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"A Most Modest Wish": The Ideal Form of Dostoevsky's Russia

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Abstract

Nineteenth-century Russia experienced a crisis of identity rooted in cultural ambivalence. Adoption of Western ideals seemed necessary to effect modernization, but westernization ran counter to the growing trend to idealize native Russian culture. Indecisive governmental policies evidenced this ambivalence, as did the developing Russian literary tradition. Relying on a traditional link between politics and religion, the literary elite created a uniquely Russian ideal identity, the authority of which was legitimized by the use of religious language. The problem Russia faced was to resolve the tension between this ideal and the reality of existing social and political forms.

Although Russia's government failed to resolve the disparity, Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, when studied in conjunction with *A Writer's Diary*, can be seen as both an explication of and a remedy for the problem. Dostoevsky achieves his goal by providing an accessible demonstration that the ideal is possible.

"A Most Modest Wish": The Ideal Form of Dostoevsky's Russia

Nineteenth-century Russia produced a number of outstanding thinkers and writers, including the novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. His last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, is considered a masterpiece of world literature. Although widely varying interpretations of it have been offered, one thing that can be agreed upon is that the novel is political as well as religious and that in it Dostoevsky prescribes his ideal of human government. During the nineteenth century, the long-established relationship between religion and politics was becoming increasingly important to the emerging Russian literary tradition.[1] In keeping with the trend, Dostoevsky uses religious language in *The Brothers Karamazov* and in his self-edited journal, *A Writer's Diary*, to present and legitimize a political idea. The issues Dostoevsky addresses, stemming from the discrepancy between an ideal of human harmony and the reality of evil, were applicable for his contemporaries, but are made relevant to a broader audience through Dostoevsky's manipulation of the concept of time.[2]

First, this thesis will investigate those aspects of Dostoevsky's culture which may have contributed to his understanding of religious and political issues and which, perhaps, prompted his reply to them through literary art. Secondly, it will focus on Dostoevsky as a person and as an author. After a few biographical details and a brief analysis of *The Brothers Karamazov*, this second portion will also consider some of the ideas Dostoevsky discusses in *A Writer's Diary* that are relevant to the novel. The last section of the thesis evaluates *The Brothers Karamazov* and *A Writer's Diary*, exploring both the way that

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[1] Gregory Frieden, "By the Walls of Church and State: Literature's Authority in Russia's Modern Tradition." *Russian Review* 52 (April 1993): 149-165.

[2] Leonard J. Stanton. "*Zedergol'm's* Life of Elder Leonid of Optina *as a Source of Dostoevesky's* The Brother's Karamazov," *Russian Review* 49 (1990): 443-55. Stanton argues that Dostoevsky de-historicized the source, then connected the narrative present of his novel to this romanticized myth. Using this idea as a basis, I am furthering the argument and saying that Dostoevsky de-historicized the novel as well, using it as a platform to present a timeless political ideal.

Dostoevsky expresses his ideas in the novel and the effectiveness of his techniques.

Russia's Identity Crisis

To begin with, it is important to understand the disposition of nineteenth-century Russia. Conflicted in nearly every level by a struggle between conservative tendencies and the impulse toward reform, the society that Dostoevsky was born into was as ambivalent as the literary characters that he created in his literature. Modernization had been an issue since Peter the Great's reforms a hundred years earlier, but became increasingly important as the ideas of the French Enlightenment spread through European Russia. Because native Russian culture was seen as backward and uncouth, the Russian nobility spoke French almost exclusively; Russian was used very little. Consequently, the literary tradition that developed was more Western in character than Russian. Toward the end of the eighteenth century uneasiness about the borrowed nature of Russian culture contributed to a sense of uncertainty regarding national identity and prompted a rectification of the problem.[3] As a result, Russia's almost complete dependence upon European tradition for high culture began to lessen by the 1780s and 1790s. However, a truly native Russian literary tradition did not begin to blossom until after the turn of the century.[4]

A decisive moment in this crisis of identity came in those first decades when France under Napoleon Bonaparte became Russia's number one irritation in matters of foreign policy. The whole of Europe was churning with war and convoluted alliances, and although Russia had initially declared neutrality, its involvement in the various

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[3] Abbott Gleason, "Structural Ideologies," 103 124. (Page citations are to the reprint edition.)

[4] Orlando Figes, "European Russia" and "Children of 1812," in *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, (New York: Picador, 2002), 4 -146. Also, *native* is used here in the sense of being written by Russians in the Russian language, not in the sense of a tradition developed without any European or other outside cultural influences. Before the turn of the century Russian literature was imported from Europe or, if written by Russians, written in French, which was the language of the educated and polite circles.

conflicts could not be avoided. Napoleon's victory over Russian forces at Austerlitz in 1805 during the War of the Third Coalition had a definite cooling effect on French-Russian relations, which only worsened with time. Although France in particular was now the enemy and could no longer be emulated in matters of culture, Europe as a whole was becoming much less appealing as a source of cultural influence as well. Since Russia's backwardness in general was still an obvious problem, and Europe was losing some of its credibility with the educated Russian classes, the question for Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century was how best to modernize, but in a *Russian* sort of way. While Western ideals were still in vogue, especially among intellectual circles, the idea of the West itself was losing much of its luster and the trend to idealize native Russian culture was growing.[5]

When Tsar Alexander I ascended the throne in 1801 at age 23, it seemed quite likely that reform and modernization would materialize. As the favorite of his enlightened grandmother, Catharine the Great, he had received a thoroughly western education and appeared to be the embodiment of Enlightenment ideals. Unfortunately, he was not strong in practical application of ideals and theory; the potential at the beginning of his reign did not culminate in the desired reform. Fitful starts and stutters toward social change characterized his time as tsar and anticipated the general tenor of the century. This ambivalence in the government was to encourage the ambiguous intellectual atmosphere that Dostoevsky's works portray so well. [6]

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[5] Nicholas Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 307-13.

[6] Ibid., 300-304, 340, 349. The main contentions in the push for social change were the autocracy itself and the problem of serfdom, but Alexander chose to set these issues aside in favor of the less potentially explosive matter of education reform. During the course of his reign, the number of schools increased to a total of 6 universities, 48 secondary schools, and 337 primary schools. Compared to the state of education before the reforms, these results were quite impressive. Although his success in this area was

Nicholas I, who was much less inclined to reform than his brother had been, succeeded Alexander I in 1825. His reign was the first in a series of undulations from relative freedom to repression throughout the century. In fact, events surrounding the transition between these two Tsars were symptomatic of Alexander's failures and a backdrop for the reactionary nature of Nicholas's reign. When Alexander died unexpectedly in December 1825, his two brothers, Nicholas and Constantine, were equally determined that the other was the proper successor. Each swore allegiance to the other, leaving no one in control of the throne. Seizing the opportunity to act, a group of idealistic liberals, mostly military officers, decided to proceed with plans for a coup that they had been formulating during Alexander's reign. Although specific ideas regarding proper governmental forms varied among the Decembrists, as they came to be called, their driving principle was Enlightenment liberalism as embodied in the French Revolution. Their goal was to effect a fundamental change in government. Alexander's tremulous approach had frustrated their hopes for liberalism, and had made the situation ripe for the coup that they had had scheduled for the following summer.

