

Curiosity Kills: Crimes of Imagination in the *Brothers Karamazov*

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We learn in the first sentence of the *Brothers Karamazov* that Fyodor Karamazov is going to die. In undramatic, straightforward prose (in fact in a subordinate clause), Dostoyevsky reveals the crime of his crime novel, the denouement of his mystery: Fyodor Pavlovich's "dark and tragic death."¹ But somehow, rather than drain his novel of suspense, Dostoyevsky's move intensifies it; he piques the reader's interest. He creates, instead of the instinct to shrink back in anticipation of something jumping out, a feverish expectancy: we lean forward into the book, eager to see happen what we know must happen. By giving away the ending, the first thing Dostoyevsky does is capture our curiosity.

While Dostoyevsky deliberately creates this atmosphere of morbid curiosity in his novel, he simultaneously uses the *Brothers Karamazov* to investigate the true nature of this curiosity, inviting us to consider the relationship between what we watch and what we want, between what we imagine and what we do. In the characters of Ivan Karamazov and Lise Khokhlakova, technically innocent people who become convinced of their own guilt, Dostoyevsky explores the destructive power of the morbid curiosity that is really voyeurism and sadistic imagination.² He concludes that this curiosity is itself a kind of

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¹ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 7. Hereafter cited in text.

² Throughout this paper I use the term "voyeurism" broadly to describe an obsession with viewing the sordid and sensational, not solely the sexual; by "sadism" I mean a pleasure in

crime, a spiritual crime, as we can see from several scenes in the novel: Ivan's discourse in his "Rebellion" chapter on the aesthetic component of sadism; Lise's "confession" to Alyosha of sadistic and voyeuristic tendencies; Ivan's "curiosity" on the eve of his father's murder, which realizes what Lise's curiosity only fearfully suggested; and finally Ivan's speech at Dmitry's trial, in which he condemns everyone present—including the readers—of a crime of imagination.

We see Dostoyevsky's concern over the destructive power of curiosity when Ivan raises it in "Rebellion." The core of Ivan's "case" against God is not simply human cruelty but sadism: that men not only harm each other as a means to an end but take pleasure in causing harm.³ Ivan acknowledges the sexual pleasure we usually associate with sadism, speaking of "floggers who get more excited with every stroke, to the point of sensuality, literal sensuality" (241), but he is more interested in sadism's aesthetic than in its sexual component. When men torture each other, something quite different is happening than when "the tiger gnaws and tears" its prey; a wild animal is never "artfully" or "artistically" cruel the way a man is (238). Ivan recounts the "delight" of Turkish soldiers who not only cut children out of their mothers' bellies and impale them before their mothers' eyes but also devise more insidious tortures for their victims:

They've thought up an amusing trick: they fondle the baby, they laugh to make it laugh, and they succeed—the baby laughs. At that moment a Turk aims a pistol at it, four inches from its face. The baby laughs gleefully, reaches out its little hands to grab the pistol, and suddenly the artist pulls the trigger right in its face and shatters its little head. (238–239)

inflicting pain in general, not only in a sexual situation. While I don't wish to (and can't) exclude the sexual component from these concepts, they are certainly at play in situations not overtly sexual.

³ Richard Peace notes that Ivan's "case" against God in "Rebellion" includes none of the "acts of God" we would expect him to bring up—disease, accidents, natural disasters—but only the cruel behavior of human beings (270–271). Laurie Lanbauer among others points out that it is sadism in particular that offends Ivan. John Attarian and Robert Louis Jackson both argue that Dostoyevsky is in deliberate dialogue with the Marquis de Sade throughout the *Brothers Karamazov*.

“Artistic, isn’t it?” Ivan concludes, adding that the Turks, incidentally, “are very fond of sweets” (239). Sadists, he argues, like to tease with suffering, to make a game out of it, to craft a clever scene and watch it unfold; the Turkish soldier is an “artist.” The parents who, when their daughter wets the bed, smear the little girl’s face with her own excrement, force her to eat it, and then lock her in the frozen outhouse all night long, or the landowner who sets his dogs on the serf boy who injured his favorite hound, are enacting a perverse aesthetic “justice”; they are attempting to make a piece of art—a story, a narrative—out of the suffering they are inflicting. Suffering is their medium.

