

THE GRAND INQUISITOR AND THE HOLY FOOL

by

MADHAVAN K. PALAT

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I

Dostoevsky was a remarkably modern thinker who may seem to have laboured hard to obscure the fact. He grappled with the customary problem of freedom and unfreedom, but not as the three concepts of liberty, of the absence of constraint, of the absence of the possibility of constraint, and of the realization of the self. He defined freedom as the exercise of moral choice, which was always available to all, even to the convict, and unfreedom as abdicating that responsibility. These were the positive and negative faces of modernity, the open and closed minds, holy foolishness and crime, the Silent Christ and the Grand Inquisitor. He explored these insights through scenes of searing intensity and overwhelming power which compare with the achievement of Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and Goethe. The situations are complex, conditions are intolerable, and choices are almost impossible to make: his characters commit suicide and murder, descend into idiocy, or are overtaken by schizophrenia; and nobody attains heaven on earth, for at best they have, after prolonged effort, merely begun their arduous ascent toward the ideal that now shines before them.

In this opposition between the negative and the positive, the negative has always seemed more evident and more obtrusive than all that could be positive, and Dostoevsky has often been accused of or seen as indulging a taste for the dismal and the morbid. Jackson contrasted Tolstoy's reality, which "*strives toward unity*" in spite of its immense complexity and openendedness, with Dostoevsky's, which "*strives toward fragmentation*."¹ Many have been uneasy about the never-ending struggle and splintering in the Dostoevskian universe, about his ceaseless burrowing into the darker crevices of being; and the impact of his explorations have been overwhelming and often unsettling. But there is a positive logic to his vision and purpose to his creations. In his strategy, he must let his opponent have his full say, he must present the opposite case comprehensively, and he must do so because it is a reality, one that was to be found in the daily newspapers, as he reminded the censor. In the event, that appalling reality was presented often with greater intensity and frequency apparently than the answer to it; and his critics have complained that Zosima and Alyosha were not an adequate reply to the overpowering reason and rhetoric of the Grand Inquisitor.² The response to negativity was to focus on an ideal that would guide our actions throughout our lives although we could not possibly attain it; and to concentrate our energies to reassemble the fragments, convert centrifugal tendencies

¹ Robert Louis Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky. The Overwhelming Questions* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 116-119.

² Sarah Hudspith, *Dostoevsky and the Idea of Russianness. A New Perspective on Unity and Brotherhood* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. 128.

into a centripetal force, and become Isaiah Berlin's hedgehog, although dialogue should as well lead to the fox. He disclosed these possibilities in numerous situations, as expressions of non-judgemental love, belief in immortality, and the Christlike emptying of the self; but he desisted from the didacticism and preaching that might threaten to accompany them. Reality was hard and crystalline, a daily experience that could be described in all its harshness; salvation on the other hand lay in a process without end and an ideal that could not be realized, but one that set direction and focused energies withal. The result seemed to be an excess of darkness and fragmentation over light and the wholeness of being; the reality of Akulka's husband, Raskolnikov, Rogozhin, Stavrogin, and Smerdyakov over the mere promise in Zosima, Alyosha, and Myshkin; and even the loquacity of the Grand Inquisitor over the silence of Christ. But this was built into the vision, as surely as Marx analysed the contradictions of capitalism without dilating on the bliss of socialism; for Dostoevsky's mind did not inhabit the criminal underground any more than Marx's was wallowing in the condition of the working class in England, or, for that matter, than Freud was obsessed with sex.

However, Dostoevsky was far from purveying a fairy tale of all is well at the end. In the final confrontation between the Grand Inquisitor and the Silent Christ, neither side is vanquished, banished, or converted, and humanity is left with the discomfort of hope and despair, of self-affirmation and of surrender, of the negative and the positive, all co-existing and accompanying us through our prolonged travails. The Grand Inquisitor intended to burn Christ at the stake on the morrow as he had arrogantly announced to his intended victim; but the burning kiss of the Silent Christ disarmed him. Christ heard him out patiently, but He could not convince this hyper-rational adversary. They went their respective ways, each to work his magic or example on humanity; but they both would dwell within the human mind for the foreseeable future. Christ did not proffer miracle, mystery, and authority to solve life's manifold problems as the Grand Inquisitor had done; instead He remained within the real world, open to human comprehension even as a putrefying corpse as Holbein painted him, and as the saintly Zosima with perverse lack of miracle became; but He (and Zosima) remained a shining ideal for emulation. The exchange between the Grand Inquisitor and the Silent Christ, and the peculiar form of it, suggests that we are fated to live with our demons and must struggle eternally, in the image of Laocoön and his sons with Poseidon's serpents. Dostoevsky offered hope, but he certainly did not bring cheer.

He disclosed the aporias of modern civilization in many different ways, and he went beyond the usual polarities of progress and reaction, revolution and counter-revolution, rationality and irrationality, and other such antinomies of modernity, and beyond even reason and faith. He penetrated the workings of the mind more than he analysed the institutions of the state, the relations between states, nations, and classes, or the functioning of the economy: but he provided almost a running commentary on all of these at various times in his career and exhaustively so in his *Diary of a Writer*. While he deployed a generous repertoire of Christian symbolism and of intractable theological problems, he was not making a contribution to either Christian theology or religious philosophy through his literary art. His concerns were in equal measure secular and modern: the morality of development strategies in which one generation is urged to sacrifice for the bliss of future generations; the social dangers of material deprivation; the delusion about unlimited growth and equal distribution; the individual dissolving in the gargantuan state of mass democracy; the empowered citizen becoming a passive object of manipulation by Orwellian mind controllers or

being trapped in Foucauldian discourse; interior psychological self-exploration engendering a hell and a heaven on earth without either diabolical or divine intervention; and finally, the intolerable and unresolved tensions between thinking and feeling leading to the disintegration of the personality. His corrosive critiques hollowed all the ideological positions then available, from the revolutionary left, through socialism, liberalism, and conservatism, to the counter-revolutionary right. He did not stand on any one of the customary ideological platforms; he stood outside of the political spectrum; and while he found Christian love the route to redemption and harmony, he repudiated or ignored both ecclesiastical and theological authority.

II

ABSOLUTE FREEDOM ENSLAVES ABSOLUTELY

Dostoevsky has numerous examples of the pure assertion of will as being self-destructive and that such freedom was illusory; and his most complete exposition of it is in *Crime and Punishment*. Its hero, Raskolnikov, embodied the inadequacy of the human animal that the Grand Inquisitor so loved and despised. He had arrived at a theory of human society and of its structuring, of its being composed of extraordinary and ordinary people. The extraordinary would transform human society, the others would make merely live without making a change. Transformation would logically entail the breaking of existing norms; hence those so capable would be entitled to transgress. He was one such person, as must happen given such insights, and he would do so. He realized that such changes could head in any direction, for better or worse, as the police inspector Porfiry would later remind him in the course of a mocking exchange. But Raskolnikov decided that he would carry out his violations of norms and laws for the good of all. Thus far it was a person of immense intelligence, endowed with good looks, inspired by the most generous instincts, determined to act in the noblest of causes.

But it is from here that Dostoevsky reveals how pure self-will mutates into passivity and how it can allow fate to take its own course. Raskolnikov searches for a specific course of action since he has not arrived at any on his own. He reads a letter he had just received from his mother, one so full of motherly love that it brings tears to his eyes, but also describing her straitened circumstances. He is seized with the compulsion to act, but that determination itself is an act of permitting fate to decide:

“Long, long ago this present anguish had been born in him, had grown, accumulated, and ripened recently and become concentrated, taking the form of a horrible, wild, and fantastic question that tormented his heart and mind, irresistibly demanding resolution. And now his mother’s letter suddenly struck him like a thunderbolt. Clearly, he now had not to be anguished, not to suffer passively, by mere reasoning about unresolvable questions, but to do something without fail, at once, quickly. Decide at all costs to do at least something, or ... ‘Or renounce life altogether!’ he suddenly cried out in frenzy. ‘Accept fate obediently as it is, once and for all, and stifle everything in myself, renouncing any right to act, to live, to love!’ ”³

³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment, a Novel in Six Parts with an Epilogue*, translated and annotated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage Books, 1993), part 1, chapter 4.

