulated Ivan into giving Smerdyakov permission to serve as "prime cannon fodder" for Ivan's death wish. Furthermore, Smerdyakov is constantly derided as unimportant, stupid, and almost inhuman, from his very childhood days when the servant Grigory, after finding Smerdyakov hanging cats in a perverse ceremony, said to him, "You are not a human being, you were begotten of bathhouse slime" (Dostoevsky, 125). After the young Smerdyakov voices displeasure with the poetry Fyodor had him read as a child, Fyodor casually responds, "Well, then, go to the devil with your lackey soul! Wait, here's Smaragdov's *Universal History*, it's all true, read it!" (Dostoevsky, 125). If *The Brothers Karamazov* is largely about the performative efficacy of the "healing word," then it also takes the hateful speech act just as seriously. It is almost as though Smerdyakov had merely fulfilled the words of the father figures who spiritually rejected him. Smerdyakov's appearance changes throughout the book and particularly often towards his death as he meets with Ivan, a quality which resonates with the Devil's remarks about his life as "an  $x$  in an indeterminate equation" in which he is "some sort of ghost life who has lost all ends and beginnings" and can only become embodied on Earth,



perhaps precisely through strange, inhuman figures such as Smerdyakov (Dostoevsky, 642). Yet despite these implicit resemblances, we can only accept the ambiguity of Smerdyakov as such, as we are seemingly encouraged to do with Dmitri's behavior.

Through presenting the effect before eventually unraveling the cause, the narrator generates a sense of prophetic mystery around certain crucial moments of ambiguous yet significant physical gesturing. The inappropriate gathering at the monastery, in situating us in the present-tense of the novel's plot, ultimately introduces us to many crucial characters through their appearances. The comical depictions of minute gestures such as the bows of each character begin to generate meaning around their personas, yet it is ultimately the presence of Alyosha, who knows these people and anticipates their inappropriate behavior, that solidifies these connotations and builds up anticipation: "The blood rushed to Alyosha's cheeks; he was ashamed. His forebodings were beginning to come true" (Dostoevsky, 39). After Dmitri arrives and begins to quarrel with his father, asking dramatic and foreboding questions such as, "can he be allowed to go on dishonoring the earth with himself" (Dostoevsky, 74), there is a crucial moment where Zosima ominously bows in Dmitri's direction:

The elder stepped towards Dmitri Fyodorovich and, having come close to him, knelt before him. Alyosha thought for a moment that he had fallen from weakness, but it was something else. Kneeling in front of Dmitri Fyodorovich, the elder bowed down at his feet with a full, distinct, conscious bow, and even touched the floor with his forehead. Alyosha was so amazed that he failed to support him as he got to his feet. A weak smile barely glimmered on his lips.

'Forgive me! Forgive me, all of you!' he said, bowing on all sides to his guests. (Dostoevsky, 75)

While this gesture is merely that of a bow, it becomes a figure for the characters and for us to read. Insofar as the characters are left to decipher Zosima's bow, with no omniscient narrator to provide the abstract sense of the bow for us, we are left with them in confusion. Fyodor first breaks the silence, "not daring, by the way, to address anyone in particular," with the obvious

question at hand for everyone: “What’s that -- bowing at his feet? Is it some sort of emblem?”

(Dostoevsky, 75). Alyosha is immediately struck by the effect of the bow:

He also wanted to ask [...] what this bow at his brother Dmitri’s feet prefigured -- but he did not dare ask. He knew that the elder himself would have explained it, if possible, without being asked. Therefore it was not his will to do so. The bow struck Alyosha terribly; he believed blindly that there was a secret meaning in it. Secret, and perhaps also horrible. (Dostoevsky, 77)

Alyosha’s reaction is one of faith -- insofar as the meaning is not self-evident, is not given, he accepts its silent signification as such. His deference towards the Elder’s will is an institutionally expected obedience, but it also shows Alyosha’s general sensitivity to the will and position of others. He does not tell stories without a purpose, nor does he greedily attempt to read people’s souls. The reaction of Rakitin, a budding seminarian who “enjoys the patronage of the monastery” yet ultimately for purposes of snooping in bad faith (Dostoevsky, 38), represents the almost lustful, uncontrollable curiosity of the public, as he becomes “flushed” and “could hardly contain himself” before calming down and “smiling even more twistedly than before”

(Dostoevsky, 82):

“I knew he wouldn’t explain it to you! Of course, there’s nothing very subtle about it, just the usual blessed nonsense, it seems. But the trick had its purpose. Now all the pious frauds will start talking and spread it over the whole province wondering ‘what is the meaning of this dream?’ The old man is really astute, if you ask me: he smelled crime. It stinks in your family.” (Dostoevsky, 78)

If Alyosha is affected directly by the “locution,” which in this case is no locution but a gesture, and if we take Fyodor to be asking if there was an “illocutionary” intention to the bow, then Rakitin jumps straight to the perlocutionary effect, in which he anticipates the “pious frauds” who will marvel and seek for meaning in an otherwise meaningless movement. Rakitin, recognizing only his own egoism in others, suggests that Zosima had calculated and recognized the probability of “a crime,” for the crime “stinks” in the Karamazov family. This sense of a “stench” that the public viscerally responds to will return in the infamous scene of Zosima’s

funeral. Eventually, long after the incident and prior to his death, Zosima reveals to Alyosha that he “bowed yesterday to [Dmitri’s] great future suffering” (Dostoevsky, 285). Indeed this suffering is not characterized as good or bad, pro or contra, but rather as simply “great,” as great as any other facet of God’s will. Insofar as he bows to Dmitri’s future suffering, he greets it, he bows it in so that it will perhaps lead Dmitri to grace rather than cause him to irreversibly and tragically fall. He tells Alyosha that “I seemed to see something terrible . . . as if his eyes [...] had expressed his whole fate. [...] Once or twice in my life I’ve seen people with the same expression in their faces . . . as if it portrayed the whole fate of the person, and that fate, alas, came about. I sent you to him [...] because I thought your brotherly countenance would help” (Dostoevsky, 285). Thus, Zosima sees within his face the expression of his “fate,” yet he simultaneously believes that Alyosha’s own face will have a healing effect upon his brother. Rakitin is right to call Zosima astute, but wrong to read Zosima as calculating; Zosima is an ethical reader who follows the rhetorical lines of the hero, yet ultimately recognizes that the hero is unfinished, that the final word rests with him.

### **“Devil Take You!”: Pro and Contra Social Performances**

Fyodor’s buffoonery in the monastery and ironic invocation of the “devils” that possess him ultimately show Fyodor to be quite aware of himself and his “cruelty” to the extent that others perceive it. Although Pyotr Miusov, as a secular moralist, is disgusted by Fyodor Karamazov’s brazen, offensive jests, the two become inseparably linked by Fyodor’s “insolent need to make others into buffoons” (Dostoevsky, 23). Miusov foolishly declares at the beginning, in front of the Father Superior, to Fyodor that “[i]f you start any buffoonery, I have no intention of being put on the same level with you here” (Dostoevsky, 37). Indeed, the “thin, silent smile, not without a cunning of a sort” of the Father Superior shows the pious man’s

awareness of irony, of the comic in particular (Dostoevsky, 37). For if Fyodor is the buffoon, then Miusov is the necessary straight man who is dragged down by his impish friend. Fyodor explains, after immediately introducing himself as a buffoon, “[v]erily, a buffoon” who is always “damaging himself,” in honest yet also dishonest terms his own behavior and his motivations after Miusov reminds Fyodor that he’s “doing it now, too” (Dostoevsky, 41):

“Really! Imagine, I knew it all along, Pyotr Alexandrovich, and, you know, I even had a feeling that I was doing it just as I started speaking, and, you know, I even had a feeling that I was doing it just as I started speaking, and, you know, I even had a feeling that you would be the first to point it out to me. In those seconds when I see that my joke isn’t going over, my cheeks, reverend father, begin to stick to my lower gums; it feels almost like a cramp; I’ve had it since my young days, when I was a sponger on the gentry and made my living by sponging. I’m a natural-born buffoon, I am, reverend father, just like a holy fool; I won’t deny that there’s maybe an unclean spirit living in me, too, not a very high caliber one, by the way, otherwise he would have chosen grander quarters, only not you, Pyotr Alexandrovich, your quarters are none too grand either. But to make up for it, I believe, I believe in God [...].” (Dostoevsky, 41)

Thus, Fyodor knows his act and announces his act to his audience, just as the Devil reveals his “new method” to Ivan (Dostoevsky, 645), and perhaps in the way that Dostoevsky, rhetorically and comically, reveals his method to us. Like the Devil, Fyodor sows “a tiny seed of faith” in others by admitting his faults, yet just when he appears to have revealed his cards, he once again performs what he had just seriously and constantatively, yet ultimately ironically and performatively, stated (Dostoevsky, 645). Fyodor most honest moment seems to occur when he admits that “there’s maybe an unclean spirit” living in him and that, if there is, then there certainly must be one within the other atheistic landlord present, that is, Miusov (Dostoevsky, 41). This statement, while perhaps a joke on the part of Fyodor, could be taken as a serious statement about non-belief in general -- it as though Fyodor ironically recognizes that, within a theological framework, he is already with the Devil and is at least honest in doing his bidding when placed against the strained *politesse* of Miusov. Fyodor’s first quoted bit of dialogue

occurs in the otherwise past-tense of the beginning exposition, and this dialogue also comedically invokes the devil:

“You see, stupid as I am, I still keep thinking about it, I keep thinking, every once in a while, of course, not all the time. Surely it’s impossible, I think that the devils will forget to drag me down to their place with their hooks when I die. And then I think: hooks? Where do they get them? What are they made of? Iron? Where do they forge them? Have they got some kind of factory down there? You know, in the monastery the monks probably believe there’s a ceiling in hell, for instance. Now me, I’m ready to believe in hell, only there should be any ceiling; that would be, as it were, more refined, more enlightened, more Lutheran, in other words. Does it really make any difference -- with a ceiling or without a ceiling? But that’s what the damn question is all about! Because if there’s no ceiling, then there are no hooks. And if there are no hooks, the whole thing falls apart, which, again, is unlikely, because then who will drag me down with hooks, because if they don’t drag me down, what then, and where is there any justice in the world? *Il faudrait les inventer*, those hooks, just for me, for me alone, because you have no idea, Alyosha, what a stinker I am . . . !”  
(Dostoevsky, 24)

Diane Thompson writes of this passage that “with this timeless, metaphysical exchange, the author momentarily lifts us out of the local context and takes us, through their words, straight away to where he most wants to go, to the eschatological questions of divine justice” (35). Victor Terras writes of this passage that “Dostoevsky likes to bring up deep metaphysical questions amidst jest, raillery, and irrelevancies” (*RD* 136). Insofar as Fyodor tends to joke by stating the truth, this comic moment indeed poses a serious problem in the book; if there is no God or immortality of the soul to invoke, then who can truly hold Fyodor accountable for his wicked lifestyle? As Ivan, the essential “contra” figure in the book, says, “Fyodor Pavlovich, our papa, was a little pig [...] but his thinking was right” (Dostoevsky, 593). It seems that we learn from this particular Christian novelist that we have everything, and certainly not “nothing” as Austin perhaps believed, to learn from the joker. Flannery O’Connor, an American, Catholic writer who also urgently concerned herself with eschatological questions put it best: “Either one is serious about salvation or is not. And it is well to realize that the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy” (O’Connor, 167).