Although Ivan’s indignation is surely sincere, his attention to detail as he tells these stories is disconcerting. He peppers his discourse with asides that reveal his intense interest in the topic: “Here is a picture I found very interesting” (238), “I have it written down in detail” (241), “I’ve collected a great, great deal about Russian children” (241), and “One more picture, just one more, for *curiosity*” (242, emphasis mine). Ivan has made a study of sadism, and his attitude as he reports his findings to Alyosha is strangely eager and exultant, mirroring the exultation of the sadists in his stories. Gary Morson notes that Ivan signs the articles he writes with the title “The Observer”; initially, Morson argues, Ivan claims to be the “eternal non-participant” in what he sees, making a sharp distinction between the “artists” who do such things and the people who watch.⁴ But Ivan’s hungry curiosity quietly undermines this distinction, exposing his own sadism. It is hard to believe that a man of Ivan’s intelligence is not aware of what he is doing; he seems to be exposing himself, deliberately undermining the distinction he once took refuge in.

It is Lise Khokhlakova who explicitly gives the lie to Ivan’s distinction between artist and voyeur. When Alyosha visits her, she at first confesses to him vaguely destructive, anarchic desires but at last focuses on what is really bothering her: her own sadism. “Is it true that Jews steal children on Passover and kill them?” she suddenly asks (583). She describes for Alyosha what she has just read about in “a book”: a trial for a Jew who kidnapped a four-year old boy, cut off all his fingers, and crucified him against a wall. He “nailed him with nails and crucified him,” Lise exclaims, “and then said at his trial that the boy died quickly, in four

⁴ Morson, “Voyeurism and Violence,” 9.

hours! Quickly! He said the boy was moaning, that he kept moaning, and he stood and admired it. That's good!" (584) Lise produces an example, like Ivan's, of artistic cruelty. "That's good!" is Lise's echo of and participation in the murderer's aesthetic pleasure, a phrase she repeats several times throughout the scene.

But Lise's morbid curiosity, the voyeurism that makes her read about and imagine the scene over and over, leads to a conviction that she herself is responsible for the event in the book: "Sometimes," she says, "I imagine that it was I who crucified him. He hangs there moaning, and I sit down facing him, eating pineapple compote. I like pineapple compote very much. Do you?" (584).⁵ Lise enjoying the story as reader becomes Lise crafting the story as author and artist. Her thoughts haunt her; despite her claim to enjoy evil, she cries all night about the story, as if with the child's tears, and agonizes over her perceived guilt: "I kept imagining how the child cried and moaned (four-year-old boys already understand), and I couldn't get the thought of the compote out of my mind" (584). The pineapple compote particularly troubles her, because it reveals that a sight that should nauseate her does not even turn her stomach; she can complacently appreciate it as entertainment—just as the murderer did. Lise has not actually crucified anyone, but because she can "watch it" happen and enjoy it, she *could* have done it; therefore, somehow, she *has*.

Lise's sadism takes on new significance when she reveals that she has confessed it to Ivan, and that Ivan—the defender of suffering children—has responded to it with a strange sympathy. "I told him *everything, everything*," Lise reports to Alyosha, "and said it was 'good.'" (584). Instead of expressing disgust or disdain, Ivan "suddenly laughed" and agreed with Lise that "it was indeed good" (584). Alyosha reads Ivan's response as sincere and significant: "[t]he man treated you honorably," he says, adding that Ivan "may believe in pineapple compote himself" (584). If pineapple compote symbolizes voyeuristic complacency in the face of suffering, Alyosha is diagnosing in Ivan a guilt similar to Lise's: Ivan too is suffering from the conviction that he is a criminal

⁵ John Attarian argues that Lise is a "montage of all the female libertines" of the Marquis de Sade's *Juliette*, who often eat while they watch children get tortured (349).

because he is a sadist, that he is guilty because he has watched—and enjoyed watching—someone suffer.⁶