He despises passivity and is desperate to act, and he prepared to kill Alyona, the pawnbroker, to whom he was indebted. He sets out to meet his friend, Razumikhin, rests on the way awhile, and dozes off. He now has a dream of the most fearful intensity, of a little boy watching a drunken peasant beating to death his underfed and overloaded mare. It is a scene of orgiastic violence, it is a dream, and Raskolnikov both wants to kill like the peasant and suffer like the innocent child; but he cannot decide for or against. As he ponders his course of action, he imperceptibly drifts. He cannot bring himself to kill, but he must act as the extraordinary man, for which he must kill. He implores God to decide for him: “ ‘Lord!’ he pleaded, ‘show me my way; I renounce this cursed ... dream of mine!’ ”⁴ Again, he allowed circumstances to choose the time for the killing. As he returned home from Razumikhin’s, he incomprehensibly took the long route home via the Haymarket, where he heard tradespeople ask Alyona’s companion, the simpleton Lizaveta, to come there at 7 pm the next day to sell something. This meant that Alyona would be alone at home, a perfect moment for the crime. Later, it seemed to him a sort of “predetermination” that took him by that route. He could not explain his choice at that moment:

“But why, he always asked, why had such an important, decisive, and at the same time highly accidental encounter in the Haymarket (where he did not even have any reason to go) come just then, at such an hour and such a moment in his life, to meet him precisely in such a state of mind and precisely in such circumstances as alone would enable it, this encounter, to produce the most decisive and final effect on his entire fate? As if it had been waiting for him there on purpose!”⁵

He repeatedly feels superstitious, as if fate is taking charge of him. He visits Alyona to pawn a watch, steps into a foul tavern—the usual Dostoevskian site for revelation—where he happens to overhear a conversation between a student and an officer that there is an old woman, Alyona, a pawnbroker and parasite, that if she were to be eliminated and her accumulated ill-gotten gains be distributed, so many of the poor and needy would benefit. It seems to him that destiny had drawn him into that tavern to hear about this old woman:

“That in itself seemed somehow strange to Raskolnikov: he had just left her, and here they were talking about her. By chance, of course; but just then, when he could not rid himself of a certain quite extraordinary impression, it was as if someone had come to his service: the student suddenly began telling his friend various details about this Alyona Ivanovna.”⁶

He could not explain it all and was struck by the mysterious coincidence:

“But why precisely now did he have to hear precisely such talk and thinking, when ... exactly the same thoughts had just been conceived in his own head? And why precisely now, as he was coming from the old woman’s bearing the germ of his thought, should he chance upon a conversation about the same old woman? ... This coincidence always seemed strange to him. This negligible tavern conversation had an extreme influence on him in the further development of the affair; as though there were indeed some predestination, some indication in it.”⁷

He did not believe he could do all this, but felt compelled:

⁴ *Crime and Punishment*, part 1, chapter 5.

⁵ *Crime and Punishment*, part 1, chapter 5.

⁶ *Crime and Punishment*, part 1, chapter 6.

⁷ *Crime and Punishment*, part 1, chapter 6.

“This last day, which had come so much by chance and resolved everything at once, affected him almost wholly mechanically: as if someone had taken him by the hand and pulled him along irresistibly, blindly, with unnatural force, without objections. As if a piece of his clothing had been caught in the cogs of a machine and he were being dragged into it.”⁸

The details of the action, the killing, all occur in this fashion, as if he were not deciding but letting it be decided for him. He found the axe by chance; he kills “almost mechanically”;⁹ in the course of killing her, he kills even Lizaveta who happens to arrive at that moment; finally he escapes without even taking all the money from the old woman, which was the original purpose of the crime. As the reflections and the dialectic unfold in scene after scene, he realizes that he has killed for its own sake, to prove himself, and not for the greater good of humanity. He realizes he is not the Napoleon he had imagined himself to be for he questions his own motives, which Napoleon in his greatness would not have done; and he confesses to the crime. An act of pure will has spun around to become an act bereft of will, and the Grand Inquisitor’s thesis on the weakness and depravity of human nature has been illustrated; yet that thesis was not proved since Raskolnikov’s action flowed from moral choice and not from natural compulsion as extreme versions of Enlightenment theories held.

Raskolnikov’s classification of humanity into the extraordinary and the ordinary was already a commonplace in many different ways. Until the revolutionary events of the eighteenth century, extraordinary beings were variously identified, be it as heroes and demigods of legend, the elect of God, warrior groups, or through the more humdrum social hierarchy. But the multiple revolutions of the eighteenth century privileged egalitarianism in knowledge, in production, under the law, and most of all in political rights. These were offset in the nineteenth century through several new doctrines that questioned such dogmatic egalitarianism to discern inspired individuals bringing about change. They were cast as romantic Byronic and Schillerian heroes standing aloof and against all; as the Marxian revolutionary bourgeois who remade the world in his image; as the Nietzschean overman who will create himself as he wills; or as Max Weber’s charismatic leaders who alone could change what the rule-bound bureaucracy could not. To all of them, as to Raskolnikov, violating the law, rules, custom, and norm were moral and necessary to the supreme moral ideal of the good of humanity.

Raskolnikov devised for himself a formula that was a simplified and simplistic variant of such theories of human creativity then swirling around him. Destitute, famished, and delirious, deprived of the discipline of a university education after having begun it, he drifted in the squalor of the metropolis, assembling his worldview through random encounters and intermittent reading. He was by no means exceptional as a type; for Hitler likewise drifted through the dosshouses of Vienna, putting together his understanding of the world from pamphlets and tavern talk.

Dostoevsky had successfully demonstrated that the line dividing human beings into the ordinary and the extraordinary had been wrongly drawn, and that the concept of such a line may be invalid. It is not only that Raskolnikov had failed to hold the line, but that another ideological line had not been drawn to create two types of human beings. Holy fools like Marmeladov and Sonya were not superior for their lives of humility, sacrifice, and self-emptying; and in his holy foolish moments

⁸ *Crime and Punishment*, part 1, chapter 6.

⁹ *Crime and Punishment*, part 1, chapter 7.

Raskolnikov himself was possessed of love of humanity enough to leave money for the impoverished Marmeladov family and to kneel down with Sonya to read from John's Gospel about the raising of Lazarus. Neither the philistine and vulgar lawyer Luzhin, nor the disconcertingly amoral Svidrigailov, comes across as absolutely inferior. The mix is such that everybody has to overcome an internal negative reality, the running Dostoevskian theme: for they are neither born into nor do they achieve the condition that Raskolnikov dreamed of, the condition that so many different ideologies of hierarchy and inequality repeatedly promised or claimed existed.

But Dostoevsky would not be himself were he to leave us with the comforting thought of a criminal or a misguided man reforming himself in the enforced leisure of Siberian exile. Raskolnikov, as befitted his extraordinary persona, admitted to every detail of the crime he had committed, which left the court searching and Raskolnikov allowing them to search for explanations in temporary insanity and extreme material deprivation. In exile however he maintained that he had not erred in theory, but merely failed in his practice, unlike other great men who had become great by shedding blood in a noble cause. And in a dream he saw a world inhabited by such extraordinary creatures succumb to a plague which they could not prevent; he then glimpsed little creatures, a mutant species of extraordinary ones, emerging unbeknownst to people the earth and ready to take command at the appropriate time.¹⁰ It was a vision that would be common as much to science fiction and medical terror as to racist paranoia; but it revealed that his convictions had not shifted. He must continue to struggle with his demons, his theory, his recollection that when he tried to apply it he doubted himself and collapsed, his certainty that it was failure and not error, and that his effort had not been in vain since others and newer generations would persist with the cause. Nothing was foreclosed, all was open, another celebrated Dostoevskian theme.

III

THE GRAND INQUISITOR

The Grand Inquisitor summed up all the insights into the negative features of human nature. He claimed that human beings did not have the capacity to determine their fate; hence it was decided for them from the outside. His argument was cast in the form of comments on the account of the three temptations of Christ by the devil in the desert. These three questions of "the dread and intelligent spirit" encapsulated the totality of human history, of the past, the present, and the future. Not only did these they sum up "the entire future history of the world and mankind", they were so comprehensive that not all "the combined wisdom of the earth could think up anything faintly resembling in force and depth those three questions." It had to be that way since they were posed by "a mind not human and transient but eternal and absolute", and they took in "all the insoluble historical contradictions of human nature over all the earth."¹¹ Thus, the deepest questions of human existence were framed by

¹⁰ *Crime and Punishment*, Epilogue.

¹¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated from the Russian by Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1992), pp. 213-214.

a mind that was not human; and human history was after all not human at all: it was not made by human beings, for it was made for them by the eternal spirit.

He divided human beings into the creative who made history and the non-creative to whom history happened. The source of that creative spark was nowhere explained, save in terms of “the dread and intelligent spirit.” This could be understood in many different ways, and in its immediate context of the Gospel account it would imply diabolic inspiration; but it penetrated to the core of modern theories of domination and it was comprehensive in its range. These creative rulers made the rest of humanity an offer it could not refuse: the security of material welfare, moral certainty, and social unity in exchange for surrendering its liberty to its rulers. It suggested that rulers were self-selected and that the right to dominion over humanity was asserted on the basis of claims to superior understanding, which, in its circular logic, only they could understand.