In spite of Fyodor's ironic belief in devils, the serious form of such a belief is apparent throughout many of the "pro" characters whose traditionalism often renders their own attitudes somewhat humorous. While the narrator's tone towards the novel's "devilry" is one of ambivalence, in which he sometimes appears to be joking and at other times appears to seriously imply the presence of satanic machinations. Later on, when Fyodor causes a "scandal" by leaving, only to return to have the last word with his buffoonery, the narrator makes one of these ambivalent references to devilry, after Fyodor blindly hurls false rumors towards the monks: "The accusations were absurd and eventually died down of themselves [...]. But the silly devil who had snatched up Fyodor Pavlovich and carried him on his own nerves further and further into the shameful deep prompted him to this former accusation" (Dostoevsky, 89). Such a reference to a "silly devil" would appear lighthearted. Yet in the first few chapters of the book that immediately follows this "Scandal" episode, the narrator cuts to an exposition on the "auxiliary persons" who are the servants of the Karamazov family (Dostoevsky, 92). The narrator adopts the serious, religious tone and worldview through which the servants Grigory and Marfa presumably interact with the world: "God did not grant them children" (Dostoevsky, 95). The narrator cuts to an earlier time when they managed to have a child, yet the child turns out to be deformed with six fingers. Grigory's strange, yet firm belief in the existence of God and the Devil ultimately leads him to interpret the child's deformity as a sign and suggests at his baptism that he "oughtn't to be baptized at all":

"Why not?" asked the priest with good-humored astonishment.

"Because . . . it's a dragon . . .," Grigory muttered.

"A dragon? How is he a dragon?"

Grigory was silent for a while.

"A confusion of natures occurred . . .," he muttered, rather vaguely but very firmly, apparently unwilling to say more.

There was laughter, and of course the baby was baptized.

(Dostoevsky, 95).

The narrator's casual, friendly "of course" suggests that we are supposed to laugh at Grigory's pious foolishness along with the others. And yet the presence of this Dostoevskian pairing of adjectives "firm" and "vague," which are all used in conjunction to describe the three Karamazov brothers, suggests that we should take Grigory at least somewhat seriously. As though to "sow a seed of faith" within us, the narrator then shows Smerdyakov to be birthed by Stinking Lizaveta later that very same day: "He was perhaps inclined to mysticism. And here, *as if by design* [my italics], the occasion of the arrival in the world of his six-fingered baby and its death coincided with a very strange, unexpected, and original occurrence" (Dostoevsky, 96). This belief in devils becomes parodied in the figure of Father Ferapont, a holy fool and a "great faster and keeper of silence" who views Zosima and the Elders to be "harmful and frivolous" (Dostoevsky, 166). When a random, highly curious visiting monk meets with Ferapont, this very, materialist literal belief in devils, itself a religious inversion of Fyodor's mock belief in devils, is revealed: "Did you see the devils around there? [...] I was up at the Superiors last year, at Pentecost, and haven't been back. I saw one sitting sitting on one monk's chest, hiding under his cassock, with only his little horns sticking out" (Dostoevsky, 166). Yet if we recall the duplicitous presence of Rakitin at the monastery, perhaps Ferapont is right to be weary: "Besides them, there stood in the corner a young fellow who looked to be about twenty-two and was dressed in an ordinary frock coat, a seminarian and future theologian" (Dostoevsky, 38). If we point towards Alyosha and Lise's shared reams of "devils, everywhere, in all the corners" who draw near them, and if we point to Rakitin's dreams of journalistic success and the Devil's claims that he has been condemned to write for the criticism section, we might find Ferapont to be paradoxically accurate, yet perhaps not as literally as he put it.

Although the uncontrollable, blasphemous babbling of Fyodor and the strict and rigorous sense of religious duty held by Grigory would seem entirely at odds, the faithful relationship between these two figures ultimately shows a sense of unity between the belief of the peasants and the atheism of their land-owning employers. At first, this sense of unity between these two wildly different aspects of pro and contra attitudes appears to be one of economic dependence. While drunk and babbling to Ivan and Alyosha “over the cognac” about his own perverse views of theology, Fyodor calls for the abolishment of the monasteries:

“[...] Take all this mysticism and abolish it at once all over the Russian land, and finally bring all the fools to reason. And think how much silver, how much gold would come into the mint!”

“But why abolish it?” asked Ivan.

“To let the truth shine forth sooner, that’s why.”

“But if this truth shines forth, you will be the first to be robbed and then . . . abolished.”

“Bah! You’re probably right. Ah, what an ass I am! [...] Well, then, Alyoshka, in that case let your little monastery stand. And we intelligent people will keep warm and sip cognac. You know, Ivan, God himself surely must have set it up this way on purpose.” (Dostoevsky, 133)

Indeed, Fyodor effectively sums up the antinomy between the faithful devotion of the peasants to God and country and the depraved, secular unbelief of the gentry who directly benefit from the devotion of the peasants. Although Fyodor recognizes the “truth,” Ivan helps him realize that the it is untruth, the untruth or perhaps faith of men like Grigory, that allows Fyodor to enjoy the very pleasures that erode his own capacity to believe in anything. Furthermore, the Church, standing for traditional values, ultimately serves as a cultural force against that of the atheistic-socialists who would indeed like to abolish both the “gentry” and the Church. It will be seen however that the socialist position itself depends on its own lingering untruths. Yet Fyodor is not without good feeling. Indeed, the presence of Alyosha seems to invoke even in Fyodor, as it does in others, great feelings of uncalculated, non-judgmental love: “I really feel you’re the only one in the world who hasn’t condemned me, you are, my dear boy, I feel it, how can I not feel it . . . !” He even began to snivel. He was sentimental, he was wicked and sentimental” (Dostoevsky, 25).



Thus, while Fyodor's love for Alyosha, like the rest of his feelings, are heavily mediated by bodily sensation ("how can I not feel it"), he nonetheless possesses a "consciousness of conscience" that instinctually guides him in the direction of people of faith (Thompson, 132):

Grigory knew that he had an unquestionable influence over his master. He felt it, and he was right. A cunning and obstinate buffoon, Fyodor Pavlovich, while he had a very firm character in "certain things in life," as he himself put it, showed, to his own surprise, even a rather weakish character in certain other "things in life." [...] In certain things in life one had to be on one's guard, and that was difficult without a faithful man. And Grigory was a most faithful man. It even so happened that many times in the course of his career, Fyodor Pavlovich might have been beaten [...] but Grigory always came to the rescue, though he admonished him each time afterwards. But [he] would not have been afraid of beatings alone: there were higher occasions, even rather subtle and complicated ones, when Fyodor Pavlovich himself would have been unable, perhaps, to explain this remarkable need for a close and faithful man that he would sometimes, all of a sudden, momentarily and inconceivably, begin to feel in himself. These occasions were almost morbid: most depraved, and, in his sensuality, often as a cruel as a wicked insect, [he] suddenly felt in himself [...] a spiritual fear, a moral shock, that almost, so to speak, physically resounded in his soul. [...] And at such moments he was glad that nearby, close at hand, [...] there was such a man, firm, devoted, not at all like himself, not depraved, who, thought he saw all this depravity going on and knew all the secrets, still put up with it out of devotion [...] and who would defend him if need be - from whom? From someone unknown, but terrible and dangerous. The thing precisely was that there should be *another* man, ancient and amicable [...] so that he could look him in the face and exchange a few words, even quite irrelevant words[.] (Dostoevsky, 93)

In terms of the content of their beliefs, Grigory and Fyodor have nothing in common, yet both can "feel" something between them that is sacred and left entirely unsaid. In the case of Grigory, he feels it his "duty" to help Fyodor, as though Fyodor were the indisputable, given world that "stood before [Grigory] as an immutable truth" and to which he must indisputably attend (Dostoevsky, 92). Fyodor, on the other hand, "feels" within himself, at moments of utter debauchery, the need for someone whose mere presence could ward away "someone unknown, but terrible and dangerous." The narrator asks, "from whom?" Indeed, we shall see that as Ivan and his Grand Inquisitor figure both refer to the devil with just the third-person pronouns *he/him*. We might take Fyodor's ironic reference to devils to reveal a deep, internal belief in the evil, pernicious forces of Satan. Yet although he does not really believe in God nor Satan, Fyodor nonetheless finds himself in sensual need of a firm presence, someone to exchange some

“irrelevant words with,” as though the mere devoted word and appearance of Grigory could soothe the moral “shock” that Fyodor feels. This quality of a spiritual “shock,” a moment where the low affairs of the body and the high affairs of the divine appear to touch, will return.

The idea of the lie in *The Brothers Karamazov* is of the utmost importance. To the extent that characters are constantly interpreting, reading, and allegorizing each other throughout the book, the notion of the lie is almost necessary, insofar as no one can presumably be taken at their word. Yet in order to get past, once again, this kind of cannibalizing mode of logic, in which all thoughts uttered are “necessarily” a lie insofar as they are mediated, we must consider the “lie” as having a performative effect. For as Dmitri says of Fyodor, after Fyodor pitifully complains of Mitya’s mistreatment of him and others, “That is all a lie! Outwardly it’s true, but inwardly it’s a lie!” (Dostoevsky, 72). The joker is often the one who lies, or perhaps just “jokes,” by telling the outward, constative truth. When Fyodor does lie and makes up raunchy stories about historical philosophers and saints alike, he does it “on purpose to be pleasant and make people laugh” (Dostoevsky, 40). Dostoevsky, in his penchant for the doubled word, the echoed sentiment, puts these very same words in the mouth of Kalganov, who had taken “interest” in the land-owner Maximov after Ivan had pushed him off their carriage: “Listen, listen! [...] even if he’s lying -- and he lies all the time -- he’s lying so as to give pleasure to us all: that’s not mean, is it? [...] Others are mean for some reason, to get some profit from it, but he just does it naturally” (Dostoevsky, 422). Yet if Maximov tells “mean” stories about otherwise trivial affairs, Fyodor’s lies extend to profanations of the most high: “‘Teacher,’ he suddenly threw himself on his knees, ‘what should I do to inherit eternal life?’ It was hard even now to tell whether he was joking or was indeed greatly moved” (Dostoevsky, 44). Zosima responds to this mockery seriously nonetheless, telling Fyodor that he’s “known for a long time” and has “sense enough: do not give

yourself up to drunkenness and verbal incontinence, do not give yourself up to sensuality [...].