Eventually, Nicholas accepted the idea that he was the next tsar and prepared to take over the throne. Using the fact that the military had just sworn allegiance to Constantine in the preceding days, the Decembrists convinced a group of some 3,000 soldiers that his claim to the throne had to be defended against Nicholas's illegitimate one. In reality, Alexander had left explicit written directions that Nicholas was to succeed him. A confrontation between the two factions ensued when it came time for the military to swear allegiance to Nicholas. The ill-prepared rebellion ended after a five hour standoff in front of the capital when artillery fire ordered by Nicholas killed sixty or

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considerable, and there were a few reforms made and measures enacted in other aspects of government that signaled a drift forward, in the scope of what was needed these changes remained but feeble efforts.

seventy of the rebels. Five of the leaders were later executed; other participants who were convicted received the lesser sentence of being exiled to Siberia.[7]

The Decembrist Uprising and its aftermath were to influence Nicholas's policies until his death in 1855. Dostoevsky and his generation, who grew to maturity during that period, experienced firsthand the clash between the liberal impulse and the reactionary policies that Nicholas embraced. Determined as he was to prevent further revolutionary threats, Nicholas became increasingly suspicious, introducing ever stricter censorship and repression.[8] The principal idea informing his understanding of Russian government was the idea of three pillars, *Autocracy*, *Orthodoxy*, and *Nationality*, on which Russia was built. *Orthodoxy* in the form of the *Blessed Tsar* served as a solvent in which the people and their ruler were unified. The system of government peculiar to Nicholas that emerged from this view was that ordering his subjects' lives through the projection of his will into every aspect of society was acting in their best interests. Additionally, any attempt to break this Tsar-people bond was seen as an attempt to dissolve not just the government, but the idea of Russia herself. Essentially, he was unwilling to tolerate any perceived threat to his power for the simple reason that the *Blessed Tsar* embodied the idea of Russia and thus transcended even the laws that were created to keep order within the

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[7] Ibid., 319-322; Figes, "European Russia," 85-91; Joseph Frank, *Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849*, vol.1 of *Dostoevsky* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 4-5; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Yermolai Solzhenitsyn (Farrar, Straus, Giroux: New York, 1995), 41. All four of these sources give varying numbers for those arrested, convicted, exiled, and pardoned. The only consistent figure is that five were executed.

[8] Solzhenitsyn takes a much less harsh view of Nicholas than Riasanovsky does. He points out that the Decembrists had some patently illiberal ideas that would have been just as tyrannical in practice as a despotic Tsar. Although their punishments seem rather severe, Nicholas was relatively lenient in his treatment of the Decembrists considering what he could have done. For example, besides the five who actually were executed, thirty-one others who had also been sentenced to death were pardoned. Similarly, though the crowd shot at Nicholas and others in his entourage he only reluctantly fired back at the crowd after his attempt to talk the leadership out of carrying through with the plan failed. Solzhenitsyn suggests that Nicholas somewhat unjustly became a scapegoat for the ills of the empire – even so far as being blamed for Pushkin's death. pp. 40-1.

state.[9]

Censored and restricted unmercifully for thirty years under Nicholas, the Russian people were more than ready for a regime change when Alexander II became Tsar after his father's death in 1855. The Tsar Liberator, as he was called, was not a particularly brilliant leader, but he introduced a number of significant changes in Russian society and government which collectively came to be known as the Great Reforms. As promising as these reforms were, though, they were less the result of a fundamental change in thinking on the part of the tsar and his government than they were a practical revamping of old governmental forms. Russia's defeat in the Crimean War had proven the inadequacy of the old system, hence the attempt to make adjustments. However, Alexander did not intend to make fundamental structural changes. With the same inflexibility that had characterized the previous tsars of the nineteenth century, he allowed some reform, but nothing that would directly affect his power as tsar. Accordingly, his Great Reforms were less effective than they could have been more because they were too limited than because of any glaring intrinsic weakness.[10]

The successive reigns of these three tsars, Alexander I, Nicholas I, and Alexander II, encompass both Dostoevsky's lifetime and the definitive years of Russian literature. The desire for a national identity on par with but distinct from European tradition urged Russia toward modernization during the nineteenth century. At the same time, it stimulated unprecedented literary growth and vitality. As a result, the years 1820 to 1880

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[9] Michael Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 146-158.

[10] Riasanovsky, 369-380. The most momentous of these reforms was the abolition of serfdom in March of 1861. Although the emancipation was rather less than ideal in many ways, it was nevertheless a huge step forward in terms of social progress. Other reforms included significant changes in local government, extensive judicial reform, and professionalizing and restructuring of the military. While the emancipation is probably the most celebrated of the Great Reforms, some of the others, especially the reform of the judiciary, were arguably more successful overall.

have come to be called "the golden age of Russian literature," and rightly so. As the Russians began to turn away from Europe and to look inward for their cultural identity, the use and development of their native language took on increasing importance.[11] Instead of French, the educated classes began to consciously use Russian for both writing and speaking, opening the door for a truly Russian literature. Such writers as Nicholas Karamzin and Alexander Pushkin started creating a tradition of literature that Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy were to continue later in the century. Russia's culturally subservient attitude in the preceding centuries made it paramount for this new generation to establish some fact of Russian existence that would change the dynamic, at least in the sense of Russians themselves feeling less inferior. They eventually came to believe that Russia's moral superiority was what set her apart from and above the developed but decadent West.[12] These two strands of thought, a new consciousness of language and a growing belief in Russian moral superiority, evolved over the course of the century into a singularly Russian cultural identity in which literature and nationality were intertwined. In a sense, literature became proof of their nation's legitimacy.[13]

Religion and Politics in Russia's Identity

The moral dimension of this developing identity was extremely important because it was from the Russian religion that this claim to legitimacy gained the authority of

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[11] Ibid., 348. The separation between the spoken and written forms of the Russian language was a part of why Russian literature was so lacking. For a discussion of the condition of the language see Dean S. Worth's essay "Language" in the Cultural Background section of *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*, 19-37. Also, in section 4 of the chapter "European Russia," pp. 49-51,and section 4 of "Children of 1812," pp. 101-5, in *Natasha's Dance*, Orlando Figes briefly touches on the language situation of late eighteenth-century Russia.

[12] Pierre Hart, "The West," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*, ed. Nicholas Rzhevsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; reprint Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 85-102; and Orlando Figes, section 5 of "European Russia," in *Natasha's Dance*, 58-60.

[13] Freidin, 161. Also, Gary Saul Morson discusses the fact that Dostoevsky himself believed that Russia's literature was proof of her greatness. "Introductory Study" in *A Writer's Diary, Vol. 1, 1873-1876*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky, trans. and ed. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 2.

historical continuity. For centuries, the Russian government had been intimately connected with religion through the person of the tsar. According to tradition and popular belief dating back to the time of Russia's conversion to Christianity in the tenth century, the figurehead of the Russian state had a dual nature that made him both secular ruler and saint. Michael Cherniavsky in his excellent study *Tsar and People*, explains that the idea of statehood was a concept introduced in conjunction with Christianity. And the prince, as the physical expression of the state, was seen as a worker both in the cause of the state and the cause of Christ. In the early stages of Russian development, the personal qualities of the prince legitimized his position as head of state, and both aspects combined gave him the role of mediator between his people and God.