The Three Temptations

The devil’s first offer consisted in “earthly bread” or the satisfaction of material needs; but Jesus rejected it on the ground that “Man shall not live by bread alone”, that this was inadequate as an end of life, and that human beings sought a meaning in existence beyond such immediate necessity. This was anticipated in *A Raw Youth* (1874-1875) when Versilov remarked to his son Arkady that there was much more to life than merely turning “stones into bread.”¹² The Grand Inquisitor now accused Jesus of permitting hunger, cold, and sickness for the sake of freedom, and he warned of rebellion as menacing as that of both the Beast of the Revelation and of Prometheus of classic myth:

“But you did not want to deprive man of freedom and rejected the offer, for what sort of freedom is it, you reasoned, if obedience is bought with loaves of bread? You objected that man does not live by bread alone, but do you know that in the name of this very earthly bread, the spirit of the earth will rise against you and fight with you and defeat you, and everyone will follow him exclaiming: ‘Who can compare to this beast, for he has given us fire from heaven!’”¹³

He then prophesied the materialist philosophies and radical politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that would justify such rebellion:

“Do you know that centuries will pass and mankind will proclaim with the mouth of its wisdom and science that there is no crime, and therefore no sin, but only hungry men? ‘Feed them first, then ask virtue of them!’—that is what they will write on the banner they raise against you, and by which your temple will be destroyed.”¹⁴

The Grand Inquisitor went on to make the two most pessimistic and in part painfully accurate predictions for the twentieth century and beyond, that material needs can never be satisfied, and that a minority shall dominate the majority. The optimism of both development as unlimited want satisfaction and of democracy as rule by the people were dismissed as impossible in the terms in which they were ideally conceived. He warned that frustration was inevitable: “They will finally understand

¹² Analysis in Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky. The Mantle of the Prophet 1871-1881* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 183.

¹³ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 214.

¹⁴ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 214.

that freedom and earthly bread in plenty for everyone are inconceivable together, for never, never will they be able to share among themselves.”¹⁵ Speaking in the name of the omniscient minority that would rule a benighted majority, he claimed:

“O, never, never will they feed themselves without us! No science will give them bread as long as they remain free, but in the end they will lay their freedom at our feet and say to us: ‘Better that you enslave us, but feed us.’”¹⁶

Instead Christ had rejected the earthly bread of material security in favour of the heavenly bread of the meaning to existence and the ensuing torment of such liberty.

This was followed by the second temptation and another source of misery. The devil offered to relieve Christ of the freedom to choose between good and evil, a prerogative that was as enticing as it was painful. “There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more tormenting either.”¹⁷ Instead of soothing the human conscience, Christ tortured it further by augmenting the dose of freedom.

“And so, instead of a firm foundation for appeasing human conscience once and for all, you chose everything that was unusual, enigmatic, and indefinite, you chose everything that was beyond men’s strength, and thereby acted as if you did not love them at all—and who did this? He who came to give his life for them! Instead of taking over men’s freedom, you increased it and forever burdened the kingdom of the human soul with its torments.”¹⁸

The purpose of granting such freedom was to allow humanity to choose freely between good and evil. Agonising as this was, people would not allow such a conscience to be suppressed. However, they would gladly surrender to one who could appease that conscience and make the choices for them. What Christ refused the Inquisitor would gladly do.

“With bread you were given an indisputable banner: give man bread and he will bow down to you, for there is nothing more indisputable than bread. But if at the same time someone else takes over his conscience—oh, then he will even throw down your bread and follow him who has seduced his conscience. In this you were right. For the mystery of man’s being is not only in living, but in what one lives for. Without a firm idea of what he lives for, man will not consent to live and will sooner destroy himself than remain on earth, even if there is bread all around him.”¹⁹

The great problem was how to take charge of that conscience. It could be done only by those who had divined the secrets of human nature.

“There are three powers, only three powers on earth, capable of conquering and holding captive forever the conscience of these feeble rebels, for their own happiness—these powers are miracle, mystery, and authority. You rejected the first, the second, and the third, and gave yourself as an example of that.”²⁰

Reason was inadequate and the miracle was required “in those terrible moments of life, the moments of the most terrible, essential, and tormenting questions of the soul.”²¹ Further, the human being was a rebel, but incapable of sustaining the

¹⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 214.

¹⁶ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 214.

¹⁷ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 216.

¹⁸ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 216.

¹⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 215.

²⁰ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 216.

²¹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 216.

rebellion. Some could do so, and “they were gods”, but the rest, the masses of humanity, craved for certainty in that turmoil. This was ensured through mystery. The Inquisitor taunted Christ by asking whether the insupportable burden of free choice had been imposed or granted in the knowledge that only some, not all, could bear it, and whether it was in fact meant to be a mystery after all. In which case, the Inquisitor himself could proffer the mystery.

“And if it is a mystery, then we, too, had the right to preach mystery and to teach them that it is not the free choice of the heart that matters, and not love, but the mystery, which they must blindly obey, even setting aside their own conscience. And so we did. We corrected your deed and based it on *miracle*, *mystery*, and *authority*. And mankind rejoiced that they were once more led like sheep, and that at last such a terrible gift, which had brought them so much suffering, had been taken from their hearts.”²²

Material security and the moral conscience needed to be embodied in a social order that would apply to all of humanity. If these were indeed truths, their embodiment must be universal, not partial or in competition with other systems of ideas. This would be the universal state in the third temptation.

“There is no more ceaseless or tormenting care for man, as long as he remains free, than to find someone to bow down to as soon as possible. But man seeks to bow down before that which is indisputable, so indisputable that all men at once would agree to the universal worship of it. For the care of these pitiful creatures is not just to find something before which I or some other man can bow down, but to find something that everyone else will also believe in and bow down to, for it must needs be all *together*. And this need for *communality* of worship is the chief torment of each man individually, and of mankind as a whole, from the beginning of the ages.”²³

The atomization of the species through individualism, or its fragmentation through pluralism and its attendant relativism, was anathema to the yearning for universality and the uniformity of the “anthill”:

“Had you accepted that third counsel of the mighty spirit, you would have furnished all that man seeks on earth, that is: someone to bow down to, someone to take over his conscience, and a means for uniting everyone at last into a common, concordant, and incontestable anthill—for the need for universal union is the last and third torment of men. Mankind in its entirety has always yearned to arrange things so that they must be universal.”²⁴

But once again Christ had refused the exercise of universal power and the opportunity to ensure peace through unity. It fell to the Inquisitor to do so.

The Happiness of Slaves

However, the Inquisitor was more prophetic than historical. The historical vision was open-ended and allowed for possibilities that could not be foreseen since human actors would create new conditions for their lives in each generation; but prophetic insight was closed, it saw an eternal past and it foresaw an almost indefinite future. But it was not indefinite, for he saw it culminate in an ideal state. The transition to that state would take its time, for the rebellion of Reason would have to

²² *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 217-218.

²³ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 215.

²⁴ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 218.

be suppressed and its new Tower of Babel would have to be overthrown. He spoke of the centuries that will pass, of the “end of the world”, of the three powers of miracle, mystery, and authority that would hold “feeble rebels” “captive forever”. The process of creating the universal state or empire was still in its infancy: “There is still long to wait before its completion and the earth still has much to suffer, but we shall accomplish it and we shall be caesars, and then we shall think about the universal happiness of mankind.” The effort would be long and arduous, “there will be centuries more of the lawlessness of free reason, of their science and anthropophagy—for, having begun to build their Tower of Babel without us, they will end in anthropophagy.” But this state of degeneracy would be followed by the “kingdom of peace and happiness”, the Millennium without Christ. This vision foreclosed other possibilities even as it posited the contradictions that would be the fate of humanity.

In effect, both the active and the passive actors of this drama, the rulers and the ruled, the extraordinary and the ordinary, were doomed to a wretchedly circumscribed existence. The passive mass were content in their secure if bovine existence, in which their needs would be provided and their wants indulged. But even the active element knew their script in advance for all time. They were to liquidate the challenge of Reason and thereafter subsist as rulers, bereft of ambition and denied the creative moment; indeed, with no further wants of their own, they would become the analogue of the despised subordinate mass in the “anthill.” They would know all there was to be known, but hold it as secret knowledge; as Rozanov acutely remarked, “history will lapse into silence, and there will remain only the secret history of a few great souls, which, of course, is destined never to be told.”²⁵ It was an eerie foretaste of the Central Committee secreting the knowledge of history in the vaults of the Lenin Library and of the Central State Archive of the October Revolution. Nothing could be more pessimistic, for not even the superior human beings, the “few great souls”, were in control of their destiny, which was in the hands of “a mind not human and transient but eternal and absolute.” Masters were no freer than their slaves; the Grand Inquisitor’s claim to superiority rang hollow; and Dostoevsky’s demonstration that freedom did not admit of the distinction was compelling.