And above all, above everything else -- do not lie” (Dostoevsky, 44). He then elaborates on the “lie”:

“[...] Above all, do not lie to yourself. A man who lies to himself and listens to his lie comes to a point where he does not discern any truth either in himself or anywhere around him, and thus falls into disrespect toward himself and others. Not respecting anyone, he ceases to love, and having no love, he gives himself up to passions and coarse pleasures, in order to occupy and amuse himself, and in his vices reaches complete bestiality, and it all comes from lying continually to others and to himself. A man who lies to himself is often the first to take offense. It sometimes feels very good to take offense, doesn't it? And surely he knows that no one has offended him, and that he himself has invented the offense and told lies just for the beauty of it [...] he knows all of that, and still he is the first to take offense, he likes feeling offended, it gives him great pleasure, and thus he reaches the point of real hostility [...].” (Dostoevsky, 44)

Thus, Fyodor's “lying continually to others” begin with the lies he tells to himself. The narrator comments on Fyodor's fondness for “play-acting” throughout the exposition (Dostoevsky, 11), yet this play-acting is not a purely outward performance, but something that materializes into “real hostility” as Zosima puts it. Fyodor ultimately “knows” that he is lying, but nonetheless “gives himself up” to “verbal incontinence” and fits of feeling that cause him to “plung[e] headlong off the mountain” (Dostoevsky, 89). Yet it seems that the lie consists not in the feeling but in the “giving one's self up” to a feeling. The lie of “feeling something” covers up the fact that the feeling is not a “primary cause,” but is in fact a spontaneous, arbitrary movement of consciousness that is seized upon by the “bored” consciousness (Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* 16). In the absence of real feeling, which for Zosima is the absence of a disposition of love and faith towards the world, the mind can seemingly only invent arbitrary desires at whim for itself. Yet Fyodor, despite all the devilish inertia of his consciousness, still knows this.

By contrast, a similar process of seemingly forced feeling occurs for the “women of faith” who seek healing from Father Zosima, but the narrator characterizes the affair as “natural” and shows their interactions to be in good faith. The narrator refers to the phenomenon of

“shriekers” as something he had long known about and had come to learn about it as “a terrible woman’s disease that seems to occur predominantly in our Russia, [...] a testimony to the hard lot of our peasant women” (Dostoevsky, 47). This phenomenon is one that leads to many interpretations, including those of the cynical public: “I heard from some landowners and especially from my town teachers, in answer to my questions that it was all a pretense in order to avoid work, and that it could always be eradicated by the proper severity, which they confirmed by telling various stories” (Dostoevsky, 47). The fact that people confirm facts through “telling stories,” through fiction as it were, should not be lost on us in this veiled tone of skepticism towards the values of society as embodied in teachers and landowners. However, the narrator explains that what went on “occurred, probably, in a very natural way”:

[B]oth the women who brought [the shrieker] to the chalice and, above all, the sick woman herself, fully believed, as an unquestionable truth, that the unclean spirit that possessed the sick woman could not possibly endure if she, the sick woman, were brought to the chalice and made bow before it. And therefore, in a nervous and certainly also mentally ill woman, there always occurred (and had to occur), at the moment of her bowing before the chalice, an inevitable shock, as it were, to her whole body, a shock provoked by expectation of the inevitable miracle of healing and by the most complete faith that it would occur. And it would occur, even if only for a moment. That is just what happened now, as soon as the elder covered the woman with his stole. (Dostoevsky, 48)

Again, the narrator recognizes that the person’s willful sense of belief has a real effect, but to what effect? This “shock” is provoked by the “expectation of the inevitable miracle,” yet the narrator insists that the women of faith believed in the efficacy of the miracle as an “unquestionable truth” (Dostoevsky, 48). We see that Fyodor is struck by this same “shock” in his worst moments of spiritual depravity, as though he really believes that Satan must come for him. Yet such a strong, unwavering faith can seemingly only manage to bring about miracles for “just a moment.” While there is a sense that humans can be touched by the Holy Spirit, the grace of God, even this touch is momentary, like all other touches. This kind of impermanence gives way to the importance of memory throughout the novel, which Diane Thompson has done

brilliantly in her *Poetics of Memory in The Brothers Karamazov*. The women of faith come to Zosima with a lapse in their faith; the “lamenting” woman, who like many Russian peoples plagued by grief finds consolation in “irritat[ing] the wound,” grieves over her dead son yet ultimately has abandoned her husband (Dostoevsky, 48). Another woman grieves over her son with whom she has lost contact and asks if it would be proper to put his name “on a list to remembered among the dead” so that his “soul [...] will get troubled” and “he will write” (Dostoevsky, 51). The final woman, a widow, begins to speak of an abusive relationship and whispers the rest, which seems to suggest she may have killed him. She says that she has confessed her sin but that she fears death nonetheless. In the first two cases, Zosima reprimands each person for their respective sins yet also gives them advice on how to deal with their suffering in good faith. In the third case, in which the woman has confessed her sin as such and says that she “fears” her sin, Zosima tells her: “Do not be afraid of anything, never be afraid, and do not grieve. Just let repentance not slacken in you, and God will forgive everything” (Dostoevsky, 52). In each of these cases, Zosima suggests that their grief will heal with an active and loving disposition to the world.

Zosima’s message of active love emphasizes the efficacy of an affirmative, faithful relationship to the world over the ability to theoretically justify or articulate the meaning of that relationship. While the “women of faith” come to Zosima in states of genuine grief, having been impacted by a hard lot, the comical “lady landowner” Madame Khokhlakov comes to Zosima in a state of “strained” desperation (Dostoevsky, 53). Indeed, the lady’s penchant for “verbal incontinence” resembles the buffoonery of Fyodor, yet she mostly comes off as a rich, yet unthoughtful society lady who gets swayed by the slightest bit of ideological wind and mindlessly quotes the works of Ivan Turgenev. Like the women of faith, she confesses to Zosima

saying that she suffers from a “. . . lack of faith . . . ” (Dostoevsky, 55), but anxiously and rather unobtrusively declares her fear that Zosima will not believe her anguish, a blatant performance to make Zosima have to reaffirm his own faith in her. This need for “affirmation,” for “proof” before Madame Khokhlakov. commits to her own faith, proves to be exactly her problem: “How, how can it be proved? [...] It’s devastating, it’s devastating” (Dostoevsky, 56). When Zosima gives her counsel to love actively so that through it she will “be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul” (Dostoevsky, 56), she immediately declares that she would indeed love to love people, but that, “if there’s anything that would immediately cool my ‘active’ love for mankind, that one thing is ingratitude. In short, I work for pay and demand my pay at once, that is, praise and a return of love for my love” (Dostoevsky, 57). Like Fyodor, Madame Khokhlakov digs herself into ironic holes, as it becomes evident that she indeed only wishes to be “praised” by Zosima, that she wants solace and not earnest advice. As these ridiculous ironies abound, Zosima brings the interaction to an end with similar advice that he gave to Fyodor:

“Is it true what you say? Well, now, after such a confession from you, I believe that you are sincere and good at heart. If you do not attain happiness, always remember that you are on a good path, and try not to leave it. Above all, avoid lies, all lies, especially the lie to yourself. Keep watch on your own lie and examine in every hour, every minute. And avoid contempt, both of others and of yourself; what seems bad to you in yourself is purified by the very fact that you have noticed it in yourself. And avoid fear, though fear is simply the consequence of every lie. [...] I am sorry that I cannot say anything more comforting, for active love is a harsh and fearful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams thirst for immediate action, quickly performed, and with everyone watching. Indeed, it will go as far as the giving even of one’s life, provided it does not take long but is soon over, as on stage, and everyone is looking on and praising. Whereas active love is labor and perseverance, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science[.]”  
(Dostoevsky, 58)

What’s most curious about Zosima’s insistence on “avoid[ing] lies” is that he simultaneously seems to imply that “lies” are inevitable. If lying was a simple act, a choice with very little at stake, then one needn’t avoid them so rigorously. Rather, Zosima says to “keep watch” on her lie constantly, to constantly be attentive to her self and her choices, to watch for the “lie” that will

justify certain bad choices. If “active love” is too idealistic, then Zosima seems to be aware of the lifetime of labor and perseverance, and of suffering too, that it takes. While the many rituals of the monastery may seem like “theater,” the difference is that they never stop performing, no matter if anyone is watching. Meanwhile, for non-believers, be it Miusov, Fyodor, or Rakitin, every ritual must have an immediate end that it attends to, be it the respect of others, money, or sensual pleasure. For people of faith, salvation is something serious, yet ultimately cannot be proved; it can only be embodied in a “pro,” affirmative disposition of active love and fidelity towards the world. Yet once this disposition looks to justify itself by some unburdenable proof, it has already become plagued by doubt.

### **Two Abysses: Love and Lust in Sensuality**

As we have seen, the contradicting beliefs and behaviors of those on the respective “pro” and “contra” come to find unity in their physical disposition towards the world. Fyodor and the women of faith experience a similar spiritual shock in their contrary moments of utter depravity and utter faith. While Fyodor Karamazov is decidedly honest, at least “outwardly,” everything he does is “contra.” After Fyodor thinks about pressing charges against Dmitri after Dmitri gives him a near fatal beating, he ultimately decides that this would go contrary to the object of his desires -- that is, Grushenka: “[...] one thing I do know [...] If I had put him away, the scoundrel, she’d hear [...] and go running to him at once. But if she hears today that he beat me [...] within an inch of my life, then maybe she’ll drop him and come to visit me . . . We’re like that -- we do everything contrary” (Dostoevsky, 174). Indeed, although Fyodor and everyone else who speaks of Grushenka are revealed to have fundamentally misjudged her character, this logic of doing things “contrary” is indeed the disposition of many in the book. Yet, contrary to what? Fyodor would be right to forgive Dmitri, yet he does the right thing for the wrong reason. Fyodor, who

has, in practice, renounced Christianity and the seriousness of salvation, can only subordinate his behavior to the purpose of lust, towards the insatiable ends of sensuality. Yet in recognizing this, there is something undoubtedly honest about him, consistent as it were, and his consistent buffoonery ultimately finds less contempt from the narrator than the dishonest posturing of Fyodor's more well-behaved peers: "Wickedness is sweet: everyone denounces it, but everyone lives in it, only they all do it on the sly and I do it openly. And for this ingenuousness of mine, the wicked ones all attack me" (Dostoevsky, 173). This is, in a way, undoubtedly true. Rakitin is the first to diagnose "Karamazovism" as "sensualism," although in considering the whole of the family he extends the definition to "sensualists, money-grubbers, and holy fools!" (Dostoevsky, 80). As the resident town gossip collector, Rakitin does Alyosha the favor of explaining the various romantic rivalries, that involve Fyodor and Dmitri's lust for Grushenka, Ivan's passion for Katerina Ivanovna, and Katerina Ivanovna's strained, dominating "love" of Dmitri. Rakitin explains the problem of sensuality to Alyosha who, as described in the beginning exposition and later on, becomes wildly anxious at the thought of sensuality and thus actively avoids ruminating too much on the romantic affairs of others:

"[... A] man falls in love with some beautiful thing, with a woman's body, or even with just one part of a woman's body (a sensualist will understand that), and is ready to give his own children for it, to sell his father and mother, Russia and his native land, and though he's honest, he'll go and steal; though he's meek, he'll kill; though he's faithful, he'll betray. The singer of women's little feet, Pushkin, sang little feet in verse, others don't sing, but they can't look at little feet without knots in the stomach. But it's not just little feet . . . Here, brother, contempt is no use, even if he does despise Grushenka. He may despise, but he still can't tear himself away from her."