Having identified with the Byzantine strain of Christianity, Russia considered herself to be the spiritual heir when Constantinople crumbled in 1453. By this time Moscow was in the process of consolidating political power, and eventually assumed the title of *Third Rome* in reference to its new position as the center of Christianity. As Muscovite rule strengthened, the image of the saintly ruler began to change. The tsar's saintliness came to be understood as resulting from his position rather than because of his personal qualities. Instead of the princely saint, he became the *Pious Tsar*. It was in his person that the reality of both spiritual and political power was manifested.[14]

This concept changed yet again in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the westernized idea of the *Sovereign Emperor* began to inform political thinking. Whereas the prince-saint was sanctified as prince because of his personal piety, and the *Pious Tsar* was holy because of his position, the *Sovereign Emperor*'s sanctification depended on nothing. He was powerful simply because he was powerful. He was, as Cherniavsky says,

[14] Cherniavsky, 32-3, 36-7, 42.

"emperor *sui generis*, containing within himself all power and the source of all power, completely secular, or, what is the same thing, deified." [15] In spite of this change in theory, the *Pious Tsar* rhetoric persisted and continued to have tremendous consequences in the course of Russian history, specifically in regard to the development of Russian literature.

In particular, an idea that had always informed both the concept of the *princely saint* and the *Pious Tsar* was the notion that the ruler's sacrifice for the greater good made him a martyr in the mingled cause of Christianity and the nation.[16] There were two dimensions to this idea, a passive aspect and an active one.[17] In the first, the prince was seen as holy because of his suffering for the cause. While he could be saintly in personality, the prince more closely personified the suffering, intercessory Christ as the head of state who had relinquished his personhood in service to the cause. This notion intensified if he died while carrying out the duties of his office. It is here too that the more active dimension of the prince's martyrdom can best be seen. The warrior ruler who defended his people against invaders was in effect the physical manifestation of the spiritual role of the Christian head of state. As the image of Christ, the ruler was both to defend his people and to die for them. Because of his Christ-like warrior persona this active prince did not rely on personal piety for his sainthood, but rather on the fact of his embodiment of the ideal. His martyrdom then was through actual death, mirroring the saintly-prince's martyrdom through suffering by giving up his personhood to serve the people.[18]

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[15] Ibid., 89-99.

[16] Friedin, 156.

[17] Bethea, "Literature" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*, ed. Nicholas Rzhevsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; reprint Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 164.

[18] Cherniavsky, 16-18.

Working in tandem with the religious rhetoric of the Christ-like tsar was another closely related idea, that of *Holy Russia*. This too arose from the ancient notion of the saintly secular ruler who was vouchsafed the care of Russia and her Christian faith. First linked to the person of the tsar, the idea of Russia's unique holiness gradually grew to mean more than just a Russia dependent upon the Tsar's religious significance. In the popular understanding it came to mean the land and the people, the essence of Russia herself. The notion of an inherent holiness independent of the tsar or other governmental structures could in theory be held up as a standard of judgment to test the integrity of the system. As such, it was seen as a threat by the *Sovereign Emperor* whose authority rested not on any standard or structure external to himself, but solely on his monopoly of power. Because of this threat, the idea and the epithet of *Holy Russia* was confined to the popular elements of Russian society until about 1812.[19]

At that time, Russia was at war with France and Russians were beginning to actively question their dependence on Western cultural forms and to distance themselves from them. Although the idea of the *Sovereign Emperor* held sway in the ruling classes, the notion of *Holy Russia*, which could have threatened the status quo, began to be used by members of the gentry as a means to garner popular patriotic support for the war effort. Eventually, the tension between *Sovereign Emperor* and *Holy Russia* was smoothed over with the ingenious revival of the *Pious Tsar* rhetoric in the idea of the *Blessed Tsar*. In particular, this revival of the former rhetoric became obvious when Russia triumphed over France in 1814, and the term *Blessed Tsar* was used for the first time in an official document praising the leader of the great Russian nation. From this time forward, the official conception was that *Holy Russia* and the *Blessed Tsar* were two

[19] Ibid., 114-17; Frieden, 155.

parts of one harmonious whole with the image of the tsar defining and expressing physically the transcendent ideal. The *Blessed Tsar* became the bridge between the popular idea of *Holy Russia* and the existing *Sovereign Emperor* structure of the government.[20] As came to be seen with Nicholas I, who took this particular conception to its extreme during his reign, the tsar and the ruling classes had effectively reversed the popular conception in an effort to make the ideal square with reality.

The development of this apologetic was invaluable for the creation of Russia's literary tradition. By emphasizing religion-infused ideas and terminology it gave the educated classes the tools to bring the notion of Russian moral superiority to the forefront of the Russian cultural scene. In their quest for a truly Russian identity superior to that of the materialistic and corrupt West, what could be better than Russia's illustrious Christian heritage to establish that identity as fact? Since the intelligentsia searching for an identity were also the writers of the era, language and literature became the vehicle for propagating the religiously-nuanced nationalism. However, this appropriation went beyond a simple borrowing of ideas and terminology. What the writers of Russia's golden age of literature achieved was not just the creation of a national myth, but also a simultaneous authority of the written word in which the author or poet, representative of the Russian individual, became the sacred defender of *Holy Russia*.[21] As such, the poet was both an oracle of truth and a figurative double of the tsar.

Essential to this new nationalism was the traditional concept of the tsar-martyr-saint. The difference was that while the articulators of the new nationalism accepted the

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[20] Ibid., 131-5.

[21] Friedin, 156-162. Frieden proposes that through borrowing the language of the Church, the intelligentsia borrowed its authority as well. Thus literature achieved a status much different from the status of literature in the West. Imaginative literature in particular played a different role. In the West, only the literature of scholarship could make any authoritative claim to truth. Russian imaginative literature, on the other hand, could and often did make such claims.

rhetoric of *Holy Russia-Blessed Tsar* they rejected its use in conjunction with the reality of the prevailing tsarist system, which was obviously flawed. The systematic exploitation of the Russian peasant through the institution of serfdom and the oppressive nature of the current regime evidenced the disconnect between the ideal of a loving tsar guiding his holy people in their Christian faith as opposed to the ugly reality of what was. Bypassing this flawed external form, they sought instead an ideal form in which the superiority of the Russian nationality was presupposed because of an intrinsic holiness of the Russian organism, not because of the extant social and political structures.

