

THE KARAMAZOV SISTERS A LAST LECTURE BY PROFESSOR OLMSTED

The title says it all, don't you think? I'd like to spend about 45 minutes this evening on a two-part talk, the first dealing with the announced topic and the second involving a few personal reflections. These parts can't really be so neatly divided, but there is a difference in emphasis. And so to proceed.

I have resisted the temptation to begin with a PowerPoint show, done in the style of my longtime colleague David Morgan, which would have offered a portrait gallery of Dostoevskian characters. These portraits, as you can well imagine, would have combined various illustrations from the novel with a new set of heads, indeed two sets of heads. The first set would have depicted the familiar characters Fyodor, Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov with the heads of male colleagues; the second set would have transposed those heads with the heads of female colleagues. You can play this game at home, if you wish. In any case, I invite you to imagine Dostoevski's novel with renamed protagonists: old mother Theodora, her children Demi, Joan, Alicia Karamazova and their illegitimate sister Paulina. The point of this exercise should be clear. By construing a classic text in terms of a completely transgendered set of characters, we are compelled to acknowledge some of the presuppositions that guided Dostoevski in his writing and that tend to guide us in our reading. This confrontation with underlying assumptions seems to me the hallmark of postmodern interpretation, and I will return later to my reasons for making this claim.

But first, let's inquire what might happen when we transform the Karamazov brothers into sisters. Many features of the novel could be allowed to remain as they are. We could retain the village setting, the faithful servants, the murder of old Theodora by the illegitimate Paulina (familarly known as "Stinking Polly"), the wrongful accusation and condemnation of the dashing Demi Karamazova, the spiritual torments of the intellectual Joan (including her imaginary confrontation between Jesus and the Grand Inquisitor), the peacemaking efforts of the religious novice Alicia and so on. Or could we keep these familiar aspects of the novel, once the protagonists were women? What would happen to the scenes where the minor characters are women? Can we imagine a male version of Grushenka, the "fallen woman" for whom Dmitri Karamazov is ready to kill himself? Can we imagine a male version of Katya Ivanovna, the rival of Grushenka and a woman whose hysterical fits of passion involve a great deal of weeping and writhing on the floor? Perhaps in the hands of a gifted satirical writer, a Woody Allen or David Sedaris, the roles of men and women might be systematically reversed without having Dostoevski's novel collapse into utter absurdity.

But it would be a difficult task. Our postmodern alertness to the importance of gender helps us see that Dostoevski's most memorable achievements rest on a very powerful set of premises concerning gender. First, the premise that the Russian nation is feminine, holy mother Russia-- an entity doubly identified with pagan beliefs about Mother Earth and the orthodox emphasis on Mary as the bearer of Christ, the *theotokos*. This premise in both aspects Dostoevski not only assumed but aimed to defend as part of his ongoing political commitment to Russia as the saving alternative to the godless socialism he regarded as a plague associated with European-style modernization. A second premise concerns the gendering of violence. While Dostoevski

allows his female characters to display considerable aggression, ranging from treachery and insult to self-mutilation, at no time do they engage in acts of violence; rather, they are victims and martyrs, objects of desire and self-indulgent busybodies. They, like Dostoevski's male characters, often hanker for power; yet the women never kill anyone. The closest approximation to violence is the beatings that Fyodor Karamazov received from his first wife, a comic touch that neatly reverses the Russian tradition of wife-beating, endemic among the peasantry. Dostoevski could not have imagined writing a novel in which the plot hinges on the murder of a very dysfunctional mother by her illegitimate daughter, a deed committed out of misguided admiration for her intellectual sister and out of hatred for her other sister, the handsome party animal Demi. More importantly, we cannot imagine such a novel, at least not such a novel in which this particular plot is embedded in complex meditations about the nature of love, duty, justice, suffering and the truths of religion. This combination of high philosophy and low crime is uniquely Dostoevski's, and it is a gendered combination, quite unimaginable in a novel called *The Karamazov Sisters*.

Postmodern interpretation also calls attention to matters of ethnicity. I have already mentioned one of these, the Russian amalgamation of Mary with Mother Earth. Readers of Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment* will recall how, near the novel's end, the confessed murderer Raskolnikov kisses the earth. We simply cannot imagine an English, German or French novel with a similar conclusion, given how Dostoevski resonates with distinctly Russian religious and political implications. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, likewise, there are ethnic dimensions that we could spend hours appreciating, from the social significance of the bathhouse to the belief in corporal punishment and a celebration of recklessness with money. But I want to emphasize one example of the difference it can make to acknowledge the novel's ethnic dimension.