"I understand that," Alyosha suddenly blurted out.

"Really? No doubt you do, if you blurt it out like that, at the first mention," Rakitin said gleefully. "It escaped you, you just blurted it out inadvertently -- which makes the confession all the more valuable." (Dostoevsky, 80)

Much of the content of what is uttered here is reflected later, whether it be the prosecutor in his closing speech on Dmitri, Dmitri's own descriptions of his sensuality, or even Alyosha who later says of Ivan's "outburst," in which he calls Dmitri and Fyodor vipers who will rightly eat each



other up, that, “These words, of course, had escaped Ivan unwittingly, yet they are all the more important for that” (Dostoevsky, 187). While Dmitri turns out to avoid his “sensualist” fate, we cannot find a lie directly within this quoted passage. Yet the lie, of course, is in Rakitin’s own sensual “glee” over exposing the sensuality of others. Rakitin can only expose it because he is guided by the same lustful instincts, and he lies, just like everyone else, to cover it up. Rakitin’s ultimate object of lust is wealth, the idea of his own economic promotion. Dmitri, while awaiting his trial, humorously recalls an episode of Rakitin himself attempting to write a “poem of little feet” for Madame Khokhlakov, yet Rakitin justifies this through his ultimate end goal: “I’ve dirtied my hands writing poetry, for the sake of seduction -- that is, for the sake of a useful cause. If I get the capital away from the foolish woman, then I can be of civic use” (Dostoevsky, 590). Rakitin does not so much desire to “be of civic use” as he wishes to be rewarded for his performances, for his various articles that concern themselves, falsely so, with the fate of Russia and socio-political issues. Even if Rakitin believes momentarily in the French revolutionary slogan of “liberty, equality, fraternity,” his only constant characteristic is his lust for power (Dostoevsky, 82).

The notion of “strained behavior” is thematized from the very beginning of the book and comes to stand in for precisely the idea of “contrary” behavior, behavior that is ultimately inadequate in its relationship to reality. When introducing Fyodor Karamazov in the very first chapter of the novel, and thus presenting his life as a sort of origin point, the narrator reflects on why Dmitri’s birth mother, a “beautiful” and rich woman from an aristocratic family, would marry “such a worthless ‘runt,’” and that he “cannot begin to explain” the phenomenon:

But then, I once knew a young lady still of the last ‘romantic’ generation who, after several years of enigmatic love for a certain gentleman, whom, by the way, she could have married quite easily at any moment, ended up, after inventing all sorts of insurmountable obstacles, by throwing herself on a stormy night into a rather deep and swift river from a high bank somewhat resembling a cliff [...] only because she wanted to be like Shakespeare’s Ophelia. Even then, if

the cliff, chosen and cherished from long ago, had not been so picturesque, if it had been merely a flat, prosaic bank, the suicide might not have taken place at all. This is a true fact, and one can assume that in our Russian life of the past two or three generations there have been not a few similar facts. In the same way, the action of Adelaida Ivanovna Miusov was doubtless an echo of foreign influences, the chafings of a mind imprisoned. (Dostoevsky, 7-8)

Of course, this suicide is certainly not “a true fact,” but rather is a mere fictional anecdote. But

the possibility that there are some “similar facts” to this fictional one seems admissible.

Nonetheless, within the fictional context of the story, this anecdote signifies a type of personality, the type that “invents obstacles” so as to have their life imitate the beauty of fiction.

If the narrator appears to admire the faithful, serious performativity that characterizes the monastic rituals, the narrator is also aware of performances that are comic and hollow. Whether pro or contra, believer or non-believer, every character in *The Brothers Karamazov* tends to “over-act” their part, to betray their “strained” disposition in moments of apparent deep feeling or pride. Yet this over-acting can extend itself to the point of willful suicide. The word strain, as we have mentioned, becomes the title for book IV for a kind of “wounded” behavior from which many in the book act. Indeed, the sense of a “wound” is evident in the “lamentations” of the women of faith which “strai[n] and exacerbat[e]” their hearts and “irritate the wound” (Dostoevsky, 48). This sense of strain is largely developed in relationship to Katerina Ivanovna’s “love” for Dmitri, which begins with the “wound” left from when she had once offered to sell her body for Dmitri’s financial support<sup>14</sup>. Although Dmitri describes wanting to have violated and desecrated her aristocratic pride in this moment, which showed itself vulnerable to his “insect” sensuality, he ultimately gives her the money and lets her go. Ever since, Katerina’s love for Dmitri, in which she attempts to “save him” no matter his rebukes, appears strained and to paradoxically emerge out of a wounded hatred. While Alyosha initially takes Katerina to be an

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<sup>14</sup> explain

almost fearfully beautiful and imperious woman of noble intentions, he begins to realize in the midst of his confusion that her good intentions are not so honest:

“I will be [Dmitri’s] God, to whom he shall pray -- that, at least, he owes me for his betrayal and for what I suffered yesterday because of him. And let him see throughout his whole life, that all my life I was faithful to him and to the word I once gave, despite the fact that he was faithless and betrayed me [...].”

She was breathless. She might have wished to express her thought in a more dignified, artful, and natural way, but it came out too hastily and baldly. There was too much youthful uncontrol, too much that still echoed with yesterday’s irritation and the need to show her pride -- she felt it herself. Her face suddenly somehow darkened, an ugly look came into her eyes.

Alyosha noticed it all immediately, and his heart was moved to compassion. (Dostoevsky, 189)

The narrator and Alyosha’s respective attitudes towards Katerina Ivanovna are fundamentally ambivalent. On the one hand, they both speak of her powerful presence, her beauty, and her objective acts of good will that usually manifest in lending money towards those in need. She does and says good Christian things, yet she betrays herself in this moment as wanting to become the very god-figure that alleviates Mitya’s suffering. Her physical appearance betrays the “contra” element of this seemingly benevolent attitude. Yet while the feelings are not necessarily untrue or cannot become “true,” they are grounded in a motivation that runs contrary to the purported goal of her intentions. In “becoming the means to Mitya’s happiness,” she merely becomes the means to his suffering, and we see how he suffers over the notorious three thousand roubles she lent him (Dostoevsky, 189). A sense of “strained” or over-excited behavior in the novel seems to emerge from the contradiction between one’s purported disposition of feeling, whether it be pro or contra, in the name of good deeds or in the name of debauchery, and their actual feelings, which can only be interpreted through the play between their words and their bodies. After Ivan ironically declares his belief in the sincerity of her feelings, Madame Khokhlakov “could not contain herself and suddenly spoke this very correct thought”: “[She is sincere] [b]ut only for this moment . . . And what is this moment? Just yesterday’s insult -- that’s all it is!” (Dostoevsky, 189). Thus, even lying cretins like Madame Khokhlakov can detect the

falseness of one's presentation with regard to the truth of their feelings, at least inasmuch as they can perceive and declare the truth of those feelings. Yet Katerina's feelings are not entirely false either; they are just "youthful," undeveloped, no labor put into them and thus theatrical performances with little faith involved. Although we cannot prove this, Alyosha and others can *feel* the effect of it.

It seems that a sense of strained or dishonest behavior, in which gestures that seem to indicate dignity, pride, or love performatively reveal their opposite, does not betray the dishonesty of performed feelings, but rather betrays a youthful, overly eager thirst for truth and expression. As we've seen, most of the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov*, either implicitly or explicitly, have philosophies of life that inform their behavior. Dostoevsky does not attempt to causally explain those ideas through the "fact" or truth of feeling; as Bakhtin writes, "The truth about the world, according to Dostoevsky, is inseparable from the truth of the personality" (Bakhtin, *PDP* 78). To the extent that one has lived with and cultivated their "idea," which is their relationship to the world, their idea cannot be separated from the unique events, thoughts, and acts that have thus shaped their life. Furthermore, their ideas do not have "permanent resident rights" within the character's isolated self, but rather are "intersubjective" and come to be developed in "dialogic communion between consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, *PDP* 88). Ivan, in the beginning of his tavern discourse with Alyosha, points to the fundamental similarity between the "pro" side of faith and the "contra" side of reason in their youthful desire for truth:

"How have Russian boys handled things up to now? [...] Take for instance, some stinking local tavern. [...] They've never seen each other before in their whole lives, and when they walk out of the tavern, they won't see each other again for forty years. Well, then, what are they going to argue about, seizing this moment in the tavern? About none other than the universal questions: is there a God, is there immortality? And those who do not believe in God, well, they will talk about socialism and anarchism, about transforming the whole of mankind to a new order, but it's the same damned thing, the questions are all the same, only from the other end." (Dostoevsky, 234)

Despite Ivan's irony regarding the over-excited philosophizing of "Russian boys," he recognizes that he too is a young Russian boy and is driven by these same questions, although his failure to resolve them ultimately leads to his own sense of indecision and dissatisfaction. This kind of banal, drawing-room philosophizing is parodied throughout the book, although that is not to say that the subject becomes any less serious in these moments. The narrator's comments on the youth of Alyosha earlier on in the book suggest that it requires hard work, and not simply a sense of intellectual fervor or wit, to commit oneself to truth:

[A]lyosha was partly a young man of our time -- that is, honest by nature, demanding the truth, seeking it and believing in it, and in that belief demanding the immediate participation in it with all the strength of his soul; demanding an immediate deed, with an unflinching desire to sacrifice everything for this deed, even life. Although, unfortunately, these young men do not understand that the sacrifice of life is, perhaps, the easiest of all sacrifices in many cases, while to sacrifice, for example, five or six years of their ebulliently youthful life to hard, difficult studies, to learning, in order to increase tenfold their strength to serve the very truth and the very deed that they loved and set out to accomplish -- such sacrifice is quite often almost beyond the strength of many of them. Alyosha simply chose the opposite path from all others, but with the same thirst for an immediate deed. (Dostoevsky, 26)

This notion of a "thirst for an immediate deed" is reflected in Zosima's comments to Madame Khokhlakov in "A Women of Little Faith," in which it becomes clear that Madame Khokhlakov's desire to love others has not been grounded in practice, in rigorous performance, but in the desire, the dream to live. We should not overlook the significance of the word "thirst"; for it is precisely in the over-excited desire for life that people act foolishly betray the inadequacy between the content of their action and their actual position in the world. To the extent that non-believers such as Fyodor and Rakitin do not believe in salvation, their sensual relationship to the world becomes characterized by a vain, immediate thirst for ephemeral objects of desire. Both the narrator and Zosima emphasize the need for slowly cultivating one's disposition to the world and the sensual feelings that mark it. Paradoxically, they both seem to suggest that it is easier to kill one's self in the thirst to live than it is to simply live and learn.