Thus, poets who articulated the new nationalism and advocated Russia's conformity to the ideal were revolutionary by definition. Their selfless devotion in proclaiming the ideal of *Holy Russia* in spite of repression by the flawed state was seen as a voluntary self-sacrifice for the sake of the national cause. In this sense, they assumed the mantle of the intercessory martyr-saint who defended, suffered, and pled for Russia and her Christian faith. By mirroring the conventional forms of authority and power through the use of religious language, the Russian literary tradition that took shape over the course of the nineteenth century was able to procure for itself and for the poets who created it an authoritative status in relation to the national identity. The writers of the golden age were canonized as "secular saints." [22]

Drawing on the various inclinations characteristic of nineteenth-century Russia, this educated elite began to consciously create a national culture which in theory could encompass the native Russian character as well as a modernized state. On the one hand, the need for a truly Russian identity unique from that of Europe tended to prompt an

[22] Friedin, 156-7. Also David M. Bethea in his treatment of Russian literature in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture* discusses the characteristics of Russian literature including its religious sensibility and the idea of the writer as secular saint. "Literature," 163-8.

idealization of the native Russian past. At the same time, the necessity of modernization made a certain dependence on European cultural forms unavoidable. Although the literature of the age combined these with more success than the government did, the problem of reconciling contradictory impulses is nevertheless as evident in literature as it was in the indecisive governmental policies. Dostoevsky is particularly representative of the triumphs as well as the vexations of the literary elite. Using this overview of nineteenth-century Russia as a basis, the second portion of this paper will examine the way that he both represents and attempts to reconcile the conflicting trends of his era.

Dostoevsky's Role

One of greatest prose writers of the golden age, Dostoevsky was revered by his contemporaries "as a national prophet, a Russian sage."[23] Similarly, as early as the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 he was viewed as a prophet who foretold the dramas and dilemmas of the twentieth century.[24] Mostly because of his enormous talent as a writer he was able to capture in his works the subtleties and the tensions of his era, and in such a way that a hundred years after the fact, his writings continue to be a source of philosophical debate. However, another reason why his writing is so powerful is that he himself was a product of the dynamic and conflicted nineteenth century. In a letter to an acquaintance he once wrote: "I'll tell you of myself that I have been a child of the age, a child of disbelief and doubt up until now and will be even (I know this) to the grave."[25] Dostoevsky was brought up in the Christian faith, but was indeed, as he himself said,

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[23] A. S. Byatt, "Pursued by Furies," review of *Dostoevsky*: *The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881 New Statesman* 131 no. 4605 (Sept. 2002): 48-52.

[24] Aileen Kelly, "Dostoevsky and the Divided Conscience," *Slavic Review* 47 (1988): 239-260. Also James P. Scanlan in his book *Dostoevsky the Thinker*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002) discusses the fact that Dostoevsky himself believed that the true artist had prophetic capabilities because of his keen powers of observation which included the ability to detect "potentialities inherent in the present," 236.

[25] Letter to Natalya Fonvizina, Jan.-Feb. 1854, in *Fyodor Dostoevsky Complete Letters, Volume One 1832-59*, trans. and ed. David Lowe and Ronald Meyer (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988), 195.

plagued by enormous doubt until his death in 1881. His parents, who were actively involved in their children's education, carefully cultivated the piety that colored Dostoevsky's worldview and that permeates the canon of his works.[26] Nevertheless, Dostoevsky was tormented by unanswerable questions his entire life.

The letter expressing his struggle with doubt was written during the 1850s while Dostoevsky was serving time in Siberia for having participated in so-called subversive activities with a group known as the Petrashevsky circle. Though he came to rail against socialism in his later years because of what he believed was its atheistic rationale, he was a budding socialist in 1849 as was in vogue among young intellectuals of the time. In April of that year, when the micro-managing Tsar Nicholas I was presented with evidence that the group was political and in favor of social reform, he had a number of participants in the discussion group arrested, including Dostoevsky. Their trial and sentencing did not take place until the end of the year, at which time they were told they had been condemned to die. A charade of execution was carried out until the last possible moment. But, as the prisoners stood before the firing squad it was suddenly announced that the Tsar had rescinded the death sentence and was graciously sending them to Siberia instead.[27]

This entire experience, including the ten years he eventually spent in exile, profoundly affected Dostoevsky. In the four years of his incarceration at Omsk, then later during his forced service in the Siberian Army, he came into contact with more of the Russian populace than he ever had before. Living for an extended period of time among people of every ilk and social background seems to have thoroughly educated him in the

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[26] Frank, *Seeds of Revolt*, 42-3.

[27] Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky*, vol. 2, *The Years of the Ordeal, 1850-1859* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 6-12.

tortuous, often inexplicable world of human motivation – to commit sin as well as to do good. Although he was depressed by the depravity around him, especially at first, he became convinced that there was within the people a core of divinity. This goodness may not have been evident on the surface, but it was there nonetheless, revealed at random through not uncommon acts of kindness and decency even in the midst of squalor.[28] Despite his conviction that people had this spark of goodness in them, the overwhelming presence of sin, suffering, and injustice continued to trouble Dostoevsky for the rest of his life.

Indeed, the interplay between these two conflicting views of human nature was to inform all of his writing and is the source of much of the debate over the question of the intended meaning of his works. The problem for Dostoevsky and his contemporaries was two-fold. First, as Dostoevsky experienced firsthand in the Siberian prison camps, human beings behave wretchedly toward one another – consistently and often without remorse.[29] This undeniable reality directly opposed two strands of thought that were becoming increasingly predominant in the era, and which Dostoevsky was convinced were true, or at least believed had merit. The first of these, and the one that Dostoevsky was rather less than ambivalent about, was the purely Russian idea of *Holy Russia.* As seen by his conscious determination that people – including his peers in exile and especially the Russian peasant, the best example of the *Holy Russian* essence – possessed within them at least a speck of the divine, Dostoevsky believed that Russia was *Holy Russia* and that her people should reflect their inherent holiness. Yet, if the Russian essence was moral superiority because of this intrinsic holiness, why were Russians of all people

[28] Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 329-331.

[29] Aileen Kelly points out that empirical observation prompted Dostoevsky to abandon utopian socialism in favor of Orthodox Christianity, but notes that "his faith and his powers of observation were from the first uneasy allies." "Divided Conscience," 243.

exemplifying moral depravity?

The other idea that troubled Dostoevsky was the increasingly popular notion that compassion by way of social justice was the supreme means and end of human life. [30] Advocates of Western-style socialism advanced the utilitarian view that social progress was to be achieved by the reasoning individual. Disciples of this view of social progress were variously grouped under such ideological umbrellas as populism, in which the answer to social problems was to be found among the peasants in their tradition of the peasant commune; anarchism, which was closely connected to nihilism, and which opposed allegiance to the authority of the state; and of course, Marxism, which grew in popularity especially in the later decades of the century.[31] Despite their sometimes vast differences in the proposed remedy for social ills, all of these schools of thought accepted as a basic principle that social injustice could and should be remedied through well-reasoned human ingenuity.

In regard to this issue Dostoevsky was much more torn over the merit of the idea itself rather than over the fact that *reality* and *what should be* did not match up. What he could not decide in this instance was whether or not the idea was *what should be* – a problem he did not have in relation to his belief about *Holy Russia.* In other words, while he was convinced that *Holy Russia* was *what should be* and that the problem was how to bring the reality of human ugliness into line with this ideal, he was unsure as to whether or not social injustice in general could or should be resolved by the dictates of human

[30] Ibid., 244.