Lise's testimony confirms for Ivan what he has slowly been becoming convinced of: that he is guilty of his father's murder. As Ivan, through his conversations with Smerdyakov, begins to suspect his own complicity, he returns over and over to one particular, seemingly insignificant episode, as if it holds the key to his guilt. On his last night in his father's house, the night before he leaves for Moscow, both Ivan and his father take a long time to go to sleep. Ivan, upstairs in the house, "get[s] up from the sofa," "quietly, as though terribly afraid of being seen, open[s] the door" of his room, "go[es] to the head of the stairs, and listen[s]" (276). He listens "with a strange curiosity, holding his breath, his heart pounding" to the sound of his father pacing (276). At the time, Ivan does not know what he is listening for; he simply feels "overwhelmingly curious" about "what approximately" the old man "could be doing now in his rooms" (276). Crouched at the top of the stairs, Ivan "guess[es] and ponder[s]," imagining his father "wandering around down there," "glanc[ing] at the dark windows," "suddenly stop[ping] in the middle of the room, waiting, waiting to hear if anyone knocked" (276). Twice Ivan creeps to the top of the stairs in order to hear better. Ivan's action here, or rather non-action, is momentous for him:

[W]hy he was doing all that, what he was listening for, he, of course, did not know himself. All his life afterwards he referred to this "action" as "loathsome," and all his life, deep in himself, in the inmost part of his soul, he considered it the basest action of his whole life. (276)

⁶ That Ivan is convicted by Lise is possibly further confirmed when Alyosha meets him and delivers Lise's note to him. Ivan rips up the letter without reading it, calling Lise "that little she-devil" (600). He may simply be referring to her "offering herself" to him (although we only have his word that this is what she is doing, for he never reads what she actually says), but in that case why not call her a little slut? He may simply mean that she is a nasty child, but the word "devil" is peculiarly strong and specific. The word Ivan uses to describe his own devil is a completely different word, but nonetheless his instinct to refer to Lise as a diminutive devil, perhaps with the connotation that she is one of the devil's minions, seems significant. His haste to destroy her letter appears more like the action of a guilty man than a disgusted one. Is it possible that in calling her a devil he is referring not to her "tempting" him, but to her *accusing* him?

Ivan's "eavesdropping" has a withdrawn, "observer" quality to it; Ivan does not, the narrator insists, "feel any hatred during those minutes" for Fyodor Pavlovich—just a ravenous curiosity (276). But this curiosity is itself "loathsome," as Ivan realizes later, rather like his eager interest in stories of tortured children; his posture is surely voyeuristic. Fyodor Pavlovich is, in fact, suffering; he is suffering the restlessness of a lust so severe as to be pathetic, and what Ivan is listening to is the physical expression of that restlessness. Certainly the text suggests a passive sadism on Ivan's part: that he is enjoying the sound of his father's anguish.

But Ivan is not only listening to his father's pain; he is listening in order to get an idea of what his father is doing, of where he has positioned himself in the room, of how he would react if someone suddenly knocked at the window. Later, Ivan compares his own behavior to that of a "thief" (611); it is furtive—guilty. Smerdyakov eventually accuses him of having predicted Dmitry's murderous rampage, and Ivan, remembering this night, concludes, "Yes, that is what I expected, it's true! I wanted the murder, I precisely wanted it! Did I want the murder, did I...?" (617). As he crouches at the top of the stairs, Ivan is imagining. He is crafting a scene: one of poetic justice in which Fyodor Pavlovich, restless with lust, feverish with longing, will hear the knock his ears have been begging for, rush to the window in a paroxysm of joy, and open it to his murderer.

But Ivan is not the original artificer of the scene; Smerdyakov first paints this picture for him. Right before Ivan goes upstairs that night, the two have a conversation in which Smerdyakov describes in detail what will result if Ivan goes to Moscow—if Ivan goes to Moscow and then Smerdyakov has a fit and Grigory and Marfa drink themselves to sleep and Dmitry comes and knocks five times on his father's window. "I'll go and this is what will happen here?" Ivan demands; "[e]xactly right," Smerdyakov replies (273). When Ivan crouches at the top of the stairs and listens, he no doubt remembers Smerdyakov's prediction, and his subsequent actions confirm that he has given it his blessing. The next day, he goes to Moscow. The next night, his father is murdered.