If the “pro” and “contra” positions occupied by different characters in the book are mediated by the sensual effect of their physical disposition, then the efficacy of their performance, the truth of their word, lies in the harmony and adequacy between the performer and the world to whom the performance is addressed. While it is clear that the narrator has a distinct bias for characters of faith, the narrator’s performative address towards the characters does not run merely along ideological lines. The narrator shows a modest, yet firm appreciation for characters such as Grigory, whose actions correspond directly to the object of their belief; insofar as Grigory believes it to be his duty to serve Fyodor, he does precisely that. This notion of honesty and integrity are emphasized through the advice of Zosima, yet it becomes rather apparent that most people, in the deepest Christian sense, are lying cretins; which is to say that every character’s action does not reveal itself as self-evident, does not convey its truth in a purely constative mode. To appreciate the irony and the hedging wit of the characters’ and narrator’s largely “double-voiced discourse” involves a need to scrutinize the characters, to read their word not for what is said, but what is implicitly and loudly unsaid. However, this unsaid does not belong purely to the character or their supposed rhetorical intentions, but can often be an unconscious echo of someone with completely different beliefs. Thus, what appears to be “pro” can often be “contra.” While Dmitri praises Grigory for having been his “own father” during the first few years of his life when he lived with Fyodor (Dostoevsky, 459), Grigory had hardly been a good father figure to Smerdyakov. The narrator recalls that after Grigory had beaten Smerdyakov and declared him to be a “monster[. . .] Smerdyakov, it turned out later, never could forgive him these words” (Dostoevsky, 124). Smerdyakov’s disposition is one of utter hatred towards life: “I’d have let them kill me in the womb, so as not to come out in the world at all” (Dostoevsky, 224). Incidentally, Smerdyakov also hates poetry. Yet unless we

believe that some humans are unredeemable, are indeed monsters, then we must hold Grigory, Fyodor, and of course, Ivan, somewhat responsible for the tormented life of Smerdyakov. At the same time, we cannot deprive Smerdyakov of his freedom as a character -- he presumably *could* have done something different. This is the kind of paradoxical logic from which that radical phrase of Zosima's, passed on to him from his late brother, seems to emerge: "[E]ach of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all" (Dostoevsky, 289). A radical saying of "yes" to life, the ideal "pro" position, entails both radical forgiveness and a radical assumption of guilt. Insofar as the lie of "taking offense" leads to quarrels and hatred between characters, the ability to see past an offense, to forgive, allows one to see the "depths" of the action. Yet such a disposition is certainly not easy, insofar as the suffering and sin that is rampant in the world necessarily tests one's faith, one's ability to love life. Zosima tells Alyosha to "sojourn in the world like a monk," to suffer for the sins of others so as to help them: "You will have many opponents, but your very enemies will love you. Life will bring you many misfortunes, but through them you will be happy, and you will bless life and cause others to bless it" (Dostoevsky, 285). Thus, to love life is not merely to kiss the earth or praise the Lord, but entails a lifetime of dedication and hard work -- the sign of which lies in the effect of the performance of that belief.

In the theatrical, three-chapter scene of "confession" from Dmitri to Alyosha, we see how Dmitri's position reflects a paradox between a love of life and a destructive lust for life. It is quite difficult to sum up all of the "tangles" of Dmitri's financial problems, such as his debt to Katerina and the supposed "moral" debt owed to him by his Father. Furthermore, Dmitri downplays the role of money in his affairs: "money is an accessory, a fever of the soul, an ambience" (Dostoevsky, 108). Dmitri's problem essentially boils down to this: he has accepted

his complete, sensual passion for Grushenka as his fate, the “stinking back lane” to which he has surrendered (Dostoevsky, 156), but before doing that he wants to clear his debt to Katya, who has intentionally lent him three thousand dollars knowing that he would spend it on Grushenka and feel guilty over it. Furthermore, Dmitri is weary of the possibility of Grushenka “showing up” to her father’s house and ultimately foresees the possibility that she may indeed go to Fyodor and wishes to prevent this at all costs, even if it means killing his father if he saw them together. The irony of all of this is that the “details” of the relations are rather arbitrary; Grushenka, as she is so often characterized by other characters in the book, turns out not to be a seductress looking for a man with money, but turns out to be a heartbroken woman who torments men out of spite towards the man who had promised marriage and then left her earlier in life. Since Katya believed that Dmitri would squander her money, the three thousand becomes precisely an “accessory” to their love-hate relationship, in which every bow is an implicit curse and every curse is an implicit declaration of love. Yet while Dmitri’s motivations are not quite grounded in realistic, pragmatic goals, his complex feelings towards everyone involved are grounded in his very real personality, that noble yet wild, and ultimately ambiguous, disposition of his. Dmitri is on the one hand, a nobleman by birth, and on the other hand an “insect” by his “Karamazovian” nature (Dostoevsky, 108). Dmitri finds himself caught by the desire to bless life and the desire to fall into the “abyss” of sensuality: “Let me cursed, let me be base and vile, but let me also kiss the hem of that garment in which my God is clothed; let me be following the devil at the same time, but still I am also your son, Lord” (Dostoevsky, 107). It seems that in the heights of sensuality Dmitri has reached, the forces of “pro” and “contra” intensify and pull him in both directions in both directions:

I want to tell you now about the ‘insects,’ about those to whom God gave sensuality [in Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” which Dmitri has cited ...] I am the very insect, brother, and those words are precisely about me. And all of us Karamazovs are like that, and in you, an angel, the same insect



lives and stirs up storms in your blood. Storms, because sensuality is a storm, more than a storm! Beauty is a fearful and terrible thing! Fearful because it's undefinable, and it cannot be defined, because here God gave us only riddles. Here the shores converge, here all contradictions live together. [...] Beauty! Besides, I can't bear it that some man, even with a lofty heart and the highest mind, should start from the ideal of the Madonna and end with the ideal of Sodom. It's even more fearful when someone who already has the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not deny the ideal of the Madonna either, and his heart burns with it, verily, verily burns, as in his young, blameless years. [...] What's shame for the mind is beauty all over for the heart. Can there be beauty in Sodom? Believe me, for the vast majority of people, that's just where beauty lies [...] Here the devil is struggling with God, and the battlefield is the human heart. (Dostoevsky, 108)

While Dmitri is a believer in God and his heart “burns” for a better life, the same part of him is tormented by the beauty of “Sodom,” by the sense of self-destructive lust that he feels towards the world, whether it be directed towards “an institute girl” like Katerina or a supposedly “lowly woman” as Grushenka. We see eventually that Grushenka does not come to represent the “ideal of Sodom,” but that it was Dmitri's desire to humiliate himself, to destroy himself and others in the process of achieving the object of his desire, that ultimately was contrary to Dmitri's own love of life. The “here” in which Dmitri is located appears to be at the height of sensuality, the dangerous heights of life in which Dmitri cannot discern if he has “gotten into stench and shame [or] into light and joy” (Dostoevsky, 107). The “ecstasy” Dmitri reports that he felt when he considered taking advantage of Katya only to then respectfully bow to her, is so much that Dmitri suggest that he could have killed himself in the height of that ecstasy (Dostoevsky, 115). Dmitri is pulled upon by pro and contra forces, by a contradictory lust and love for life. The fate of this torn disposition, whether he will die in sensuality or ultimately raise himself up to a good, Christian life, seems to rest upon whether he will kill his father for the money or find it within himself to “overcome” the Devil (Dostoevsky, 472).

Alyosha's relationship to sensuality, which he seldom articulates or theorizes as his family does, can be seen in the sense of confusion and angst he feels towards the complex romantic rivalries that unfold in the beginning of the novel. As the theme of sensuality is

developed throughout the first several books of the novel, both Rakitin and Dmitri suggest to Alyosha that he too must have inherited a Karamazovian sensuality, that he too must feel “storms in his blood.” The narrator describes Alyosha in his childhood as possessing a “wild, frantic modesty and chastity,” a pairing of adjectives and nouns that would appear paradoxical. The narrator speaks of how Alyosha could not bear “to hear certain words and certain conversations about women,” to the point of squirming and plugging up his ears (Dostoevsky, 20). Both Alyosha and Dmitri ultimately fall on the “pro” side of belief, but while Dmitri comes to be torn between the tension between lust and love, Sodom and the Madonna, the young Alyosha appears to simply avoid these temptations. Alyosha is described in the exposition as on the verge of “shut[ting] himself up in [the monastery] for the rest of his life” (Dostoevsky, 18). While the young Alyosha seems to not have been tormented by life as Dmitri and Ivan have been, it is clear enough that he intuitively recognizes the same darkness and suffering in the world that his brothers do: “[If] he threw himself into the monastery path, it was only because it alone struck him [...] with an ideal way out for his soul struggling from the darkness of worldly wickedness to the light of love” (Dostoevsky, 18). Zosima comes to recognize that Alyosha is “more needed there” in the world and by his family and friends. As Alyosha attempts to unite his family, he finds himself struck by confusion. We perhaps see a glimpse of Alyosha’s own fear of beauty when thinking about Katerina: “Her image he recalled as that of a beautiful, proud, imperious girl. But it was not her beauty that tormented him, it was something else. It was precisely the inexplicable nature of the fear that now added to the fear itself” (Dostoevsky, 101). We see Alyosha blush with shame the moment he begins attempting to help with the various romantic issues at hand, doubting his own ability to understand such affairs. If Alyosha is willing to bless and love life, he finds himself hesitant to speak on affairs of life authoritatively. Yet, when

meeting with Dmitri, he begins to think that he too might be faced with the very same suffering caused by sensuality that Dmitri is faced with:

“[...] I blushed not at your words, and not at your deeds, but because I’m the same as you.”

“You? Well, that’s going a bit too far.”

“No, not too far,” Alyosh said hotly. (Apparently the thought had been with him for some time.) “The steps are all the same. I’m on the lowest, and you are above, somewhere on the thirteenth. That’s how I see it, but it’s all one and the same, all exactly the same sort of thing. Whoever steps on the lowest will surely step on the highest. (Dostoevsky, 109)

While Alyosha is described as young and red-cheeked, Dmitri is described as looking old and sickly, as though he had experienced too much of life. If life and its incessant temptations inevitably bring one higher up the ladder of sensuality, then the pivotal question is whether Dmitri, so far up the ladder, will ultimately destroy himself or find salvation through his passion for life.