The Grand Inquisitor despised humanity for its frailties, but he claimed to love it better than Christ Himself did. He had lifted the burden of choice from human beings by granting them all that they wanted; his Christ on the other hand inflicted the freedom of choice on them, a torment the vast majority could not bear. His Christ obviously loved only the elect; the Grand Inquisitor loved all of humanity. As he paid homage to the indomitable spirit of leaders, he taunted Christ by asking whether He had after all come only for those chosen few and not for the helpless masses as he claimed:

“They endured your cross, they endured scores of years of hungry and naked wilderness, eating locusts and roots, and of course you can point with pride to these children of freedom, of free love, of free and magnificent sacrifice in your name. But remember that there were only several thousand of them, and they were gods. What of the rest? Is it the fault of the rest of feeble mankind

²⁵ V. V. Rozanov, “O legende ‘Velikii inkvizitor’ (1891) in Iu. Seliverstov, ed., *O Velikom Inkvizitore. Dostoevskii i posleduiushchie* (Moskva: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1991) pp. 73-183, here p. 161, translation from Vasily Rozanov, *Dostoevsky and the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, translated with an Afterword by Spencer E. Roberts (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 170-171.

that they could not endure what the mighty endured? Is it the fault of the weak soul that it is unable to contain such terrible gifts? Can it be that you indeed came only to the chosen ones and for the chosen ones?"²⁶

His rhetoric was unyielding:

"Is it that only the tens of thousands of the great and strong are dear to you, and the remaining millions, numerous as the sands of the sea, weak but loving you, should serve only as material for the great and the strong? No, the weak, too, are dear to us. They are depraved and rebels, but in the end it is they who will become obedient."²⁷

He contrasted his own realism with Christ's schoolmasterly excesses:

"I swear man is created weaker and baser than you thought him! How, how can he ever accomplish the same things as you? Respecting him so much, you behaved as if you had ceased to be compassionate, because you demanded too much of him—and who did this? He who loved him more than himself! Respecting him less, you would have demanded less of him, and that would be closer to love, for his burden would be lighter. He is weak and mean. What matter that he now rebels everywhere against our power, and takes pride in this rebellion? The pride of a child and a schoolboy!"²⁸

Dostoevsky captured the rhetoric and the logic of the varieties of mass mobilization, where one camp offers nothing but blood, sweat, tears, and toil, while the other shows how *Arbeit macht frei*.

Dostoevsky was exposing two types of democracy and egalitarianism and their respective forms of hollowness through the Grand Inquisitor's charges of elitism against Christ. Both the Grand Inquisitor and his Christ were committed to the wellbeing of humanity, and both systems generated their own elites. The Grand Inquisitor's notion of welfare was founded on material, moral, and social security and passivity, which needed an elite of superior and active beings to sustain it. He would solve the great problem of democracy, that of combining freedom with regulation, while Christ's freedom would entail chaos:

"With us everyone will be happy, and they will no longer rebel or destroy each other, as in your freedom, everywhere. Oh, we shall convince them that they will only become free when they resign their freedom to us, and submit to us."²⁹

His Christ's concept of welfare on the other hand was oriented to liberty of choice by the individual and the active citizen whose self-legislated norms and exercise of reason led humanity to collective harmony. But all citizens were compelled to be active performers in such a system, and the best were the most active, the ones who could shoulder the burden of choice most effectively. It was a meritocracy in which the winners assumed leadership and the losers fell through the trapdoor, whether through the examination system, capitalist enterprise, or democratic elections. Rozanov's insights are as usual piercing and he extended the Grand Inquisitor's argument by quoting first from Revelation of St John that a mere 144,000 souls had been saved on Judgement Day by an unfeeling God who abandoned the rest,³⁰ and

²⁶ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 217.

²⁷ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 215.

²⁸ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 217.

²⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 219.

³⁰ "1. And I looked, and lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred and forty *and* four thousand, having his Father's name written in their

then the devil reminding Ivan Karamazov in the latter's nightmare of "How many souls it was necessary to ruin ... in order to obtain just one righteous Job!" But Rozanov went further to suggest the filiation of modern meritocracy to such Biblical tales:

"Higher education, for example, is a fine thing, it is respected by everyone, and it attracts everyone to it, but, as it is impossible in childhood to tell whether someone has a talent for it, thousands and tens of thousands of children are crippled by difficult and complex schooling, in order that from their number can be separated a score or so of truly educated people. The others crowd around them not only as an uneducated mass but as a corrupted one."³¹

The Grand Inquisitor professed to be pained by such brutality, and he administered the corrective narcotic. Dostoevsky had presented himself the almost impossible task of providing alternatives to the Grand Inquisitor's presentation of political options that ranged from nervous crises induced by meritocracy to asphyxia in the gulag.

The Grand Inquisitor confessed to his power being founded on deception at three levels. The first was that popular consent was extracted in the name of Christ; the second that the people shall not be allowed to know that the power of Christ would be negated; and the third the Inquisitor's suffering over his own fraudulence.

"They will marvel at us, and look upon us as gods, because we, standing at their head, have agreed to suffer freedom and to rule over them—so terrible will it become for them in the end to be free! But we shall say that we are obedient to you and rule in your name. We shall deceive them again, but this time we shall not allow you to come to us. This deceit will constitute our suffering, for we shall have to lie."³²

Ultimately, he derived his legitimacy from Christ, denied Christ, and was tormented by the knowledge and the practice of the deceit. He was uncannily prescient about the cynicism, both democratic and totalitarian, of rulers bearing the Atlas burden of freedom and sacrificing their integrity in what is known in democratic parlance as service to the people. He noted that rulers would rule in the name of the people, love them, and deceive them, all in the same breath; but especially, that such deception would be a species of self-flagellation in a noble cause. In the kingdom of happiness only the few hundred thousand governors would be unhappy, for they would "keep the mystery" and would bear "the curse of the knowledge of good and evil." He contrasted his mass democratic instinct once again to the elitism of the periodic return of Christ, including of course the Second Coming: "It is said and prophesied that you will come and once more be victorious, you will come with your chosen ones, with your proud and mighty ones, but we will say that they saved only themselves, while

foreheads. 2. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder; and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: 3) And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred *and* forty *and* four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. 4) These are they which were not defiled with women; for they were virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, *being* the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb. 5. And in their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God." Revelation 14: 1-5.

³¹ Rozanov, "O legende", pp. 145-146; Rozanov, *Dostoevsky and the Legend*, p. 141.

³² *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 215.

we have saved everyone.”³³ Democratic mendacity would be monumental, for everything that the Inquisitor did would be in the name of Christ to the exclusion of Christ. But again Christ did not emerge unscathed. He was exposed for His impotence, just as He had been for His heartless elitism; and again, Dostoevsky must frame an adequate response.

Christ’s formula according to the Grand Inquisitor entailed the torments of liberty in modernity, the active citizen with his search for meaning, his moral conscience, and his preference for pluralism; the Grand Inquisitor proposed instead an active elite and a passive mass, the elite emerging through whichever of the processes that modern civilization had to offer, be it the genetic selection of the *Herrenvolk*; the electoral choice of democratic dictators and dynasts; the *pays légal*; Saint-Simonian technocracy; competitive meritocracy; the Russian intelligentsia’s self-selection of the “conscious”; Bazarovian nihilism; Raskolnikov’s extraordinary man; Leninist vanguardism; Eurasianist ideocracy; with enough to spare for brahmanical purity and the Chosen People, or any other, whatever the ideology across the political spectrum; and this elite would guarantee consumerist satisfaction, freedom from choice, and social harmony unsullied by pluralism.

The Grand Inquisitor’s historical account of the nature of modern civilization fits into a familiar pattern of thought in nineteenth century Russia and Europe. As had become customary in Europe from the late eighteenth century, he divided world history into three segments, Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern from the sixteenth century. System-building thinkers accounted for the sequence in two different ways, either chronologically as a succession of epochs, or dialectically as the first being negated by the second; in both cases, the third or the modern world appears as a creative synthesis of the first two. At one end of modernity Dante captured it graphically by having a three-mouthed Satan munching simultaneously on Brutus, Cassius, and Judas Iscariot for their respective crimes against Rome and Christ,³⁴ and at its other end, Dostoevsky brought together the rebellion of both Prometheus and the Beast. The Grand Inquisitor’s argumentation inclined to the dialectical more than the purely chronological; but that had long been routine theoretical practice in Russia.

He fused the epochs in various ways, not necessarily with the clarity of the distinction between the chronological and the dialectic. The Roman Empire represented only universal empire without material security or the conscience; the Roman Catholic Church offered only to manage the conscience while ignoring the vital need for satisfying material needs; modern civilization absorbed all three, material need, conscience, and unity in universal empire. Similarly Classical Antiquity established moral order but it was disturbed by Socrates and Christ; the Roman Catholic Church repaired the damage through “miracle, mystery, and authority”, but Luther challenged it yet again. The Inquisitor foresaw long centuries of chaos, what Dostoevsky knew to be of the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the ideological civil wars of the nineteenth century and possibly foreseeing that of the twentieth. But order would be restored once again through the Inquisitor’s project for a tyranny of happiness. It would combine the Roman Catholic Church’s expertise in manipulating the mind and the liberal-socialist ardour to promote economic development with the Roman Empire’s reach for world dominion. In many different ways he reverted to the same theme: the material universality of the

³³ On the periodic return other than the Second Coming, see Frank, *Dostoevsky, 1871-1881*, pp. 436-437.