Ivan's story is Lise's nightmare come true, for she thinks that to imagine the little boy's crucifixion is mystically to enact it. In her mind, her imaginative voyeurism becomes a kind of artistic participation. But Ivan is a voyeur of his father's murder *before* it happens. His vision, his participation in Smerdyakov's vision, is indeed enacted, realized in the

waking world. Although his hands stay just as clean as Lise's do, Ivan discovers to his horror that he is in fact the artist of the scene he thought he was only enjoying. His will has been done.

But it is not only Ivan's will that has been done. "There are moments when people love crime," Alyosha tells Lise, and Lise corrects him: "they all love it, and love it always, not just at 'moments'" (582). Lise's guilt, which she tries to alleviate by crushing her finger in the door, is the same guilt that begins to madden Ivan; but they both realize that the "crime" for which they feel guilty is not unique to them: "Listen," Lise tells Alyosha, "your brother is on trial now for killing his father and they all love it that he killed his father.... Everyone says it's terrible, but secretly they all love it terribly" (583). Alyosha eventually admits that "there's some truth" in Lise's diagnosis (583). The narrator likewise confirms Lise's evaluation as he describes the build-up to the trial. All the townspeople are "burning with impatience for the trial to begin," after two long months of "discussion, supposition, exclamation, anticipation" (656). People from all over Russia share their interest; the case of Dmitry Karamazov has "shaken all and sundry to such a burning, such an intense degree" (656). People pour into the town for the trial; "all the tickets [are] snapped up" (656), and especially in the faces of the women there is a "hysterical, greedy, almost morbid *curiosity*" (657, emphasis mine).

Ivan is not content to observe this voyeurism; he exposes it in a speech at the trial that is simultaneously confession and accusation. He cries out suddenly, "Who doesn't wish for his father's death?" When the judge asks if he is out of his mind, Ivan declares that he has never been more sane:

The thing is that I am precisely in my right mind ... my vile mind, the same as you, and all these ... m-mugs! ... A murdered father, and they pretend to be frightened ... They pull faces to each other. Liars! Everyone wants his father dead. Viper devours viper ... If there were no parricide, they'd all get angry and go home in a foul temper ... Circuses! "Bread and circuses!" And me, I'm a good one! (686)

The fear and disgust the community express in the face of Fyodor's murder are, according to Ivan, feigned. What should nauseate them titillates them. The suffering of an old man, of a family, of big and little

children tortured in front of an audience, is like a “circus” to them, something they can appreciate as entertainment. The attendees of the trial and the perusers of the newspaper articles consider themselves pure observers; they do not realize that their curiosity implicates them in a crime. If you, too, could kill your fathers by imagining it, Ivan implies, you would all be parricides.

But as readers we are not allowed to enjoy this irony, because the irony is at our expense as well. Every crime novel plays upon, presupposes, and even necessitates a kind of morbid curiosity on the part of its readers—Dostoyevsky’s perhaps more than most. Vladimir Nabakov calls the *Brothers Karamazov* “a riotous whodunit—in slow motion.”⁷ Because the novel is so “front-loaded,” because the set-up for this murder spans half the book, Dostoyevsky has to fight to sustain his readers’ interest, and to do so he “us[es] every device to excite the reader’s *curiosity*” (emphasis mine).⁸ Even his mysterious chapter headings are just one of the “teasing and taunting” ways that Dostoyevsky “deliberately entices the reader”; “he is constantly preoccupied with means for keeping and whetting the reader’s attention.”⁹ Dostoyevsky deftly arouses suspicion around his characters, intensifying the atmosphere of tension and suspense, portraying in gruesome and gleeful detail the sordid sensationalism of the Karamazovs. He manages to keep always before our eyes the room where the old man will soon lie dead. The morbid curiosity that Ivan has declared an imaginative crime is exactly what the novel has fostered in us. We have been following the case with as much attention as anyone.