### **Blessing Life All the Same: Jokes and Poetry**

After his arrest, Dmitri later explains to his interrogators how his erratic behavior was caused by his guilt over the money, given to him by Katya, that he had “sewn up” after his spending spree, rather than the money spent:

“And that’s why I raged all month, that’s why I fought in the tavern, that’s why I beat my father, because I felt I was a thief! I could not bring myself, I did not dare to reveal anything about the fifteen hundred even to Alyosha, my brother: so much did I feel myself a scoundrel and a pickpocket. But know that all the while I carried it, every day and every hour, I kept saying to myself at the same time: ‘No, Dmitri Fyodorovich, perhaps you’re not yet a thief.’ Why? Precisely because you can go tomorrow and give the fifteen hundred back to Katya.” (Dostoevsky, 493)

The interrogation and trial scenes in the novel reveal the inadequacy of criminal psychology and similar professional discourses insofar as they cannot properly account for the fantastic, absurd nature of Dmitri’s behavior and thus depict Dmitri’s excuses as the work of a “triumphant novelist” who perceives “only the grandiose whole” yet ultimately is “brought up short and demolished by the details” (Dostoevsky, 721). In a word, Dmitri’s stories sound too fantastic to

be plausible, especially when put up against the overwhelming circumstantial evidence of his guilt. Yet while Dmitri's thinking indeed seems absurd and ungrounded, he nonetheless takes himself seriously: "Any man can be, and perhaps is, a scoundrel, but not any man can be a thief, only an arch-scoundrel can be that. Well, I'm not very good at these subtleties . . . But still, a thief is more of a scoundrel than a scoundrel, that is my conviction" (Dostoevsky, 492). Dmitri's logic is humorous, worthy of laughter, but as readers who are seemingly the most privy to the truth of the novel, by way of seeing it from nearly infinite positions, we ultimately take his word as true. As Grushenka says, "I know him: when he babbles, he babbles, whether it's for fun or out of stubbornness, but if it's something against his conscience, he will never deceive you!" (Dostoevsky, 506). The difficulty in Dmitri's case is that the only "evidence" for him comes from an ethical plea from those who know him best, yet this sort of evidence cannot be constituted as proof in a court of law. It turns out that the real tormenting decision for him was whether he would ultimately restore his honor in his relationship to Katya, a private struggle of honor within Dmitri. We might view Dmitri's own explanations of himself as dubious; we cannot verify whether his anger towards his father was in fact a displaced feeling of self-hatred. Yet, in light of Dmitri's confessions, this idea of sitting upon the money while fatefully struggling with his honor makes sense. When Dmitri comes the night of the murder to find Grushenka and sees that she is not there, the moment of temptation then presents itself not as one of jealous wrath or cold-blooded robbery but of sensual hatred when seeing his father's "loathsome" profile in the window (Dostoevsky, 392). However, Dmitri asserts that, despite all the evidence, he was saved by a moment of grace: "I not only wanted to kill him, but I could well have killed him, and I voluntarily heaped it upon myself that I almost killed him! But I didn't kill him, my guardian angel saved me -- that's what you haven't taken into consideration . . . And

that is what makes it mean, mean!” (Dostoevsky, 476). Dmitri’s earnest pleas for them to “tak[e] into consideration” his “guardian angel” are serious, yet ultimately are rendered awkward and comic in the face of a secular audience. Dmitri’s behavior throughout the legal process can indeed be adequately described as of that of an utter fool: “You don’t know with whom you’re dealing! You’re dealing with a suspect who gives evidence against himself, who gives evidence that does him harm!” (Dostoevsky, 475). But Dmitri’s truthfulness, his awareness of the paradoxical nature of his own drives, is precisely what makes his honest character inadmissible in legal procedures, in which he might have done well to have kept quiet. His penchant for telling the truth becomes comic only in a world where the whole truth, and not a legally or psychologically plausible truth, is seemingly no one’s prerogative.

Dmitri’s tendency to cite poetry and tell jokes reflects his deep, intuitive love of life that borders on uncontrollable lust and self-destruction. The narrator sets up Dmitri’s “confession” to Alyosha in three chapters that are titled respectively, “The Confession of an Ardent Heart. In Verse”; “The Confession of an Ardent Heart. In Anecdotes”; and “The Confession of Ardent Heart. Heels Up.” Dmitri’s playful, yet serious narration of his own story, filled with passionate citations of poetry, very much creates the dramatic, theater-like effect of the moment. Yet it is precisely this aesthetic love for life that he struggles with: “And it even seems that while I was telling about all these agonies just now, I must have been filling them out a little, to praise myself. But let it be, let it be so, and to hell with all spies into the human heart!” (Dostoevsky, 115). As readers, we have very little to say about Dmitri that he does not already know about himself. His arc throughout the novel shows that every word of his rings true, that he really does act in accordance with his ridiculous word. Dmitri reads poetry in an urgently literal manner;

after citing a Schiller verse that reads, “Let man and Earth with one another/Make a compact evermore” (107), he asks:

“There’s just one thing; how can I make a compact with the earth evermore? I don’t kiss the earth, I don’t tear open her bosom; what should I do, become a peasant or a shepherd? I keep going, and I don’t know: have I gotten into stench and shame, or into light and joy? [...] And whenever I happened to sink into the deepest, the very deepest shame of depravity (and that’s all I ever happened to do), I always read that poem about Ceres and man. Did it set me right? Never! Because I’m a Karamazov. Because when I fall into the abyss, I go straight into it, head down and heels up, and I’m even pleased that I’m falling in just such a humiliating position, and for me I find it beautiful. (Dostoevsky, 107)

While the “compact” made between man and earth is certainly not depicted as a concrete action in Schiller’s poem, Dmitri genuinely struggles to understand how to have a loving relationship to the world. Insofar as his sensual passion is driven largely by lust, he despairs that he cannot kiss the earth or “tear open her bosom.” If Dmitri is driven by the beautiful ideals depicted by poetry, he is equally driven by the poetic beauty of his own inadequacy to fulfill such lofty values.

Dmitri’s affirmation of life extends itself to affirming the destructive forces of life. If redemption is beautiful, then so is the fall for Dmitri. This same “broad, Karamazovian” disposition allows Dmitri to both praise and cruelly laugh at someone like Katerina, who is both his lover and his rival (Dostoevsky, 699):

[Alyosha] “But I’m sure she does love a man like you, and not a man like [Ivan].”  
“She loves her own virtue, not me,” the words suddenly escaped, inadvertently and almost maliciously, from Dmitri Fyodorovich. He laughed, but a moment later his eyes flashed, he blushed all over and pounded his fist violently on the table.  
“I swear, Alyosha,” he exclaimed with terrible and sincere anger at himself, ‘believe it or not, but I swear as God is holy and Christ is the Lord, that even though I sneered just now at her lofty feelings, still I know that I am a million times more worthless in my soul than she is, and that her lofty feelings -- are as sincere as a heavenly angel’s! That’s the tragedy, I know for certain. What’s wrong with declaiming a little? Am I not declaiming? But I am sincere, I am really sincere. (Dostoevsky, 117)

Dmitri’s laughter is almost a bodily reaction, a physical jolt in his body that emerges from the disparity between Alyosha’s naive perception of Katerina and Dmitri’s own experience of her.

But Dmitri always makes sure that he is the first and last person that he denigrates; he knows that

it takes a scoundrel to recognize another. Dmitri's references to "tragedy," his own awareness of the dramatic nature of his position, might reveal him to be disingenuous, to be like the woman who kills herself for the beauty of it. Yet every action in this novel is disingenuous, only insofar as the possibility of a purely genuine, unmediated communication of neutral information does not exist in Dostoevsky's world. Dmitri's aesthetic pleasures reveal much about his depth of character; however, it is in the moment of decision, in a moment of crisis, that he finds redemption and grace.

If Dmitri's tendency as an author is to "declaim" and perhaps exaggerate for aesthetic effect, then Ivan's literary works tend to baffle and mystify his readers. The narrator describes Ivan's arrival in his father's town as "mysterious," yet also as a "so-fateful arrival" and "the start of so many consequences" (Dostoevsky, 17). While it becomes clear that he is partially there to mediate the family drama, and partially there to pursue his passion for Katerina Ivanovna, the narrator's ominous, yet vague tone almost makes Ivan's arrival appear as a sinister force that was destined to come and claim the life of Fyodor. Ivan arrives in the town known as an inscrutable author who calls for the Church to usurp within itself the functions of the state, yet in an ambiguous tone that leads to wildly different interpretations of his article:

The main thing was the tone of the article and its remarkably unexpected conclusion. And yet many churchmen decidedly counter the author as one of their own. Suddenly, however, along with them, not only secularists but even atheists themselves began to applaud from their side. Finally some quick-witted people concluded that the whole article was just a brazen farce and mockery. (Dostoevsky, 16)

What do we make of these separate reactions? The narrator seems to imply that those who perceived the article to be a "farce" are correct by virtue of being "quick-witted," yet as we know, there are many jokers throughout this novel and a joke is not necessarily a lie. At the inappropriate gathering at the monastery, Ivan and several of the church elders have a respectful and insightful discussion over his idea of which the elders seem to approve. Pyotr Miusov,

clearly frustrated at his inability to keep up with the interlocutors or enter the conversation, angrily tries to expose Ivan by letting everyone know of his infamous “formula” which Ivan had been discussing at various local dinners and get-togethers:

“[...] he solemnly announced [...] that there is decidedly nothing in the whole world that would make men love their fellow men; that there exists no law of nature that man should love mankind, and that if there is and has been any love on earth up to now, it has come not from natural law but solely from people’s belief in their immortality. Ivan Fyodorovich added parenthetically that that is what all natural law consists of, so that were mankind’s belief in its immortality to be destroyed, not only love but also any living power to continue the life of the world would at once dry up in it. [...] [H]e ended with the assertion that [for non-believers ...] the moral law of nature ought to change immediately into the exact opposite of the former religious law, and that egoism, even to the point of evildoing, should not only be permitted to man but should be acknowledge as the most necessary, the most reasonable, and all but the noblest result of his situation. From this paradox, gentlemen, you may deduce what else our dear eccentric and paradoxalist Ivan Fyodorovich may be pleased to proclaim [...].” (Dostoevsky, 69)

What is at stake here is precisely a question of ethics; what greater law or sense of meaning can possibly be invoked so as to deem a given action as unethical? To the extent that one does not believe in salvation or the spiritual equality of men, one can perhaps find more “natural” reasons to do the right thing. But indeed, if Ivan is the essential “contra” figure in the book, then his own methods of reason and logic undo the very possibility of finding any “reason” or “logic” that can explain morality. Ivan recognizes that invocations of “natural law” and any secular form of morality ultimately rests upon the same arbitrary “European hypotheses” that become “axiom[s] for a Russian boy” (Dostoevsky, 235). While Miusov takes Ivan to be a mere joker, we come to understand Ivan to be pushing paradoxes to their end, pushing the limits of reason to the point of aporia, intellectual despair.