Outside of Russia, Dostoevski's fame resulted from two translations. Constance Garnett, daughter of a well-known critic, made the English translation, complete with Victorian euphemisms lacking in the original, which brought Dostoevski to the attention of writers like D. H. Lawrence. Melchior de Vogüé, a Russian émigré living in Paris, made the French translation that brought *The Brothers Karamazov* to the attention of continental authors like Albert Camus, Sigmund Freud, and Thomas Mann. Both versions were the basis for many editions of the most famous part of the novel, the so-called "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," the object of worldwide critical commentary. Ivan Karamazov's fantasy of a monologue by a Spanish inquisitor who berates a returned Jesus for his refusal of the three temptations has inspired limitless responses, all the way from confused freshman essays to sustained philosophical treatises and theological reflections. This part of the novel, which Dostoevski had to justify to the Russian censors, still constitutes the core of present-day interest. However, the very fame of the "Legend" creates many problems.

First, the issues raised in the "Legend" are a thematic dead end. The problem of the church as a secular power occupies no further space in the novel. Second, Ivan's disclosure of his story to Alyosha has no bearing on the plot. Third, Dostoevski himself debunks the story's significance when he has Ivan dream about a visit from a shabby devil, one who bears no

resemblance whatsoever to the imposing figure of the Grand Inquisitor. Fourth, the story distracts from the more significant part of the conversation between Ivan and Alyosha concerning the suffering of innocent children. Would a wise editor then be right to remove the “Legend” or, to put it more assertively, would a wise agnostic editor be right to cut this part of the novel so as not to distract readers with a lot of religious claptrap from the main theme of justice for the innocent? For this is indeed the main theme, and the “Legend” contributes very little to it. But some Christian readers would no doubt be appalled by such a cut, and even Dostoevski’s actual censors, who did in fact enforce other cuts, let the “Legend” pass. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of traditional interpretive concerns about theme and plot and character, the “Legend” looks like one of those astonishing extrusions that led Henry James to characterize Dostoevski’s novels as “baggy monsters.”

If we appeal to the ethnic dimension, however, the “Legend” makes a bit more sense. Ivan Karamazov had previously written a somewhat confused essay entertaining the possibility of creating ecclesiastical courts to supplement or even replace those of the state. The “Legend” simplifies and allegorizes this issue of church versus state by making the state representative into the Grand Inquisitor. This figure stems not from the history of the Inquisition but from Dostoevski’s youthful commitment to Christian socialism, now represented in the “Legend” as a bizarre distortion of true Christianity with its acceptance of suffering and embrace of freedom. What the “Legend” depicts, ultimately, is a peculiarly Russian concern with the limits of secular authority, even when that authority assumes for itself the trappings of religion. This concern begins with the reforms of Peter the Great and continues in Russia today, as Vladimir Putin attempts to restore Russian orthodoxy while embarking on a particularly aggressive style of capitalist adventure.

Why, you might well ask, have I conducted this exercise in rewriting Dostoevski’s masterpiece? I simply want to dramatize how postmodern interpretation proceeds without the modernist assumption of the primacy of the author’s intention, looking instead to the presuppositions and meanings embedded by socio-cultural factors like gender and ethnicity. Forty years ago, as the Cold War was fought out on its cultural front, critics labored to distinguish what the author REALLY meant and intended from what readers, those whimsical dilettantes, merely found significant. To couple the author’s will and intention to forces beyond his or her control was heresy, socialist heresy, materialist heresy, a sin against organic form and such shibboleths as “poems are not to mean but be.” Yet the individual creative genius, despite a suspicious resemblance to the self-made man of capitalist folklore, had an undeniable attraction to critics and theorists eager to achieve their own distinction and fame by becoming an expert in Keats or Shakespeare or Rembrandt or Jane Austen. When the critic Roland Barthes scandalously announced “the death of the author,” he did no more than flag a development that had been underway for more than a century. Starting with Hippolyte Taine in the second half of the 19th century, and proceeding from sociological to historical to psychological and linguistic approaches to literature, there emerged the notion of books as events (rather than objects merely) and authors as functions or operators helping to orchestrate forces and materials made available to them by history and culture. As a result, the approach known as formalism, with its acute

attention to language—but language only—was superseded by a toolkit of much more flexible instruments.