³⁴ *Inferno*, canto 34, lines 55-67.

Roman Empire, the ideological universality of the Roman Catholic Church, and their fusion in the consumer satisfaction and ideological manipulation of a worldwide despotism.

But where did Russia fit into these meditations? The answer may not be what Dostoevsky's well-advertised political ideology would lead us to expect. Russia had not partaken of either Classical Antiquity or the civilization of the Roman Catholic Church, a source of immense regret to so many of the Russian intelligentsia down to this day and expressed with especial acuity and melancholy by Petr Chaadaev. As for the modern world, Russia had entered its portals uncomfortably late, not earlier than the eighteenth century with the Petrine reforms, or perhaps only with industrialization in the nineteenth century, another subject of painful soul-searching by this intelligentsia. It would appear that Dostoevsky was not talking of Russia at all. However, the Inquisitor spoke on behalf of humanity, not just of Europe; he addressed Christ, who could not be imagined as other than universal; and, if not universal, at least as much Russian as European. Thus the Inquisitor reflected on human history, not just on its European component. Dostoevsky's choice of the Inquisitor and the Roman Empire and the Roman Church through which to frame his universal questions suggests that he recognized Europe as the demiurge of modernity, despite his numerous denunciations of European corruption and his unconvincing adulation of Russian purity, of a Russia that he himself suspected might have been his own *Dulcinea*.³⁵ In 1861 he had enthusiastically exclaimed "the Russians ought to regard Schiller in a very special manner, for he was not only a great universal writer, but—above all—he was our national poet."³⁶ In his obituary of George Sand in 1876, he admitted, "We Russians have two homelands, our own Russia and Europe, even if we call ourselves Slavophiles."³⁷ To this modern world Russia now firmly belonged; and the question of being Russian or European was secondary to a larger, universal vision.

The Grand Inquisitor foresaw, as in augury or science fiction, the calamitous consequences of science and technology gone mad. He virtually prophesied the triple division of the world in the twentieth century, when the great powers would consume each other through total war; the next level would suffer the blight of population transfers, ethnic cleansing, and genocide; and the weakest would eke out their existence in craven dependence: "Freedom, free reason, and science will lead them into such a maze, and confront them with such miracles and insoluble mysteries, that some of them, unruly and ferocious, will exterminate themselves; others, unruly but feeble, will exterminate each other, and the remaining third, feeble and wretched, will crawl to our feet and cry out to us: 'Yes, you were right, you alone possess his mystery, and we are coming back to you—save us from ourselves.'" ³⁸ He contrasted this with the happiness of the masses who would "marvel and stand in awe of us and be proud that we are so powerful and so intelligent as to have been able to subdue

³⁵ Frank, *Dostoevsky, 1871-1881*, pp. 279-281.

³⁶ Frank, *Dostoevsky, 1871-1881*, p. 394.

³⁷ Frank, *Dostoevsky, 1871-1881*, p. 336.

³⁸ There seems to be an inversion here. For those who exterminated each other should have been the "ferocious" or the great powers that conducted the three great wars of the twentieth century, the first and second world wars and the cold war; and those who exterminated themselves should have been those torn by internal dissension, hence "feeble", even if they be Germany or the Soviet Union with their respective internal bloodletting, or the obviously lesser powers from the Ottoman Empire to Yugoslavia, Kampuchea, or Rwanda, that conducted their respective genocides.

such a tempestuous flock of thousands of millions.” They would lead carefree lives like children; they would be permitted to sin because they were so well beloved; and the punishment for transgression would be borne by their noble rulers who would be further adored for their sacrifice. He would “allow or forbid them to live with their wives or mistresses, to have or not to have children—all depending on their obedience—and they will submit to us gladly and joyfully.” He would let these feeble souls live peacefully in the belief of a reward in afterlife although in fact no reward of any kind awaited them; indeed, if there were rewards in the afterlife, it would not be for them. His own rationality would correct the perversion of Reason.

The Grand Inquisitor’s Foucauldian Insight

The Inquisitor’s political and anthropological arguments were already common currency in Europe, analyzing and describing with unease the irrational in modern politics. Indeed, he seems to have gone to school in England and been taught Walter Bagehot’s theory of British political culture, already elaborated in the *Fortnightly Review* between 1865 and 1867. Bagehot grounded his account of the liberal polity, of parliamentary government, and of the constitutional monarchy, on the “magic” and the “mystery” of the authority of the aristocracy and monarchy, on the insight that the nominally sovereign “masses of Englishmen are not fit for an elective government; if they knew how near they were to it, they would be surprised, and almost tremble”, and that Charles James Fox had even described “the hidden influence of George III as the undetected agency of ‘an infernal spirit’ ”, one which they had now come to venerate under Victoria.³⁹ The British constitutional monarchy, the ideal of complacent liberals and reforming conservatives across Europe all the way to Russia, seemed to have been animated by none less than a Grand Inquisitor in the unlikely garb of Georges and Williams and Alberts and Victorias.

The Grand Inquisitor on the face of it seems an unusual choice as the prophet of the modern dystopia. If it was to be an adversary worthy of God and therefore of the future and the good of all humanity, surely it should have been Satan, and Dostoevsky should have followed in the wake of Dante, Milton, and Goethe. But modernity offered ceaseless want generation and made the false promise of limitless want satisfaction, not sin and eternal hellfire in the company of Satan. Dostoevsky wanted to fashion one who worked for future happiness and would pretend to do so better than God had managed to do, but whose work was a perversely convincing lie. Those who had been tempted by Satan into sin suffered forever; those who came under the sway of the Grand Inquisitor lived secure and content in their self-delusion. Through supreme artifice, the Grand Inquisitor, a servant of God and a Prince of His Church, acted in His name to confound His purpose. The Grand Inquisitor enslaved the mind but did not, unlike Satan, torture the body. Solzhenitsyn’s account of gulag was Dantesque, inspired by nightmares of physical (and of course mental) agony in that inferno; but Dostoevsky was haunted by the prospect of the incorporeal intelligence directing the mind.

³⁹ Bagehot, [Walter], *The English Constitution*, edited by Paul Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 46, 50, 178.

The inspiration derived from the turbulence of the late eighteenth century.⁴⁰ Entirely new forms of power had emerged during the French Revolution, absolute, rational, democratic, and oriented to the welfare of humanity. But it was less and less spectacularly and directly coercive. Marx described the workings of an apparently self-regulating market that guided human destiny without physical coercion; Weber analysed the utterly impersonal domination of a bureaucracy of rational experts; and Dostoevsky anticipated Foucault's thesis of power exercised by penetrating the mind rather than scourging the body. During the nineteenth century, the new discipline of psychology, or rather the methods of psychoanalysis, interrogated the working of the mind with an intensity that has often been compared, not least by Freud himself, to the mental tortures of the Holy Inquisition; to this was added the medical specialization and techniques of psychiatry which shaped and altered the mind. Revolutionary forms of power and knowledge in multiple domains came together to reveal new possibilities and new dangers. The Grand Inquisitor focused all these insights and anxieties.

Foucault has famously contrasted the theatricality of the archaic exercise of power until the end of the eighteenth century with the rationality of it thereafter as it worked, silent, invisible, and pervasive. In a nice Foucauldian moment, Dostoevsky presented the Grand Inquisitor, resplendent in his Cardinal's robes as he presided over a spectacular auto-da-fé in Seville, where he burned a hundred heretics, and then austere in monkish Dominican brown in a crepuscular cell where he harangued the Silent Christ. The Grand Inquisitor seemed to embody in style and attire the great transition from the archaic to the modern. If the God of modern times was Progress or the progressive welfare of the species, the Grand Inquisitor was promising as much as God, and achieving His purposes, apparently utterly painlessly. He was not Satan but the other face of modernity, the all-seeing eye of surveillance and control from within the Panopticon, the "tyranny *incognito*."⁴¹

The Grand Inquisitor was a personage of preternatural intelligence, omniscient, superlatively rational, monomaniacal in exercising the absolute power of controlling the mind. He prefigured the Orwellian Big Brother in his commitment to the welfare of the human species. His was a malign genius totally devoted to a cause, one who tortured out of love, killed to save, diabolic in the service of God, and himself a degraded version of God; and like every democratic leader of modern times, he labored tirelessly for the future of our planet. Such a specimen did not belong to the Middle Ages; and curiously, he did not appear in Cervantes, Montaigne, or Rabelais, Renaissance figures who were sceptical and satirical in different ways and who might have been expected to portray the inquisitors of three centuries. He was constructed during the Enlightenment as the embodiment of the obscurantism, persecution, and bigotry that twisted the smile of Reason; he appeared as a literary myth when the Holy Inquisition had lost its political potency; and its first form was as a caricature, especially at the hands of Voltaire and even of the Marquis de Sade. The French Revolution however, especially the Terror, induced a mutation. He was cast as the intelligence of the Terror; and he was incarnated primarily in Robespierre, but also in all others who nurtured a paranormal fanaticism in the cause of human