[31] The ideologies of the various schools of Russian radicals in the nineteenth century are much too complex to discuss at length here. However, two chapters in Riasanovsky's *History of Russia*, "Russian Culture in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," pp. 348-367, and "Russian Culture From the 'Great Reforms' until the Revolutions of 1917," 435-452, provide a good basic overview. Also, the chapter "Ideological Structures" by Abbott Gleason in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture* takes a much more in depth look at the various strains of Russian political thought and the forces driving them. He points to the development of Freemasonry in eighteenth-century Russia as the gateway for the later more general move toward Westernization of political thought and the development of a "Civil Society," 103-124.

reason. He vehemently denounced atheistic socialists, yet he could not resolve in his own mind why it was that they rather than the Church were on the forefront of the demand for more compassionate and just government – a government that would essentially reflect what he believed to be the Christian doctrine.[32]

Although he is preoccupied with these themes in all of his writings, two of his last works offer what is considered to be his most comprehensive discussion of the questions that tormented him. *A Writer's Diary* and *The Brothers Karamazov,* both written in the last decade of his life, seem to be a compilation of a lifetime of philosophical musings. And in fact, the repeated themes of *A Writer's Diary* can be read as the embryonic stages of the ideas that would later take full shape in the novel. [33] As conclusions drawn from his lifelong analysis of the problems that vexed him and his contemporaries, the ideas presented in *A Writer's Diary* and *The Brothers Karamazov* can be thought of as Dostoevsky's final answer in his search for truth. The question for critics remains, then. What is Dostoevsky's final answer?

The Novel and the Diary

To begin with, we need a summary of *The Brothers Karamazov* to serve as a

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[32] Kelly, 244.

[33] Ernest Simmons, "A Historical and Analytic Introduction to *The Brothers Karamazov*," in *The Brothers Karamazov and the Critics*, ed. Edward Wasiolek (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1967), 27-41. Also, Geoffrey C. Kabat in the preface of his book *Ideology and Imagination: The Image of Society in Dostoevsky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), ix-xii, uses Dostoevsky's journalism during the last two decades of his life to expound on Dostoevsky's worldview. In examining Dostoevsky's journalistic writings over those last twenty years Kabat came to the conclusion that Dostoevsky's understanding of history, Russian society, and Russia's relationship with the West remained stable in spite of shifts in political convictions. For this reason he gives the later writings (specifically in *The Diary of a Writer*) special attention as elaboration on earlier themes. Thus, he too sees Dostoevsky's later writings as more in-depth treatment of long-held ideas. In regard to the relationship between the ideas advanced in *The Diary* and their fuller exposition in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Kabat puts forward the idea that two distinct styles of thought were used in the creative process for the two works. In *The Diary* and other journalistic writings, an ideological mode in which rigid boundaries are presupposed and used to reject anything contrary to them informs the writing process. In works of fiction on the other hand, the ideological mode, which represents the initial reaction to opposition, is replaced by the more developed and comprehensive imaginative mode in which exploration and finally integration of conflicting impulses are achieved in the presentation of the artistic vision. Pp. 163-180.

background for analysis. The novel is about a rather dysfunctional Russian family in which the widower father, Fyodor Karamazov, a member of the gentry and a profligate womanizer, is murdered, apparently by his eldest son, Dmitry. Circumstantial evidence pointing to Dmitry's guilt is made all the stronger by what appears to be an excellent motive. In addition to a long-standing dispute over Fyodor's refusal to give Dmitry his inheritance, the two are involved in a very public quarrel over a beautiful young woman named Grushenka. She is at the time the mistress of an old, rich widower of the town, although it is believed that she comes from a decent, middle-class family. Dmitry is young, sensual, and passionate and truly believes himself to be in love with the girl. Fyodor, on the other hand, depends on his wealth and position to try to win her favors. The jealous rivalry between father and son sets the stage for the murder, which happens in the middle of the narrative.

Before his murder, Fyodor's relationship with his other sons is none too admirable, either. All of them have been neglected, raised by other people, and denied any financial support. Ivan and Alexey, sons of Fyodor's second wife, are quite different from one another in character. Alexey, the younger of the two is the novel's designated hero. He has been living in a monastery and is the picture of virtue and innocence. His brother Ivan, arguably the most complex and intriguing character in the book, is a rationalist preoccupied with the question of God's existence. He is also the most intellectually astute of the brothers. In addition to these three sons, a family servant named Smerdyakov is implied to be Fyodor's illegitimate son. Although Smerdyakov tries to be intellectual, and admires Ivan for his intellectual prowess, he is simply devious, opinionated, and despised by all, except perhaps Fyodor. By the end of the novel, Smerdyakov has committed suicide, Ivan has gone mad, Dmitry and Grushenka

have repented of their former sins and, although Dmitry is sentenced to exile in Siberia, the two of them are engaged. Alexey has gone through a period of doubting in his faith, but has emerged stronger than ever.[34]

The message of the novel, Dostoevsky's final answer, has remained elusive ever since it was published in 1880. By reason of space, time, and the limitations of language it is impossible for us to make an assertion as to his exact intended meaning, but it is possible for us to examine his work and its criticism and to draw some conclusions about what he was attempting to do and how he attempted to do it. First, let us look at the criticism. At the risk of oversimplification, suffice it to say that there are basically two interpretive camps that draw generally opposite conclusions: those who believe Ivan's airtight explication of anarchism is Dostoevsky's primary message and those who believe that Alexey's moral example of brotherly love is.

In the Alexey camp of criticism, Dostoevsky's doubts, evident as they are in the novel, are nevertheless seen as subordinate to an overarching schema reflective of the Christian principle of brotherly love. According to these critics, the principal theme reinforced by the obvious family intrigue as well as by the multiple subplots is that of universal guilt and corresponding universal responsibility. In other words, we humans are each responsible to and for every one else. This principle is played out in how Alexey counsels the school boys to befriend the outcast Ilyusha, in Dmitry's dream of the little babe – humanity – who needed to be taken care of, and in Ivan's assumption of guilt in the murder of his father even though he was out of town when the murder happened. Essentially, all people are guilty of sin and are therefore guilty of causing the pain and

[34] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, Modern Library ed. (New York: Random House, 1996). Hereafter cited as Dostoevsky, *Karamazov* with the appropriate page number.

suffering that characterizes human existence.

The second major theme of *The Brothers Karamazov* according to this camp of criticism is a complication of the primary theme of universal responsibility. Namely, considering the problem of human suffering, what should the individual's relationship be to God and to other human beings? Ivan's rebellion as discussed in the chapter entitled "The Grand Inquisitor" results from his not being willing to accept the fact that an all-powerful and merciful God could or would allow the sin and the consequent suffering that characterizes human experience. The truth according to Ivan is that God, in allowing people the freedom to choose Him, allows a way out only for those who are strong enough to take it, leaving the majority of humanity to languish forever. The strong ones are those who can follow Christ's example of choosing spiritual purity in spite of the temptation to gratify physical, earthly needs. Most people, though, do not have the fortitude to resist, and as a result cannot achieve spiritual purity. For these people, the freedom to choose is merely another element of misery in an existence already burdened with hardship, hunger, and suffering. While living, they are tormented by the knowledge of their own inadequacy; in the next life they suffer eternal judgment for it. The Inquisitor – and by implication all of organized religion – has "corrected" the problem by removing the element of personal responsibility for one's own spiritual welfare. By invoking *miracle, mystery,* and *authority,* these correctors of God's truth deceive the people and give them happiness, which though it is temporal and disappears with life it guarantees more happiness to greater numbers than what God's way does. Neither of these options seem acceptable to Ivan, so he rejects both.