One of the first notions to disappear was that of the superreader, an imaginary being whose capacity for understanding was not limited by any obstacle. In the place of this beast disguised as a full professor of English at the appropriate college, other readers came to the fore. These other readers insisted on the difference it made to read as a woman, to encounter as a woman the phallic posturing of authors like Lawrence. These readers insisted on the difference it made to read as a Jew, to encounter the slur of the so-called “blood libel” in Dostoevski. These readers noted how novels like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* suggest different meanings to gay and straight audiences. Once considerations of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, social class and ethnicity were raised both as legitimate areas of investigation and as meaningful perspectives for interpretation it became more difficult to achieve certain kinds of consensus about meaning. A lot of handwringing over the perils of multiculturalism ensued, often joined to senseless blather about the evils of technology, nowhere more famously than in Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*. True, the computer has caused the vanishing of the typewriter, just as the ballpoint pen eliminated the inkwell, and as the MP3 file will extinguish the compact disc. Where the technology intersects with our new, rather more hybridized understanding of interpretation is the internet with its twitters and blogs. Already a great number of books are available to read, mark, digest, review, modify, decorate, link and Photoshop. No doubt many monstrosities will spring up and many tradition-minded sensibilities will be offended. But this revolution will not be easily stopped, despite the emergence of a new kind of censorship that ranges from spyware and adware to middle-aged policemen posing online as available nymphets.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt liked to compare Spinoza and Kant on the subject of thinking. Spinoza, according to Arendt, believed that thinking was possible in all circumstances, that a man trapped at the bottom of a mineshaft in utter silence and darkness could continue to think. Contrarily, Kant believed that thinking without communication was impossible, that someone deprived of others with whom to share thoughts would soon cease to have any thoughts worthy of the name. Arendt did not resolve this difference between her two eminent predecessors. But the comparison does present an analogy of sorts for considering how interpretation works and how it might continue to change over time. If Kant was right, as I personally believe him to have been, we have more to fear from restrictions on communication than on its expansion, however chaotic. Digital technologies, virtual classrooms, chat sites, blogs, instant messaging: all these offer challenges but, more importantly, opportunities for communication with others whose differences may enlighten us. Just as we have come to look with suspicion on political efforts to control access to information, be it exercised by China or Israel or North Korea, we have learned to feel cautious about interpretations that silence rival views, that refuse to honor diversity of opinion, that treat disagreement as nonsense and heresy.

Of course, that’s looking at the bright side: a cloud of more or less harmonious witnesses constantly enriching their understanding of the humanities through lively discourse on not just the alleged “best that has been thought and written” but everything under the sun, from the B minor Mass to Warhol’s soup cans. A somewhat darker view is possible, however, one that

reduces the humanities and their interpreters to an inconsequential pastime or minor industry, whether expensive and elitist or cheap and democratic. When the study of the humanities and its place within a liberal arts education could be celebrated as the hallmark of free individuals living in a free society, the whole endeavor shared in the idealism, indeed the triumphalism of Euro-American capitalism. To paraphrase the poet Wallace Stevens' remark that "the death of Satan was a blow to the imagination," we might say that the demise of the Evil Empire was a blow to the humanities. Has anyone stopped to add up the money that accrued to the humanities from subsidies by the Department of Defense and the CIA, subsidies that sent intellectuals and scholars abroad, that funded the study of foreign languages, that promoted American abstract art, that played American music over the airwaves and so forth? During the 37 years I have spent at Valparaiso University there has been a steady decline in what has been called "the traffic in the humanities," at least as far as the American version is concerned. And a significant portion of that decline stems from the shriveling of government support, a withdrawal dictated partly by ideological conservatism and partly by popular disenchantment with the legacies from the past that comprise the knowledge-base of the humanities. The humanities have always engaged in re-inventing the past, in creating traditions that will lend dignity to existing culture while trying to shape its future. Yet it has become more difficult to teach authors who no longer speak our language (Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton) or who speak it in ways we find troubling or offensive (Eliot, Conrad, Faulkner). A bias toward selecting contemporary works, the so-called "presentist" bias, now affects all humanities curricula. From the 1960s when students demanded "relevance", to the twenty-first century administrator concerned to attract a more diverse student body, the emphasis has been on immediate appeal, an emphasis that critics accuse of consumerism and trendiness. What the presentist bias reveals, however, is that the appropriation of key figures from the past no longer serves nationalistic ends or, put differently, that nationalistic ends no longer seek justification in the traditions of the humanities. We have been told for at least eight years that the nation doesn't depend on the humanities, certainly not on the idealization of humanistic works and their authors. This debasement of the cultural value of the humanities makes academic battles over interpretation look trivial and self-indulgent. How can you be fretting over a poem when millions have lost their jobs, when soldiers are killing children, when religious radicals are plotting our destruction?