⁴⁰ For the account of the literary myth of the Grand Inquisitor in the nineteenth century, see Caroline Juillot, *Le grand inquisiteur. Naissance d'une figure mythique au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2010)

⁴¹ P. Travis Kroeker, Bruce K. Ward, *Remembering the End. Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (Boulder: Colorado, Westview, 2001), p. 76.

welfare, especially Saint-Just, and including, somewhat unusually, Frederick II. Now brooding and sinister, aged, hooded, and cheerless, he became the image of the Revolution perverting its purposes, devouring itself, a cancer to itself. Vergniaud, the Girondin, first discerned the Inquisition in the Terror of 1793 as the Revolution offered up its sacrifices at the altar of Reason and the *Rights of Man*. Thereafter the nineteenth century, and especially the romantic authors, relentlessly moulded the image, Georges Sand, Jules Michelet, Honoré de Balzac, Edgar Quinet, Louis Blanc, Adolphe Thiers, Victor Hugo and Théophile Gautier, going on to Gustave Le Bon and Hippolyte Taine later in the century, extending to H. W. Longfellow, and spilling over into the twentieth century with Evgeny Zamyatin, George Orwell, and Henri de Montherlant. By far the most influential among these was Victor Hugo's Torquemada in the nineteenth century and the Orwellian Big Brother in the twentieth. Only a Grand Inquisitor captured that condition perfectly, of one who served the Cause, be it God or Progress, but perverted it by claiming superior capacity to achieve the same results. To the romantics, Jesus Christ evolved into the spirit of liberty, the one who had fought off the Inquisition of his own day, the "Sansculotte of Nazareth." The opposition between the mythical Grand Inquisitor and the mythicized Jesus Christ was conceived during the Revolution, matured in the course of the nineteenth century, and was brought to term in *The Brothers Karamazov*. It has remained one of the summits of accomplishment of modern world culture.

IV

THE HOLY FOOL

As he presented the dismal and negative features of a modern existence, Dostoevsky outlined its radiant and positive potential. These may best be summed up as holy foolishness in Christ. It was not a religious and still less a theological concept, derived though both the principals were from religious experience and tradition; it was a way of proposing moral action to all types of human being, whatever the ideological persuasion, religious, atheistic, or agnostic, progressive or reactionary, or any other, on the premise that the discontents of modern civilization was common to all, and solutions would have to be found in these courses of action, which were open to any ideology. The core of it consisted in the emptying of the self or the annihilation of the ego; the ideal *human* example of it was Christ; accordingly, the best way to pursue that objective was to seek to emulate Christ as a human being. He famously acknowledged that it was impossible to obey Christ's commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself for the ego must frustrate the attempt;⁴² he stressed that it was imperative nonetheless to strive toward that goal.

In the hagiographical tradition of Russian Orthodoxy, the holy fool is one who imitates the life of Christ, suffers humiliation and rejection in the cause of the salvation of humanity, effaces and debases himself, is mocked and freely mocks and exposes others in their sin and error, and in the event reveals to human society that a

⁴² In his jottings during the vigil by the bier of his first wife, Masha, in 1864. The full text of that remarkable statement is available in translation in Steven Cassedy, *Dostoevsky's Religion* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 115-118.

moral existence is viable. In these ways he replicates the life of Jesus on earth. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries about thirty such holy fools were canonized; but popular wisdom recognized and revered dozens of unofficial saints around whom cults flourished.⁴³ Their bizarre behaviour was interpreted as evidence of divine inspiration worthy of cultic veneration. In the course of the nineteenth century modern medicine judged the phenomenon to be pathological. Careful research claimed that these forms of behaviour were evidence of neurological disorder which needed treatment like any other illness. Dostoevsky's creations were insertions into this furious debate between the hagiographical tradition of blessedness and the new medical tradition of physiological and environmental determinism; but he did not take a final position on either side of the argument, preferring instead to leave possibilities open for further elaboration or reflection. Indeed he did not need to do so since his concern was to chart out a suitable morality: it was neither the religious preoccupation with divine grace and diabolical possession nor the medical problematic of insanity.

The holy fool was ideologically undefined and belonged to the margin in a number of senses; but it was a unique vantage point from which to observe, comment, propose, and eventually move to the centre. For this reason Nietzsche declared that Dostoevsky was "the only psychologist who had anything to teach me: he is one of the best strokes of luck in my life, even better than discovering Stendhal." His Dostoevsky had grasped that "Chandala feeling" of exclusion, which had bred "the scientific character, the artist, the genius, the free spirit, the actor, the merchant, the great discoverer."⁴⁴ Nietzsche's Chandala condition of marginality allowed such persons to speak more freely than others could,⁴⁵ and, from the margin they moved to the centre through prophecy and moral leadership.

But the margin was more than the ideological or the sociological. It is often regarded as the psychological; for Dostoevsky did bring to bear on it his intense suffering in prison and exile coupled with his experience of epileptic seizures. They included all those mental states that were regarded as allowing a special access to the truth, from insanity and schizophrenia to modern spiritualism, clairvoyance, and mediums, which latter had become especially popular or fashionable in Dostoevsky's own time. His work has attracted an obsessive concern with abnormal psychology; but whatever the nature of his experiences, they were transfigured into artistic creations in the manner that he fashioned the Madonna image of the peasant Marei out of a childhood hallucination recalled during a moment of horror with fellow convicts in Siberia.⁴⁶ His margin also penetrated deep into the criminal underworld about which he wrote all his life. Dostoevsky glorified the people; but the people he

⁴³ Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness. Dostoevsky's Novels and the Politics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 2.

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Gods or How to Philosophize with a Hammer" (1888), in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, translated by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 219.

⁴⁵ "All the methods, all the presuppositions of our present scientific spirit have been regarded with the greatest contempt for thousands of years, they barred certain people from the company of 'decent' men,—these people were considered 'enemies of God', despisers of the truth, or 'possessed'. As scientific characters, they were Chandala ..."
See Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Gods", p. 11.

⁴⁶ See the fine analysis in Robert Louis Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky. Deliriums and Nocturnes* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), chapter 1.

so worshipped, as Shestov sharply remarks, were the convicts he encountered during his years in prison. He experienced the extreme humiliation of having to bend to common criminals who despised him; he had to ask himself why they seemed right; the result was not bitterness but respect; and they became his teachers, the best of Russians, the “people.”⁴⁷ The third of the marginal that he explored and raised to the level of agency were children. To a remarkable degree, children drive his characters onward, from the child in Raskolnikov’s horrifying dream of Mikolka beating his mare to death, the little girl in *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, to the extended and determining role of Kolya Krasotkin, Ilyushin and his friends in *The Brothers Karamazov* who set out to build the brave new world of brotherhood. It is no coincidence that the three areas of Foucault’s concern to explore the rationalization of power in modern times are the hospital, the prison, and the school. Dostoevsky’s Christlike figures seemed to emerge with the greatest clarity in these challenging environments.

However, Dostoevsky’s investigations were not constrained by such marginality. His premise was that all human beings faced the predicaments he described; their specific circumstances of life did not determine either the problem or the solution. Any person in any walk of life could imagine his or her situation in any way and seek any number of possible futures. It was entirely up to the individual to do so, and no one person was better placed morally than another to act. Individual responsibility did not admit of alibis; such individual choices were possible;⁴⁸ and they were always of value even if of no use to anybody, as Nietzsche discerned.⁴⁹ Throughout the twentieth century this imperative would be put to the test and its potency demonstrated, be it with Jean-Paul Sartre in fascist Europe, Mahatma Gandhi in the British Empire, or Solzhenitsyn in the gulag.

The Human Christ

The process of emptying the self, of self-dissolution, with all its consequences in humiliation and suffering, were in imitation of Christ. But this Christ was human, not divine; he was the embodiment of the Ideal to which a human being could aspire, by which a human life could be guided. “On earth there is only one positively beautiful person—Christ, so that the appearance of this immeasurably, infinitely beautiful person, is of course, an infinite miracle in itself.”⁵⁰ It may appear disconcerting to some that he listed Don Quixote, Pickwick, and Jean Valjean as other, even if not quite as exalted, examples from Christian literature. That he was profoundly Christian and Orthodox was obviously never in doubt; but it is not so certain that he was making a contribution to Christian thought and civilization, and he

⁴⁷ Lev Shestov, *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche. The Good in the Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche. Philosophy and Preaching*, translated by Bernard Martin. *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy*, translated by Spencer Roberts (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969, reprinted 1978), chapters 13, 14.

⁴⁸ Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky*, p. 78.

⁴⁹ “The value of a man does not lie in his being useful, for it would continue to exist even if there were no one he could be useful to.” See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, edited by Rüdiger Bittner, translated by Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 181.