Although Ivan rejects God's truth, his rejection of his own truth is echoed in the larger scheme of the work. Running throughout is the idea that loving the whole of

humanity without being able to express it on a person-to-person basis is a perversion of the universal responsibility and love which is our duty one to another as humans. Thus, the message expressed in *The Brothers Karamazov* is that because we are all guilty of causing suffering in some form or another, we are all likewise responsible to choose to do what is right and to reduce the suffering of those around us thereby alleviating universal suffering in general.[35]

Critics who believe that Ivan's cynicism is the ultimate message of the novel take their stand on the fact that Alexey never articulates a rebuttal to his brother's argument that a God who allows suffering of any kind is less just than the Grand Inquisitor. Specifically, Ivan argues that faith in a God who allows innocents to suffer is not reasonable, especially since such faith requires that those who perpetrate the suffering be forgiven. Real compassion according to Ivan would be to eliminate suffering for as many people as possible, by whatever means necessary. This would include punishing, not forgiving or trying to reform through brotherly love, those who inflict suffering on others. The Grand Inquisitor puts into practice a utilitarian system to reduce the suffering of millions, albeit at the expense of their freedom to make independent moral decisions.

In purely practical terms, this compulsory reduction of suffering is more just than a system in which suffering is not alleviated until some final day when those who made right moral choices are rewarded and those who did not are punished. Ivan's question is why a faith that claims to be the source of compassion seems less compassionate in practice than an anti-Christian social system. The critics who side with Ivan see Alexey's

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[35] This analysis of the book was drawn primarily from Michael Stoeber "Dostoevsky's Devil: The Will to Power," *Journal of Religion* 74 (January 1994): 26-45; James P. Scanlan, "Dostoevsky's Arguments for Immortality," *Russian Review* 59 (January 2000): 1-20; and Richard Neuhaus, "Dostoevsky and the Fiery Word," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 131 (March 2003): 74-82. Also helpful was the collection of essays in *The Brothers Karamazov and the Critics*, ed. Edward Wasiolek (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1967).

silence in the face of his brother's tormented questions as proof that there are no final answers. As the consummate doubter who wants to believe, but will not embrace faith at the expense of reason, Ivan is understood as the embodiment of Dostoevsky's own tortured soul.[36]

Whether or not either of these two camps of criticism arrives at the meaning Dostoevsky intended is impossible to decide with certainty. Both cases are argued persuasively. However, taking into account the above-discussed trends of Dostoevsky's era as well as the opinions outlined in *A Writer's Diary*, the case for Alexey is the stronger of the two.

To start with, we have seen already that intellectuals of the nineteenth century were concerned with remedying the flaws evident in their society and government. Because the reality of Russian social and political structure was defective, they sought instead an ideal form to replace the imperfect external form and to serve as their national identity. The *Holy Russia-Blessed Tsar* myth in all of its interpretations became that ideal. Dostoevsky himself was very much aware of the gap between this ideal and reality – in the whole of Russia as well as in individuals. One of his greatest concerns in all of his writings was the disparity between the immoral actions of individual Russians that seemingly belied the *Holy Russian* ideal. We can see this in both *The Brothers Karamazov* and in *A Writer's Diary*. For example, in the chapter entitled "Rebellion" in *Karamazov*, Ivan recounts story after story of children being abused, and points to this as

[36] Aileen Kelly's article "Dostoevskii and the Divided Conscience" is a good overview of this interpretation of the novel. She points out that Dostoevsky considered Ivan's position "irrefutable" and that Ivan's doubts echo Dostoevsky's. The problem with the interpretation that Kelly endorses is that it seems that part of Dostoevsky's problem (as well as Ivan's and Alexey's) was his belief that people are inherently good. Compulsory compassion through socialism is more humane than independent moral choice if acting compassionately depends entirely upon people acting conscientiously out of some inherent altruism. Because people are not inherently good, simple altruism is unreliable as a source of compassionate social action.

a reason why a loving God who promises future harmony in spite of all the suffering must not exist. And if such a God does exist, then Ivan rejects him because "if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price."[37] Obviously, Dostoevsky makes no excuses for this troubling aspect of life.

Similarly, in *A Writer's Diary* he dwells at length on the news story of a child abuse case in which the father severely beat his seven year old daughter, but was acquitted at the trial because the incident was merely evidence of the father's lack of skill in parenting, not because he was a deliberate child torturer. Although Dostoevsky is horrified at the details of the case, at the end of his discussion of it, he invokes the sacred ideal of the strong Russian family on which, he says, the state rests. This ideal is so solid and deeply held that examples of bad parenting and bad families will never be able to shake it. He regrets that there are such examples, and goes on to say:

> I would only like us all to become a little better than we are. This is a most modest wish, but, alas, a most idealistic one. I am an incorrigible idealist; I am seeking sacred ideals; I love them, and my heart thirsts after them because I have been so created that I cannot live without sacred ideals; still, I would like our ideals to be a bit more sacred – otherwise, is there any point in worshipping them?[38]

In recognizing the disparity, Dostoevsky also offers part of the solution: "I would only like us all to become a little better than we are." In other words, people have to live out the sacred if the ideal is to be realized. In another entry in *A Writer's Diary*, Dostoevsky

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[37] Dostoevsky, *Karamazov*, 272. For a discussion of Dostoevsky's use of realism in his novels see Jefferson J. A. Gatrall, "The Icon in the Picture: Reframing the Question of Dostoevsky's Modernist Iconography," *Slavic and East European Journal* 48 (2004): 1-eoa. He poses the idea that Dostoevsky creates a "modernist iconography" with these faceless images of suffering innocents. Differentiating between an icon and a picture, Gatrall discusses the idea that realism taken to its extreme in these collected images of suffering actually becomes iconographic within the realist picture of the novel itself.