It would thus far seem that in the great debate between “pro” and “contra” that Dostoevsky realizes in the novel, “reason” as a human faculty would appear to be a sinister force, one that threatens the integrity of belief. But if Ivan suffers from a lack of belief, we find that Alyosha earlier on in the book struggles in his capacity to reason, to make sense of the tangled affairs that surround him:



One could get completely lost in this tangle, and Alyosha's heart could not bear uncertainty, for the nature of his love was always active. He could not love passively; once he loved, he immediately also began to help. And for that one had to have a goal, one had to know firmly what was good and needful for each of them, and becoming firmly convinced of the correctness of the goal, naturally also to help each of them. But instead of a firm goal there was only vagueness and confusion in everything. (Dostoevsky, 187)

While Alyosha's immediate disposition is to love, this fidelity towards the world does not immediately lend itself to be immediately realized in practice. In order to embody that faith within the world, one needs a bit of reason, if only to make distinctions. Alyosha knows the solution to lie in the practice of active love, but he does not know how to properly shape his love in accordance with each character's disposition. Ivan, on the other hand, is called upon to be a mediator by Dmitri Karamazov, who clearly respects, if not fears, Ivan's intelligence. If Alyosha wishes to help but doesn't know how, then Ivan is in the opposite position: "Let it be known to you that I will always protect [our Father]. But as for my wishes in the matter, there I reserve complete freedom for myself" (Dostoevsky, 143). While Ivan appears to intuitively understand his family members and swears to protect them, he has no innate feeling or reason to justify his action. This particular conversation between Ivan and Alyosha follows shortly after the moment when Ivan appears to almost involuntarily say of Dmitri and Fyodor, "Viper will eat viper, and it would serve them both right!" (Dostoevsky, 141). Although Ivan never puts it so literally, it becomes evident in this conversation that Ivan wishes death upon his family members. After Alyosha asks if any man can judge "who is worthy to live and who is more unworthy," Ivan gives a telling response:

"But why bring worth into it? The question is most often decided in the hearts of men not at all on the basis of worth, but for quite different reasons, much more natural ones. As for rights, tell me, who has no right to wish?"

"But surely not for another's death?"

"Maybe even for another's death. Why lie to yourself when everyone live like that, and perhaps even cannot live any other way? What are you getting at -- what I said about 'two vipers eating each other up'? In that case, let me asks you: do you consider me capable, like Dmitri, of shedding Aesop's blood, well, of killing him? Eh?" (Dostoevsky, 143)

As a believer, Alyosha's question is urgent and serious. How can any one person have the right to declare any life to be "unworthy" of itself? Alyosha takes the value of life to be given, God-given in particular. Alyosha's evaluative love for life is grounded in a firm goal, a firm belief that all can be redeemed. While Ivan logically understands the idea of salvation, he cannot bring himself to earnestly and sensually maintain a loving disposition towards a world full of sin and suffering. The labor of active love requires a lifetime of paradoxical affirmation, of finding joy through sorrow, grace through suffering. Ivan, however, finds this attempt to affirm life in spite of everything to be in bad faith. After telling Alyosha a terrible story of cruelty on the part of a general towards one of his serfs, Ivan becomes ecstatic when he tricks Alyosha into saying yes to his rhetorical question: "Well . . . what to do with him? Shoot him? Shoot him for our moral satisfaction?" (Dostoevsky, 243). The dream of salvation, for Ivan, becomes a lie in the face of "much more natural" decisions that have already been "decided in the hearts of men." While Ivan insinuates the death-wish he has for Fyodor, Alyosha conforms to him that he does not consider Ivan "capable" of killing Fyodor. And indeed, Ivan never ends up laying a hand on his father. However, we ultimately see that at a moment of crisis, of great decision, Ivan's repressed feelings lead him to abandon his father, to leave him to die, just as his father had abandoned Ivan at the beginning of his life.

While Ivan recognizes within himself an innate, sensual attraction to life, he finds its "absurdities" to offend his intellectual thirst for truth, and thus he negates it. Although Ivan admits to Alyosha outright that he does not "believe in the order of things," that he rejects the gift of life as it has been presented to him, Ivan nonetheless knows that he is a Karamazov and thus possesses a naturally "wild and indecent thirst for life": "Some snotty-nosed, consumptive moralists [...] often call this thirst for life base. [...] but why is it base? There is still an awful lot

of centripetal force on our planet, Alyosha. I want to live, and I do live, even if it beg against logic” (Dostoevsky, 230). Indeed, insofar as Ivan is alive, he clearly must have some innate desire, some will, to live. Yet as we know, this thirst to live, if not cultivated and properly directed, can paradoxically lead one to destroy themselves. No matter whether one is “pro” or “contra,” no matter whether one blesses or curses life, the same “centripetal force” of sensuality pulls both sides towards the center. And indeed, the height of sensuality appears to be located right on the border of “pro” and “contra.” We might imagine Dmitri, split between the forces of pro and contra, to be teetering at this point. While Dmitri’s affirmation of life and its value corresponds to a deep feeling of sensual attachment, this very same sensual urge brings him causes him to negate the value of his own life. As Dmitri says to Perkhotin, after he wrongly believes himself to have accidentally killed Grigory, that, “I’m ready right now to bless God and his creation, but . . . I must exterminate one foul insect, so that it will not crawl around spoiling life for others” (Dostoevsky, 406). Dmitri’s desire to end his father’s life and his own life emerge from the same sensual source of self-hatred. He ultimately believes himself and his father to be the “insect” that spoils creation. Mitya’s temptation to “exterminate” the insect, to negate it either through killing himself or his father, brings him dangerously close to the “contra” side, dangerously close to losing faith in the possibility of his own redemption. Ivan, on the other hand, has already rejected life, yet finds himself to instinctually love it all the same: “[S]till the sticky little leaves that come out in the spring are dear to me, the blue sky is dear to me, some people are dear to me, whom one loves sometimes, would you believe it, without even knowing why” (Dostoevsky, 230). The tone of this passage is ambivalent. Diane Thompson writes that, “‘Some person’ whom ‘you/one’ love ‘sometimes’ not knowing ‘what for’ is so vague and abstract as to be virtually equivalent to love no one anytime for any reason. Ivan does not

mention a single real living person who is 'dear' to him" (180). Yet it becomes clear, with references to the "graveyard" of European culture, which he nonetheless considers "the most precious graveyard," and to Pushkin in referring to the "sticky little leaves," that Ivan sees something of the beauty of life and the artifacts that bear witness to it, even if this beauty is meaningless and his love for it "goes against logic" (Dostoevsky, 230). After Alyosha praises Ivan and suggests that everyone should love life, Ivan asks: "Love life more than its meaning?" Alyosha corrects the premise: "Certainly, love it before logic, as you say, certainly before logic, and only then will I also understand its meaning" (Dostoevsky, 231). Ivan's reductive, "Euclidean" view of the world causes him to equate "meaning" with the "negative determinations" of reason. For the "meaning" of life, while not something ineffable, cannot unfold solely through theoretical thought; rather, one's "idea" about life develops and takes its shape through dialogic contact, and its sense, its unique meaning, becomes cultivated with time. For while reason, as a tool, allows one to make distinctions in order to see and act more clearly, reason itself cannot provide a "goal," nor can it justify life. If it is reason's function "to negate," then it causes Ivan to see sensuality as empty, youthful "habit," to see his own "thirst for life" as something stupid, to even see the benefactor who paid for his education as someone who was "carried away by the idea that a boy of genius must also be educated by an educator of genius." Love then becomes, at its best, a meaningless and perhaps even self-indulgent "ardor for good works" (Dostoevsky, 15). If pure reasoning, devoid of good faith, can only find beneath every mask a scoundrel, it is because "reason [itself] is a scoundrel," as Ivan says (Dostoevsky, 236). And indeed, after having abandoned the family and gotten onto a train to Moscow, Ivan whispers to himself: "I am a scoundrel," knowing full well that he has broken his promise to protect, a promise that he never really believed in (Dostoevsky, 280).

If Dmitri sees poetry as the expression of lofty beliefs, then Ivan sees poetry as a powerful, yet empty form of rhetoric which masks a loss of an old ideal. While Ivan shows a deep understanding and innate appreciation of European art and philosophy, he ultimately sees Europe as a graveyard and views poets as “snotty-nosed, consumptive moralists” (Dostoevsky, 230). Ivan nonetheless tends towards philosophical discussion and reveals a deep familiarity with European poetry through the allusions made in “The Grand Inquisitor.” If Ivan’s Karamazovian sensuality compels Ivan to live in spite of his hatred towards life, then we can see it in his disposition to philosophize and discuss poetry. Indeed, Ivan recognizes as much: “[W]e green youths need another, we need first of all to resolve the everlasting questions, that is what concerns us” (Dostoevsky, 233). After Ivan makes a powerful, rhetorical *apologia* for his “rebellion” against God, which has clearly has a powerful, dark effect upon Alyosha, he moves from rhetoric to poetry: “My poem is called ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ -- an absurd thing, but I want you to hear it” (Dostoevsky, 246). Now, we must remember that Ivan knows what he is doing in deriding his own ideas: “Reason is a scoundrel, stupidity is direct and honest. I brought the case around to my despair, and the more stupidly I’ve presented it, the more it’s to my advantage” (236). Like the narrator, Ivan presents himself as a nervous fool, only to then dispose of the mask and triumphantly reveal his plan. Ivan ultimately makes use of poetry and philosophy as rhetorical forms, yet only to parasitically deconstruct the idealism, the thirst for truth, that sensually drives poets and philosophers. His Grand Inquisitor operates in a similar manner. The Grand Inquisitor refers to humanity as “weak, feeble” rebels, yet claims to love them in recognizing them as such. The Grand Inquisitor condemns Christ for allowing humanity to freely choose their love for him, arguing that they were not created with the strength to maintain such a love in the face of earthly suffering:

Is it the fault of the weak soul that it is unable to contain such terrible gifts? Can it be that you indeed came only to the chosen ones and for the chosen ones? But if so, there is a mystery here, and we cannot understand it. And if it is a mystery, then we, too, had the right to preach mystery and to teach them that it is not the free choice of the heart that matters, and not love, but the mystery, which they must blindly obey, even setting aside their own conscience. (Dostoevsky, 256-257)

If poets are the keeper of the mystery, who astound the masses through their rhetorical tricks, then the “mystery” they protect is that there is no mystery. Since humans are feeble, sensual creatures who thirst for truth, they will ultimately come to a totalitarian leader who will both “feed them” and give them “someone to bow down to” (Dostoevsky, 254). Indeed, there is plenty to say about the tendency of right-wing Fascist movements to hollowly invoke past cultural forms in their sinister, and false, attempts to foster nationalistic pride. When Alyosha points out that the Grand Inquisitor does not “have any great mysteries and secrets . . . Except maybe for godlessness,” Ivan jumps on his point:

“[...] Yes, indeed, that alone is the whole secret, but it is not suffering, if only for such a man as he, who has wasted his whole life on a great deed in the wilderness and still has not been cured of his love for mankind? In his declining years he comes to the clear conviction that only the counsels of the great and dread spirit [read: Satan] could at least somehow organize the feeble rebels, ‘the unfinished, trial creatures created in mockery,’ in a tolerable way. And so, convinced of that, he sees that one must follow the directives of the intelligent spirit, the dread spirit of death and destruction, and to that end accept lies and deceit, and lead people, consciously now, to death and destruction, deceiving them, moreover, all along the way, so that they somehow do not notice where they are being led, so that at least on the way these pitiful, blind men consider themselves happy. And deceive them, notice, in the name of him in whose ideal the old man believed so passionately all his life!” (Dostoevsky, 261)

It seems that rhetoric and poetry, in the hands of non-believers, can ultimately only be the work of the Devil. While poets and other types of rhetoricians know how to guide us, to blind us at some moments only to later make us see, they know that behind their revelatory “word” lies nothing but the grave. Poets employ words and figures so as to mysteriously evoke an otherwise absent meaning, yet this rhetorical effect ultimately conceals the rote, grammatical mechanisms that engender it. And yet, the intentions of such poets do not appear so to be so sinister. The Grand Inquisitor and his associates attempt to enslave humanity, but supposedly out of pity for

them. If mankind is irretrievably fallen and lost in the wilderness, then perhaps we can find some solace through the beautiful images of poetry. Furthermore, we might even come to see the poet as a paradoxical, perverse Christ figure whose false teachings of an ideal he once believed in become a sort of “noble lie.” The Grand Inquisitor becomes a martyr for the truth, yet a truth that is entirely negative. For while the Devil is an excellent critic of God, the only truth he really knows is the truth of death and impermanence.