⁵⁰ Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky. His Life and Work*, translated by Michael A. Minihan (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 345.

was certainly not doing so to theology. Dostoevsky was however bred in the Christian world, that was the only one he knew, and from it he drew his ideal of human perfection, Jesus.

Dostoevsky was attracted above all to Ernest Renan's portrait of Jesus, in which he both denied the divinity of Jesus and upheld him as an ideal to emulate;⁵¹ he was equally impressed by Chateaubriand's response to Voltaire, that Christianity was the foundation of beauty, humanity, and morality even if all the supernatural proofs of the religion be denied.⁵² The exploration of Jesus as a man about whom historical details could be investigated and biographies written was already nearly a century old, and those who registered the greatest impact were David Friedrich Strauss and Renan, the latter's more akin to a novel than a work of research.⁵³ Both of them demystified many miracles as examples of illness, including epilepsy.⁵⁴ Dostoevsky was especially attracted to Renan on the ground that an unbeliever like him could regard Jesus' perfection as unattainable while providing direction and guidance. The fact that this ideal could not be realized on earth was no ground to reject Renan's Jesus; and both Ivan's "great idealist" and Fetiukevich's "crucified lover of humanity" were the Jesus drawn from Renan, not from Russian Orthodoxy.⁵⁵ Ironically, he was in the company of Nietzsche in this matter. Nietzsche owed much to Renan for his *The Anti-Christ*, acknowledged that the two modern predecessors for his portrait of Jesus were Renan and Dostoevsky, and even noted that Dostoevsky was the only one before him who had "figured out" Christ.⁵⁶ But more than anything, Renan painted Jesus as naïve and poetic, ignorant of science and society, fond of women and children, childlike and innocent, and afflicted by doubt and struggling with internal demons to the extent of teetering eventually on the edge of madness. This was the very human or rather mythicized Christ, incarnated in Prince Myshkin, who at the end of the novel descended into idiocy.⁵⁷ Indeed, so overwhelming was his adoration of the beauty of Christ, that Dostoevsky admitted to an un-Christian and theologically dubious preference for Christ over the truth should the one exclude the other. He once wrote: "Even if somebody proved to me that Christ was outside the truth, and it *really* were so that the truth was outside of Christ, then I would rather remain with Christ than with the truth [*istina*]." ⁵⁸ Dostoevsky proposed an ideal that was in principle universally available and not necessarily Christian; the universality of reason and science could not imagine such perfect human goodness; and he turned to the source

⁵¹ Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1863), chapter 23.

⁵² Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 135.

⁵³ Steven Cassedy, *Dostoevsky's Religion* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 30-41; Karen Stepanian, "'It Will Be but Not Until The End Has Been Achieved'. (David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*, and Dostoevsky's *Idiot*)," *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1, Winter 2005-6, pp. 36-54, here p. 39.

⁵⁴ Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, p. 181.

⁵⁵ P. Travis Kroeker; Bruce K. Ward, *Remembering the End. Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (Boulder: Colorado, Westview, 2001), pp. 244-246.

⁵⁶ See the discussion on Renan and Nietzsche in Kroeker and Ward, *Remembering the End*. pp. 243-255.

⁵⁷ Stepanian, "'It Will Be but Not Until The End'," pp. 39-40.

⁵⁸ To Natal'ia Dmitrievna Fonvizina in January-February 1854 from Omsk, on leaving prison, see PSS, vol. 28, book 1, p. 176, translation from Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 246; see also Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky*, pp. 158, 343.

which provided it, the Christian tradition.

Out of the immense number of masterpieces of art that depicted Christ before, during, and after the Crucifixion, the one that moved him the most was Hans Holbein the Younger's painting of 1521-1522, *The Dead Christ*, hanging in the Basel Museum of Fine Art. It was devoid of all supernatural attributes; it was a brutal and painfully realistic portrait of a corpse, battered and bruised, livid and rotting; and it has always been represented as a vision of Christ as a mere man whose body was decaying.⁵⁹ He used the painting in *The Idiot* where it hung over the door: Prince Myshkin was provoked to comment that viewing it would shatter faith; Rogozhin indeed lost it; and Ippolit committed suicide after a nightmare about a tarantula and in the conviction that if death is a law of nature then all good deeds are meaningless.⁶⁰ But it has also been interpreted as revealing the tension and the strain of a resurrection, as if Christ were attempting to rise, especially from the manner in which the fingers of the right hand seem to be tensing to grip. Kasatkina has suggested that if it were viewed above eye level, as it was hung at the Basel Gallery when Dostoevsky saw it and as he placed it in *The Idiot*, it would indeed look like a mere corpse that was about to topple down; but if it were examined at eye level, as it is hung now, and as Dostoevsky inspected it then by climbing on to a chair, it would appear as a man straining to rise.⁶¹ Dostoevsky played with both visions, of Christ as a Renaissance man and as the incipience of a resurrection. He put the saintly Zosima through both motions: his corpse putrefied, to the dismay of the faithful who expected a miracle, and he was resurrected through his disciple Alyosha, who both resurrected himself by losing his virginity through union with the earth⁶² and carried Zosima's message to the world. This was a repetitive Dostoevskian theme, that we are immortal, that our lives and work continue, and that death is a resurrection, for which he placed the epigraph to *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."⁶³

Emulating Christ through dissolution of the ego and selfless love, and accepting humiliation and suffering, was a process that was both complex and contradictory, and Dostoevsky laid out the problems in exhausting variety. It entailed the inherent contradictions of working against the self, accepting that such an ideal was unattainable, and realizing that nothing could be finalized because life stretched into immortality. Self-annihilation, impossibility, and open-endedness seemed absurd; and they were best revealed in characters that seemed manifestly absurd, but who, on closer examination, disclosed the profoundest truths. Truths were not eternal and they were multiple, all defining the modern condition. The holy fool possessed the freedom to be both absurd and true in the modern.

⁵⁹ This may now be viewed at: <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/hans-holbein-the-younger/the-body-of-the-dead-christ-in-the-tomb-1521>

⁶⁰ See Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky. His Life and Work*, translated by Michael A. Minihan (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 363-365.

⁶¹ Tat'iana Kasatkina, "After Seeing the Original. Hans Holbein the Younger's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* in the Structure of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*," *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3, Summer 2011, pp. 73-97.

⁶² Suzanne Fusso, "The Sexuality of the Male Virgin: Arkady in *A Raw Youth* and Alyosha Karamazov," in Robert Louis Jackson, ed., *A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2004), pp. 142-154, here p. 148; PSS vol 14, p. 328; *The Brothers Karamazov* p. 307

⁶³ John 12:24.

The central contradiction lies in human beings working against their nature. Dostoevsky jotted down in his notebook in 1864: “Man strives on earth for an ideal which is *contrary* to his nature”, and when he does not strive he suffers, which suffering is called sin.⁶⁴ All that is good in this world, be it health, happiness, or harmony, all of it is due to transcending the natural, not to being natural. As Ivan pointed out, there was no law of nature compelling us to love humanity and work for its good; yet Ivan firmly repudiated harmony acquired at the expense of innocent suffering; and he illustrated his argument with the gory tale of the eight-year old boy being ripped apart by the dogs of a sadistic general and the child’s mother embracing the general.

“I do not, finally, want the mother to embrace the tormentor who let his dogs tear her son to pieces! I don’t want harmony, for love of mankind I don’t want it. I want to remain with unrequited suffering. I’d rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, even if I am wrong. Besides, they have put too high a price on harmony; we can’t afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket.”⁶⁵

Every time people worked for justice and morality, for happiness and salvation, they were acting against their own nature; hence our entire moral edifice is unnatural. Ivan was prepared to endure suffering rather than purchase his wellbeing at the expense of the suffering of others. In this he imitated Christ, the very one he accused of causing so much misery. By this he acknowledged the need for redemptive sacrifice; and, far from repudiating humanity and Christ, he was recovering his faith in the one and the other.⁶⁶ So powerful was Ivan’s argument against a moral law, yet so compelling the moral passion of his Rebellion, that Alyosha was astonished to find him adoring Christ rather than worshipping the Devil. “But ... that’s absurd!” he cried, blushing. “Your poem praises Jesus, it doesn’t revile him ... as you meant it to.”⁶⁷ Through the extremity of negation Ivan, like so many of Dostoevsky’s characters, arrived at a means of overcoming negativity. Or, he seemed to do so, for Dostoevsky famously did not conclude the dialectical process. As Alyosha regarded Ivan walking away, he noticed, or imagined he noticed, that Ivan’s left shoulder was slightly higher than the right one, a leftward asymmetry that was the mark of Satan in folk belief.⁶⁸ And finally Ivan, unable to resolve contradiction, disintegrated mentally. Was Ivan of the party of the Devil, as Blake said of Milton, or of God, or neither? We don’t quite know: Dostoevsky left the question open.