[38] Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary, Vol.1, 1873-1876*, trans. and annotated by Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994) Jan. 1876, chapter 2 part 6, 384. Hereafter cited as Dostoevsky, *Writer's Diary*, with the appropriate date, chapter, and page number.

is more specific about the sacred ideal that he envisions, at least on the individual level:

> Even though our People are weighed down by vice – now more than ever – they have never been without ideals, and even the greatest scoundrel among the People would never say, "One must do as I do." On the contrary, he always believed and regretted that he was doing something wrong and knew there was something far better than he and his deeds. The People do have ideals – firmly held ones; and that is the most important thing: circumstances will change, things will improve, and the People, perhaps, will simply shed their vices, while their radiant principles will remain, even stronger and more sacred than ever before.[39]

Throughout *A Writer's Diary*, Dostoevsky also elaborates on what he believed was the national essence and the destiny of the Russian organism. His view strongly reflects the *Holy Russia-Blessed Tsar* rhetoric prevalent during the nineteenth century. He writes:

> The Czar to the people is not an extrinsic force such as that of some conqueror (as were for instance, the dynasties of the former Kings of France), but a national, all-unifying force, which the people themselves desired, which they nurtured in their hearts, which they came to love, for which they suffered because from it alone they hoped for their exodus from Egypt. To the people, the Czar is the incarnation of themselves, their whole ideology, their hopes and their beliefs.[40]

Dostoevsky enthusiastically held to this notion of faithful Russia in contrast to the decayed and dying West. Repeatedly, he characterizes Russia and the Russian people as inherently messianic, capable by their very nature of facilitating a worldwide community of love and brotherhood. He says, "Russia, with her people headed by the Czar, is tacitly cognizant of the fact that she is the bearer of the idea of Christ; that the word of Orthodoxy transforms itself in her into a great cause…."[41] That cause, according to Dostoevsky is "the good and genuine unification of mankind as a whole in a new,

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[39] Dostoevsky, *Writer's Diary*, Feb. 1876, chapter 1 part 1, 346.

[40] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, trans. and annotated by Boris Brasol (New York: George Braziller, 1954), Jan. 1881, chapter 2. Hereafter cited as Dostoevsky, *Diary*, Brasol with the appropriate date and chapter.

[41] Dostoevsky, *Diary*, Brasol, Nov. 1877, chapter 3.

brotherly, universal union whose inception is derived from the Slavic genius."[42] She would accomplish her mission by first "becoming the servant of all for the sake of universal reconciliation." Dostoevsky states:

> And there is no shame in this whatsoever; to the contrary, it is what makes us great, because it all leads to the ultimate unifying of humanity. He who would be first in the Kingdom of God must become the servant of all. This is how I understand Russia's destiny *in its ideal form.* (Dostoevsky's emphasis)[43]

What we can conclude from these statements in *A Writer's Diary* is that reflecting his culture, Dostoevsky believed that there was an ideal form (*Holy Russia-Blessed Tsar*), that the Russian people were a significant part of this ideal form, and that although there was currently a divergence between it and reality, specific steps could be taken by both Russia as a whole and by Russian individuals to remedy the existing gap. We can assume then that if *The Brothers Karamazov* is a mature rendering of the themes Dostoevsky discusses in *A Writer's Diary*, explication of both the problem and the remedy is quite possibly what he intended to express in the novel. Thus, Alexey's ideal moral community exactly correlates to the ideal Dostoevsky extols in *A Writer's Diary*. The question is then, how exactly does he express this ideal in the novel?

Visualizing the Goal

The literary critic Northrop Frye has made some observations that are pertinent to our discussion of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The goal of literary art, he says, is to visualize the goal of human life. If this is so, then religious conceptions of the purpose of human life and activity will necessarily inform the way that meaning is conveyed and understood in works of literature.[44] In his theory of archetypal literary criticism, he poses the idea that the meaning of a piece of literature is extrapolated from the work's

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[42] Ibid., July-August 1877, chapter 2.

[43] Dostoevsky, *Writer's Diary*, June 1876 chapter 2 part 4, 527.

[44] Northrop Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2001),1445-57.

relationship to an overarching myth. Specifically, elements of the piece correspond with elements of a totally coherent system – a system that can be universal, local to a particular culture, or both. In the instance of *The Brothers Karamazov* there are a number of ways in which this form of literary criticism is relevant. First, we have already seen that Dostoevsky and the culture that produced him depended on the *Holy Russia-Blessed Tsar* myth to give their nation meaning and identity. Second, we have also seen that the gap between the ideal and the real was recognized and agonized over. If, as Frye suggests, the purpose of literature is to visualize the goal of human existence, then at least within the work of literature itself, the ideal and the real must reach some sort of equilibrium in which it is demonstrated that the ideal is achievable. Art, Frye says, "seems to have as its final cause the resolution of the antithesis…the realizing of a world in which the inner desire and the outward circumstance coincide."[45]

The intimate connection between the opinions Dostoevsky expresses in *A Writer's Diary* and the central idea of *The Brothers Karamazov* is that for Russia to fulfill her destiny by effecting the universal reconciliation of humanity, the less-than-ideal *reality* of the present-day Russia must eventually conform to the ideal of the *Holy Russia-Blessed Tsar* myth. Since *The Brothers Karamazov* presumably presents a visualization of this goal, the *present* of the novel could not correspond exactly to the *present* in reality, since the ideal was not being lived up to during Dostoevsky's lifetime. Although he obviously wanted the novel to be applicable for his own generation, he needed to find a way to ensure that while the actual *present* was kept in mind, the goal of a *present* in which the ideal and the real coincided was also in view. There are two ways in particular that Dostoevsky makes the novel's *present* ambiguous.

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[45] Frye, *Archetypes*, 1455.

The first of these techniques is what Gary Saul Morson has termed "sideshadowing." He explains this concept as being the opposite of foreshadowing. When foreshadowing is used in a story, the author drops hints to the reader about what the characters in the book are going to experience in the future. This, Morson says, is a closed view of time in which the characters' *present* (as well as *past* and *future*) is already decided, and the reader knows that although the character may think he has a choice in what happens to him, the end result is already decided. When sideshadowing is used, however, the hints that are dropped are not hints about a future certainty. Rather, they are hints about possibilities, and introduce to the story an ultra-realistic sense of "open" time. The *present* and even the *past* and *future* that actually take place in the story are seen as just one of many possible alternatives. To demonstrate Dostoevsky's use of sideshadowing in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Morson gives the example of the novel's beginning. "Fyodor Pavlovich receives the news that '[his first wife] had somehow suddenly died somewhere in a garret, according to some stories – from typhus, but according to others – allegedly from starvation.'" Thus, any number of possible causes – and outcomes – is introduced simultaneously.[46] In regard to our discussion of the representation of the *present* in *The Brothers Karamazov* we can see that by introducing these various possibilities, the novel's sense of the *present* is fluid, and not necessarily bound to a specific time – although it could be.

Another device Dostoevsky uses to make the *present* ambiguous in *The Brothers Karamazov* builds on this technique that Morson points out. Dostoevsky mentions time – often in very specific ways – then proceeds to obscure what *time* he is talking about. For example, he states in the section "From the Author" at the beginning of the novel that its

[46] Gary Saul Morson, "Introductory Study," in *A Writer's Diary Vol. 1 1873-1876*, trans. and annotated by Kenneth Lantz (Evanstan, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 82-93.

narrative "is the action of my hero in our day, at the very present time." However, in the next sentence he goes on to say, "The first tale takes place thirteen years ago, and it is hardly even a novel, but only a period in my hero's early youth."[47] A number of things are at work here. He starts out by saying unequivocally that it is "at the very present time." But, other elements in the statement obscure what might otherwise be understood as the Author's time. "Our time" could be Dostoevsky's and his contemporaries' time; it could also be the time of anyone who reads the novel. The exact *time* is obscured even further by the other qualifications that are introduced. The statement that the first tale "takes place thirteen years ago" prompts the obvious question, thirteen years ago from what *time*? And, the tale did not *take place* thirteen years ago, but *takes* place. Even "thirteen years ago" becomes hazy by the end of the sentence since it becomes "only a period in my hero's early youth." All of these taken together encourage the reader to imagine himself in the story at the *time* it is being written – and presumably lived. The reader is persuaded to imagine himself in the *present* of the novel before it even begins.