Let me take what may seem a controversial position. Had there been more "fretting" over meaning—not just of poems but of the laws—perhaps some of these problems would not have occurred or would not have been so severe. A recent essay by the critic Peter Brooks laments the failure of what, in the 1970s, was a promising field of study, law and literature. Instead of the sophisticated study of narrative having a positive impact on the way judges viewed the law, Brooks admits that no such result occurred. In recompense, Brooks goes on to attack John Yoo's infamous memo justifying the torture of political prisoners. This memo, Brooks concludes, relies on a circular argument amounting to "interpretation untethered by any ethics of reading, interpretation as domination, Humpty Dumpty style." Humpty Dumpty? When Alice reminds him that the question is "whether you *can* make words mean many different things," Humpty replies that the question is "which is to be master—that is all." Such is the interpretive legacy of the folks who brought us Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and secret prisons in Eastern Europe. We need to be clear, however, that such flagrant abuses of language as a means of justifying

flagrant abuses of power did not occur in a vacuum but in a society already conditioned to pay insufficient attention to matters of interpretation. Shall we blame the media, the I-Pod, high fructose corn syrup, tenured radicals, SUVs, Britney Spears? Why not blame ourselves instead?

I feel a bit awkward in naming myself as a collaborator in the failure of interpretation but, in this particular instance, I think I'm in good company. The very proliferation of interpretive discourses, the acknowledgement of so many diverse communities of interpretation, the explosion of new tools and techniques for understanding the humanities—all this produced a certain intoxication, if you will. At one of the libraries I use, I can visit the newspaper archive at the Austrian national library in Vienna and read articles about the events of the day in 1896. My wife, who studies Renaissance English literature, can read the pages of 16th-century books from collections all over the world without leaving her desk. Marvelous, isn't it? And yet the analogy that comes to mind is this one: I've just been admitted to a library that has a copy of every printed book in all the world's languages but while I'm wandering from room to room and from shelf to shelf, a determined group of people is setting fire to the building itself. This library-- call it the humanities-- has been smoldering for too long and it's time to speak out against the impending destruction. Shall I denounce Islamists, fundamentalists, Zionists, Mormons, hedge fund managers, men with mustaches? No, in spite of a frightening surge in anti-intellectual fanaticism of one or another sort, the deeper problem lies with the natural defenders of the humanities, folks who read books, listen to symphonies, visit museums, brush up on their Spanish, go back to playing the flute and so on. All of us, in other words. The problem can be posed in terms of my earlier remarks about Spinoza and Kant. A person who always listens to music in solitude, who reads a book without discussing it and who views artworks in silence is not going to have to worry about interpretation. With no one to share these experiences, our solitary humanities lover will eventually have nothing to love, will feel nothing, understand nothing, see and hear nothing, will feel no particular responsibility to literature and the arts. Furthermore, this solitary may fail to recognize that she has been dropped in Spinoza's mineshaft, that the truth, goodness and beauty which made her cherish the humanities have been defiled by those who regard absolute power and unlimited wealth as the supreme values. She, I should say we, will find ourselves at the mercy of those who have decided to correct the failures of the humanities, much as Dostoevski's Grand Inquisitor claims to be correcting the work of Jesus. In both cases, Dostoevski's as well as ours, what is at stake is freedom, a very lofty concept but one we can translate into the aims and methods of interpretation in the humanities: first, freedom of inquiry, even concerning matters that are controversial; second, freedom of opinion, even when our opinions are wrong; third, freedom of communication, even with those who intend to do us harm; and finally, creative freedom, even when it means forsaking what is cherished and familiar.

I'm happy to say that during the four decades I have been associated with Christ College it has been a place where these four freedoms have flourished. And after my departure I am confident that the College will continue to make the humanities an activity that creates and sustains a community dedicated to those very old-fashioned values that we need constantly to renew, the true, the good and the beautiful. Thanks!