Like the crowd at the trial, we are, of course, only in Lise’s position—voyeurs after the fact; but Dostoyevsky has also shown us what it is like to be in Ivan’s place. Since we know from the first sentence of the novel that Fyodor Pavlovich is going to die, we put together the pieces of the crime before it actually takes place—watching for it, expecting it, *imagining* what it will be like. Our curiosity keeps us from shutting the book, keeps us pressing forward to the bloody act, implicitly demanding of the book Fyodor’s Karamazov’s murder. And our will is done. We, like

⁷ Nabakov, “*The Brothers Karamazov*,” 88.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

Ivan, withdraw at the last moment from the scene of the crime, not privy to the actual violence. We remain “observers” with clean hands. We appreciate the artistry of the thing. We didn’t *do* anything, of course, but Ivan’s question remains: do we too murder Fyodor Karamazov?

Just as Smerdyakov’s guilt does not alleviate Ivan’s, Ivan’s does not alleviate the reader’s; rather, it intensifies it—and Dostoyevsky means it to.¹⁰ Ivan’s sarcastic cry of “[b]read and circuses! *And me, I’m a good one!*” echoes Lise’s confession to Alyosha that “[e]veryone says it’s terrible, but secretly they all love it terribly. *I’m the first to love it*” (583, emphasis mine); they both echo Zosima’s brother’s cry on his deathbed that “[e]ach of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and *I most of all*” (289, emphasis mine); and all of them point back to the narrator’s opening remark, in the face of Karamazovian sensuality, that “[i]n most cases, people, even wicked people, are far more naïve and simple-hearted than one generally assumes. *And so are we*” (9, emphasis mine). In each of these moments in which characters and the narrator see guilt and own it, Dostoyevsky invites his readers to join this pattern of self-discovery, to bring the guilt home. What if one of these days our wills were done? Who would die?

At the end of the novel, the degree of guilt belonging to Ivan and Lise remains unclear. Lise did not crucify the little boy in the book, and Ivan did not bash in his father’s head. But neither of these characters now recognize a distinction between actual guilt and the feeling of guilt: their own thoughts condemn them, and their self-condemnations seem irrefutable. This is bad news for readers who have been convicted alongside them of a similar curiosity, who have acknowledged a degree of imaginative complicity in the murder of Fyodor Karamazov. We cannot be literally guilty of a fictional murder, can we? We cannot be held responsible for the events we have only imagined, hoped for, or even desired. That way lies madness. Yet Dostoyevsky seems to encourage us, like his characters, to approach that madness.

But Ivan and Lise meet someone along that road. Alyosha, the only character privy to Lise and Ivan’s “crimes,” strangely refuses to condemn them; although he accepts what they say about themselves, he insists fiercely on their innocence. With Lise he does so implicitly by assuring her of his love for her; with Ivan he speaks plainly. After his

¹⁰ Versus, for example, Joyce Carol Oates, who argues, building off of Freud’s analysis, that the “criminals” of the story (Smerdyakov and Ivan) are scapegoats; they commit murder, suffer the guilt, achieve insight, so that their fellow characters, and we the readers, need not.

conversation with Lise, Alyosha confronts Ivan on his way home. Alyosha tells Ivan over and over that the murderer was “[n]ot you, not you” (601). Finally he concludes “in a trembling voice” (602), “not of himself” but as if “obeying some sort of irresistible command” (601),

Brother ... I've said this to you because you will believe my word, I know it. I've spoken this word to you for the whole of your life: it was *not you!* Do you hear? For the whole of your life. And it is God who has put it into my heart to say this to you. (602)

Alyosha's declaration of innocence is, of course, literally true, but this technicality means nothing to a man who is convinced that his imagination and will, not his actions, have made him a criminal, and it is not the full import of Alyosha's words. Ivan and Alyosha are standing at a crossroads, beneath a streetlight. The picture is not of Alyosha standing in judgment over Ivan and declaring him innocent, but of Alyosha extending innocence to Ivan like a gift, presenting it to him as if it is a choice that he can seize, a road that he can walk, an identity that he can assume “for the whole of [his] life.” If Ivan's guilt for his father's murder developed before the fact, if it depended on his desires, on what he wanted when he crouched at the top of the stairs and listened, perhaps correspondingly Ivan's innocence can arise after the fact, by means of new desires, what he wants now. And perhaps the potential for innocence after the fact suggests that Dostoyevsky does more in his novel than expose to his readers the destructive power of their morbid curiosity. If a book can confer guilt, perhaps it can also shock readers into repentance, and thus offer innocence—a new identity to cling to when we have put the old to death.

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