This technique introduced at the very beginning is reinforced throughout the novel by the repeated interjections of the author – who again speaks to the reader as if author and reader are both in the same *present*. In the chapter "The Breath of Corruption," in the midst of a description of the events surrounding Father Zosima's death, the narrator breaks in:

> But before three o'clock in the afternoon that something took place to which I alluded at the end of the last book, something so unexpected by all of us and so contrary to the general hope, that, I repeat, this trivial incident has been minutely remembered to this very day in our town and all the surrounding neighborhood…..I should, of course, have omitted all mention of it in my story, if it had not exerted a very strong influence on the heart and soul of the chief, *though future*, hero of my story, giving a shock to his intellect, which finally strengthened it for the rest of his life and gave it definite aim. (Dostoevsky's

[47] Dostoevsky, *Karamazov*, xvi.

emphasis)[48]

The mention of time again scrambles the reader's orientation, despite (or to spite?) the deliberate references. In the first sentence the Author references all of the following simultaneously, and with the first-person present tense thrown in for good measure: the specific time that the incident happened, allusions to the incident that were made in a past chapter of the novel, and the supposed living *present* of the Author. The already confused sense of time is further complicated as the Author's aside continues. He refers to when the story was being written, saying that he would not at that point have included this supposedly trivial matter except that the incident influenced the hero for the rest of his life – the *future* hero, that is. We know from the Author's note at the beginning of the novel that the events currently being related happened "thirteen years ago," but that this is only "the first tale," and that the real story takes place in "the very present time." From this we can conclude that the *future* hero in the current tale is actually the hero of the *present* the Author and the reader are supposed to be sharing. Similarly, the fact that the end of the hero's life is mentioned causes the reader to suppose that the *present future* hero is also the *past* hero. We are left wondering, which of these *time* options are we supposed to identify with?

This fluidity of time helps Dostoevsky achieve something crucial to his artistic goal of visualizing the ideal of the *Holy Russia-Blessed Tsar* myth. Namely, he helps the reader identify with the hero, presumably the embodiment of the ideal individual – the kind of individual necessary for the realization of *Holy Russia-Blessed Tsar.* By placing the reader and the ideal individual into the same *past-future-present*, Dostoevsky gives the reader an accessible demonstration that the *ideal* is possible in the ubiquitous *present*

[48] Ibid., 371-2.

that every person assumes.

Because of the confluence of religious and political ideas both in Russian tradition and in his own mind, Dostoevsky did not separate the two in his *ideal-present* model. Indeed, as writers increasingly did in the nineteenth century, he borrowed Orthodoxy's authority to lend his political and social idea credence. The political aspect of his ideal he explains in terms of Russia's national destiny in *A Writer's Diary*. Russia, *Holy Russia*, had been charged with preserving the Truth of Christ. Although this truth had been obscured in other nations, it was kept pure and sanctified by Russia's continued faithfulness to Orthodoxy. In the Muscovite past, Russia had been unjust to other nations by keeping this truth to herself, but the contact with Europe since the Petrine reforms had broadened her outlook and had made her aware of her universal mission to share the Truth of Christ with the rest of the world. Through this message of truth, *Holy Russia* would bring about "the universal reconciliation of nations." [49] Standing at the head of this universal brotherhood, Russia, holy protector of the word of Orthodoxy, would finally be the *Blessed Tsar* of nations.

The social aspect of the ultimate goal of realizing Russia's ideal form is brought to life in *The Brothers Karamazov* through Alexey, Dostoevsky's *future* hero. Dostoevsky, in his preface "From the Author," ponders whether or not his readers will find his hero to be remarkable. He acknowledges that Alexey is odd, even eccentric, but at the same time he hopes that the reader will not think of him as too out of the ordinary:

> For not only is an eccentric "not always" a particularity and a separate element, but, on the contrary, it happens sometimes that such a person, I dare say, carries within himself the very heart of the universal, and that the rest of the men of his epoch have for some reason been temporarily torn from it, as if by a gust of

[49] Dostoevsky, *Writer's Diary*, June 1876 chapter 2 part 1, 519; part 4, 525-7.

wind….[50]

Alexey, as a reflection of the universal, becomes the bridge between the reader and truth. Through his individual example two things happen. One, Alexey becomes the mediator between the reader and the ideal form – the guide who will lead people to harmony and holiness through Christian principles. And two, the reader understands that just like Alexey, the individual also has a responsibility to act as an intercessor for his fellow human beings by living out the principles of Christ. Pulling back the layers of this *Holy Russia-Blessed Tsar* ideal, we see that the political and social ideal that Dostoevsky advocates is legitimized by its refraction through religious principles and is made accessible by his visualization of it in the ubiquitous *present* with which all people can identify.

In understanding that Dostoevsky's novel effectively synthesizes and expresses some of the key ideas of *A Writer's Diary* we are, however, left with the question as to whether or not the novel offers a resolution of the era's tensions that is effectual in the practical sense. As we have seen, the moral tone of the uniquely Russian identity that emerged throughout the nineteenth century was frustratingly disconnected from the reality of Russian existence. Dostoevsky addresses this problem extensively in *The Brothers Karamazov*, but his solution is primarily related to individuals rather than to the state as a whole. Conspicuously missing in the novel is a practical plan for implementation at the collective rather than the individual level. How does Dostoevsky reconcile the fact that in Russia of the nineteenth century, the tsar, not the individual was the source of political power? Since this was the case, could the *trickle-up* effect that his ideal depended on actually bring about practical political change? Similarly, if the Tsar as

[50] Dostoevsky, *Karamazov*, xv.

a divine figure was the essence of the people's hopes and desires, was not Nicholas I's enforcement of his will the logical extension of the ideal? Another question to consider is whether Dostoevsky expresses in the novel a dream rather than a belief. In other words, did Dostoevsky actually believe that his ideal was possible in reality or did he merely construct his "most modest wish" while expressing through Ivan his own (albeit unwilling) cynicism? Some of these questions will obviously remain unanswerable, but some of them may be illuminated in *A Writer's Diary*, which essentially can be thought of as Dostoevsky's nineteenth-century version of a blog. Because of its more political cast, further research of this unique piece is warranted, especially as it relates to the practical implementation of the ideals articulated in *The Brothers Karamazov*.[51]

[51] For a good discussion of Dostoevsky's reasoning processes as he attempts to apply his political apologetic to practical issues see James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). Chapter 7 "'The Russian Idea,' " 197-230, and the conclusion, "Dostoevsky's Vision of Humanity," 231-43, are particularly insightful in regard to this topic.

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