Ivan’s radical, paradoxical employment of logical reasoning ultimately reveals reason itself to be a perversion of faith, a greedy thirst for truth that necessarily falls short of its own desire to proclaim, “And here is the Messiah!” After taunting Alyosha with stories of cruelty and tricking him into admitting his own internal, yet violent desire for immediate retribution, Ivan suggests that there is no redemption, no logic that could resolve such a painfully ironic desire for justice on earth:

[Alyosha] “What I said is absurd, but . . .”

“That’s just it, that ‘but . . .,’” Ivan was shouting. “I tell you, novice, that absurdities are all too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and without them perhaps nothing at all would happen. We know what we know!”

“What do you know?”

“I don’t understand anything,” Ivan went on as if in delirium, “and I no longer want to understand anything. I want to stick to the fact. I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I wanted to understand something, I would immediately have to betray the fact, but I’ve made up my mind to stick to the fact . . .”

243)

(Dostoevsky,

In this moment, we see that the “understanding” of reason ultimately denies the very meaning that it wishes to reveal. While reasoning, an ability to posit a certain thought and consider the possibilities implicit within it, can be a tool that serves towards the ends of clarification, of narrowing down the “facts,” reason itself cannot bring forth the “meaning” of the fact. The idea that a fact could “mean” something, that it could be understood as anything other than what it simply is, implicitly resembles an arbitrary affirmation of belief. If reason dedicates itself to the

“fact,” then in the process it will only find obstacles to negate, appearances or idiosyncrasies to be reduced to bare parts that themselves are never bare, never “true” enough. If the “beauty” of the world emerges from its inability to “be defined” as Dmitri suggests (Dostoevsky, 108), then reason can only find life’s beauty to be a fraudulent untruth, yet one that it fails to ever unmask. Ivan’s capacity for reasoning betrays his own sensual delight in taking on paradoxes, in boldly grappling with ideas, yet this very delight turns into pain as Ivan’s thirst for truth leads him to negate the very world that he wishes to understand. Ivan cannot, like Alyosha, find the strength to love life “before its meaning.” If reason “hedges and hides,” it is because it knows that it has no ground upon which to stand: “[Fyodor] stands on his sensuality [...] as on a rock . . . though after thirty years, indeed, there may be nothing else to stand on . . . But still, seventy is base; thirty is better: it’s possible to preserve a ‘tinge of nobility’ while duping oneself” (Dostoevsky, 231). Ivan sees his own desire to live as a lie, his attempt to exist as a deceitful performance, and thus becomes the ultimate embodiment of the lying cretin. But why, why does the lying cretin warn us about lying cretins? Something about the Grand Inquisitor’s desire to “speak out,” to “say aloud all that he has been silent about for ninety years” betrays the small, yet significant degree of belief that must reside within him and torment him (Dostoevsky, 250). Even the highest of all lying cretins still bear witness to the “latent, unuttered future Word” in which an “overwhelming part of this reality is contained” (qtd. in Thompson, 326). The desire to speak out, even if just to make a declaration of non-belief, betrays an innate belief in the possibility of salvation.

As ethical readers of the text, what can we say of Ivan? How do we respond to the tortured, yet beautiful riddles that he poses for everyone throughout the novel? On the one hand, we can find within Ivan’s nihilistic, destructive philosophy the possibility. The Devil mocks Ivan



with his own knowledge, telling him, “I will sow just a tiny seed of faith in you, and from it an oak will grow -- and such an oak that you, sitting in that oak, will want to join ‘the desert fathers and the blameless women’; because secretly you want that ver-ry, ver-ry much, you will dine on locusts, you will drag yourself to the desert to seek salvation” (Dostoevsky, 645). Insofar as Ivan has negated and repressed his own innate love for the world, his feelings of guilt ultimately bring him closer to this belief. If feelings of guilt violently pull Ivan towards belief, then the sensual effect of this force culminates in sickness and madness. If we have learned anything from our paradoxicalists, it is that we should take irony quite seriously. Diane Thompson does precisely this in reminding us that “it is wrong to hear only the evil voice in Ivan’s discourse and to isolate it rhetorically from the poetic content of the novel” (191). Like his father, Ivan’s ironic, contrary behavior, such as writing articles in favor of the Church, unconsciously echoes the serious belief that it mocks. Ivan’s joke, just like Fyodor’s, achieves its comic force precisely to the extent that it is true. After Miusov exposes Ivan for his formula of “everything is permitted,” Zosima responds that Ivan is either “blessed [...] or else most unhappy!” Zosima suggests that Ivan has mostly likely been joking, to which Ivan responds: “Maybe you’re right . . . ! But still, I wasn’t quite joking either” (Dostoevsky, 70). In this moment, Zosima and Ivan seem to find a sense of dialogic communion through perceiving the same phenomenon from “different ends”:

“You weren’t quite joking, that is true. This idea is not yet resolved in your heart and torments it. But a martyr, too, sometimes likes to toy with his despair, also from despair, as it were. For the time being you, too, are toying, out of despair, with your magazine articles and drawing-room discussions, without believing in your own dialectics and smirking at them with your heart aching inside of you . . . The question is not resolved in you, and there lies your great grief, for it urgently demands resolution . . .”

“But can it be resolved in myself? Resolved in a positive way?” [...]

“Even if it cannot be resolved in a positive way, it will never be resolved in the negative way either -- you yourself know this property of your heart, and therein lies the whole of its torment. But thank the Creator that he has given you a lofty heart, capable of being tormented by such a torment, ‘to set your mind on things that are above, for our true homeland is in heaven.’ May God grant that your heart’s decision overtake you still on earth, and may God bless your path!”  
(Dostoevsky, 70)

Zosima's refusal to state that it could only be resolved "in a positive way" reveals his respect for the nature of the paradox. If Zosima finds himself "prescribing" faith to the women who come to him, then he is wise enough to avoid such straightforward, reasonable advice in addressing Ivan. For the paradoxicalist will only recognize, behind every profession of faith, a lying cretin that yearns for the lost ideal of salvation. Zosima blesses Ivan's torment and the convoluted path that may or may not lead him to a resolution, to salvation. Yet despite the sensual, aesthetic beauty we perceive in reading about Ivan's torment, his torment will only find resolution not through a miracle, nor from a proof, but precisely in the unique, unrepeatable moment of ethical decision. Zosima's metonymic figure for finding resolution embodies Zosima's own paradoxical disposition: "May God grant that your heart's decision overtake you[.]" Ivan's decision will ultimately not belong to the perverse intentions, to the in-tension of his mind, but will rather be made by his heart. While Zosima believes in human freedom and thus does not attempt to predict behavior, he understands that Ivan's decision to accept his guilt will involve a feeling that is analogous to one's heart "overtaking" the whole of their body. To achieve resolution, to perform one's utter faith in *something*, must look something like the dancer merging with the dance. Yet to live on the paradoxical brink of sensuality, where all forces pro and contra meet, is not sustainable. While Ivan's formula, which can be paraphrased as, "If there is no God, then everything is permitted," paradoxically touches upon the truth of "things that are above," its open, unresolved effect ultimately allows Smerdyakov to read Ivan's open proposition as a sort of code through which Ivan renounces not only God the father, but his very own father. Smerdyakov later tells Ivan, "I performed the deed according to your word" (Dostoevsky, 623). Thus, while Ivan is no doubt a hero, a martyr, he is also a murderer and a lying cretin. How can we love such a villain? And yet, if Ivan is capable of recognizing his own guilt, then we must

declare to him, along with Alyosha, that “it was *not you* who killed father” (Dostoevsky, 601). If not Ivan, then *whom*? Could it be . . . *him*?!

I should like to close this discussion of sensuality with a passage from the “Life of Zosima.” If the final word on the matter should be given to someone, I believe myself authorized to give it to Father Zosima:

I think thus of Satan’s pride: it is difficult for us on earth to comprehend it, and therefore, how easy it is to fall into error and partake of it, thinking, moreover, that we are doing something great and beautiful. And there is much in the strongest feelings and impulses of our nature that we cannot comprehend while on earth; do not be tempted by that, either, and do not think it can serve you as a justification for anything, for the eternal judge will demand of you that which you could comprehend, not that which you could not -- you will be convinced of that, for then you will see all things aright and no longer argue. But on earth we are indeed wandering, as it were, and did we not have the precious image of Christ before us, we would perish and be altogether lost, like the race of men before the flood. Much on earth is concealed from us, but in place of it we have been granted a secret, mysterious sense of our living bond with the other world, with the higher heavenly world, and the roots of our thoughts and feelings are not here but in other worlds. That is why philosophers say it is impossible on earth to conceive of the essence of things. God took seeds from other worlds and sowed them on this earth, and raised up his garden; and everything that could sprout sprouted, but it lives and grows only through its sense of being in touch with other mysterious worlds; if this sense is weakened or destroyed in you, that which has grown up in you dies. Then you become indifferent to life, and even come to hate it. So I think. (Dostoevsky, 320)

### Conclusion: A Final Word

Our reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* began with a simple question: Is literature performative? Such a question is rather literal and earnest enough. Yet each time we have raised the question, we have found it to become an increasingly fateful, dangerous question. For if one can do things with words, then we must be weary of the destruction that words can reap. Smerdyakov’s decision to murder Fyodor in fulfillment of Ivan’s paradoxical philosophizing bears witness to this. And yet if the stakes appear quite high at certain moments, then they are decidedly low in others. For even if we have justified literature, even if we have done justice to Dostoevsky’s word, the possibility remains that our own performance, our own moment of great decision, has been infelicitous. If this essay serves as an apology for the value of literature, then to whom have we addressed it? Were someone who holds literature in contempt to read our work

here, could we honestly expect that such a person would find our arguments satisfying? We might find a better audience amongst other literary critics, yet what kind of success would this constitute? Could we really be so bold as to declare, “And here is the Messiah,” upon the freshly printed pages of an undergraduate thesis? If our own notions of ethical reading, informed by Bakhtin, have lead us to take all sorts of fools, jokers, and lying cretins seriously, then we might also do well to laugh at ourselves a bit. But if it were all to to end on this note of laughter, what would it sound like? Would it be a cunning snicker that takes pride in the great farce it has promulgated? Or would it ring with a loving affirmation of life? If the truth lies in the effect of the performance, then we must leave that word to someone else.

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