Working against the Self

Ivan’s brother Dmitry seemed to prove the Grand Inquisitor right that human nature was weak and needed the “ancient law” to direct it; but, he proved the Grand Inquisitor wrong by striving for an ideal higher than his own nature and thereby redeeming himself.⁶⁹ But the answer to the Grand Inquisitor was provided by the life history of a holy fool, not by rational argument that closed in on itself as the Grand

⁶⁴ Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 179.

⁶⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 207-208.

⁶⁶ Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky*, chapter 14, esp. p. 334; Frank, *Dostoevsky, 1871-1881*, p. 608.

⁶⁷ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 221.

⁶⁸ Frank, *Dostoevsky, 1871-1881*, p. 618.

⁶⁹ Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky*, chapter 15.

Inquisitor's did so overpoweringly. Dmitry was torn in every direction and unable to assert mental control; but he was committed to his faith in God. He was sorely tempted to murder his father but refrained and thanked God for “ ‘watching over me then’ ”;⁷⁰ he desperately wanted to kill himself, but then “decided to live for love, for “ ‘Isn't one hour, one minute of her love worth the rest of my life, even in the torments of disgrace?’ ”;⁷¹ and he wanted to reject God but refused to do so. He was tempestuous and given to drunken revelry; physically strong, generous, and trusting; and loving, sensitive, and naïve. These features belonged to the stereotype of the peasant and the people, and he was a man of the people. But he yearned for something that was above these earthy qualities, for true love, a life of commitment, and creative work; above all, he wanted to be true to God. “He thirsted for this resurrection and renewal”; and he was desperate to get out of this “vile bog.”⁷² When Kuzma the merchant suggested that he ask Lyagavy, the peasant, for a loan, Dmitry was overjoyed; but the expression of his gratitude took the unusual form of exclaiming: “ ‘You are my resurrection.’ ”⁷³ He whispered to his coachman, Andrei, “ ‘if you send me to hell, even there I will love you, and from there I will cry that I love you unto ages of ages...’ ”⁷⁴ He was pulled violently in one direction, but he drove with unbridled passion in the other. He lived that contradiction all his life,⁷⁵ and he suffered the agony of being unjustly convicted for the murder of his father.⁷⁶

Dmitry conducts a Sisyphean struggle against his nature, even after falling victim to it and being wrongfully convicted for the murder of the father. When he was arrested he stoutly denied that he had committed the crime and spoke with the assurance of one whose innocence was so evident that he could afford to make incriminating statements. He repeatedly admitted to his desire and his capacity to kill his hated father, but he also denied having done so despite the overwhelming circumstantial evidence against him. He could freely exclaim, “ ‘But who killed my father, who killed him? Who could have killed him if not me? It's a wonder; an absurdity, an impossibility...!’ ” He had tried all his life to lead a moral life and failed. “ ‘This is precisely what has tormented me all my life, that I thirsted for nobility, that I was, so to speak, a sufferer for nobility, seeking it with a lantern, Diogenes' lantern, and meanwhile all my life I've been doing only dirty things, as we all do, gentlemen ... I mean, me alone, gentlemen, not all but me alone, I made a mistake, me alone, alone . . .!’ ” But he loathed his father for “trampling on all that is holy” and at the same time acknowledged that he had no right to judge since his own life had been far from exemplary.⁷⁷ He may have wanted to murder his father, but he knew it was an evil he did not want to commit, and he was thankful that a divine miracle or his “guardian angel” had saved him from this sin: “ ‘Whether it was someone's tears, or God heard my mother's prayers, or a bright spirit kissed me at that moment, I don't know—but the devil was overcome.’ ”⁷⁸ As he was led away, he made a final moving statement to his captors that all his life he had striven hard and

⁷⁰ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 334.

⁷¹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 371.

⁷² *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 310.

⁷³ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 316.

⁷⁴ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 350.

⁷⁵ Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 280.

⁷⁶ *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book VII.

⁷⁷ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 393.

⁷⁸ *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 404, 400.

now he was grateful for this opportunity for reform and resurrection: “ ‘Every day of my life I’ve been beating my breast and promising to reform, and every day I’ve done the same vile things. I understand now that for men such as I a blow is needed, a blow of fate, to catch them as with a noose and bind them by an external force. Never, never would I have risen by myself! But the thunder has struck. I accept the torment of accusation and of my disgrace before all, I want to suffer and be purified by suffering! And perhaps I will be purified, eh, gentlemen?’ ”⁷⁹ At his trial he again declared, “ ‘I intended to become an honest man ever after, precisely at the moment when fate cut me down!’ ”⁸⁰ Alyosha understood him well, that he hated his father,⁸¹ “ ‘But I was always convinced that at the fatal moment some higher power would always save him, as it did indeed save him, because it was *not he* who killed my father.’ ” Alyosha also saw clearly that Dmitry could not do what he wanted to do, neither good nor evil, because “ ‘in the weakness of his character [...] he would not do it ... he knew beforehand that he could not, that he was not strong enough to do it!’ ”⁸² Dmitry admitted to his weakness after all the arguments were heard and the jury was to retire, “I erred but I loved the good. Every moment I longed for reform, but I lived like a beast.”⁸³ After Dmitry’s conviction, Alyosha urged him to escape on the ground that he was morally too feeble to bear the cross of innocent suffering like Christ, and were he to try he might even degenerate into bitterness and moral indifference; but, were he to escape, he would feel compelled to reform as a duty to himself:

“ ‘But you’re innocent, and such a cross is too much for you. You wanted to regenerate another man in yourself through suffering; I say just remember that other man always, all your life, and wherever you escape to—and that is enough for you. That you did not accept that great cross will only serve to make you feel a still greater duty in yourself, and through this constant feeling from now on, all your life, you will do more for your regeneration, perhaps, than if you went there.’ ”⁸⁴

Alyosha had endorsed the first part of the Grand Inquisitor’s argument on human inadequacy and the need for submission; but he turned it round by having that submission take the form of a permanent striving for the Ideal. Dmitry embodied contradiction, but he was not morally inert or indifferent; he wanted to but could not remake himself; he needed a superior power to save him; and that was the ideal which was unattainable but was worth seeking, as Alyosha recommended.

Zosima was, by his own account, a holy fool. He was subjected to much derision for the manner of his spiritual conversion as a youth. He was an army officer who was attracted to the fiancée of another officer, challenged the latter to a duel, survived the first shot, and then sought forgiveness on the field without himself firing a shot. On the night before, he had struck his orderly viciously, and in the morning realized his error and sought forgiveness. After the duel, he resigned his commission, and was forgiven by both his fellow officer and his fiancée. But his actions aroused such curiosity that he spent many days explaining himself to all and sundry, accounting for his change of heart, and his final decision to enter a monastery. He was

⁷⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 432.

⁸⁰ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 561.

⁸¹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 574.

⁸² *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 576.

⁸³ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 638.

⁸⁴ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 648; Frank, *Dostoevsky, 1871-1881*, p. 700.

laughed at always, which he welcomed as self-abasement and self-effacement; he would declare that he assumed the guilt of all, which provoked more laughter; and with mocking condescension they would say that they could not help but love a person like him. But he would remind them that what they took to be the truth was a lie, and he would not live that life. Thus he became a “sort of holy fool.”

In his homilies he inveighed against atomization and egoism in society, and demanded that, without waiting for the Second Coming, “we must keep hold of the banner, and every once in a while, if only individually, a man must suddenly set an example, and draw the soul from its isolation for an act of brotherly communion, though it be with the rank of holy fool.” Similarly, he advised people to treat their servants as equals, seat them on their sofas and have tea with them, which again induced much merriment, as befitted holy foolishness;⁸⁵ Prince Myshkin had likewise treated the servant as an equal, which both charmed and disoriented the latter. He preached love, uninhibited, universal, and forgiving; the refusal to judge others since every one was guilty of crime; responsibility for all; the repudiation of any type of revenge; and that hell meant “The suffering of being no longer able to love.” In these ways he imitated the life of Christ; and, as he lived his saintly life in this image, he suffered much mockery, which he welcomed and endured as a holy fool. Zosima’s corpse putrefied and emitted a natural stench which saintly bodies are customarily exempted from: but it was his final and posthumous act of holy foolishness.⁸⁶

People struggled against their own natures and the reality around them in pursuit of an ideal which they knew to be unattainable. Shortly before he wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky noted how Don Quixote must preserve his illusion about the perfection of Dulcinea, and then asked his readers whether they did not nurture illusions, find a way of adhering to them, and even invent lies to preserve that original lie.⁸⁷ In exploring this idea in another form, Dostoevsky has the Grand Inquisitor assert that human beings are so weak that they must submit to somebody; Dostoevsky agrees, but reformulates it to specify that somebody, that higher power, as Christ.⁸⁸ Christ did not have to be the truth; but as an ideal, he was incomparable, and all human beings must strive toward Him even if He be beyond human reach.

His most famous holy fool in Christ was Prince Myshkin of *The Idiot*. He was to be the “positively beautiful individual”, but one that was to be impossible since only Christ could attain such perfection. The problem for Dostoevsky was doubly difficult. In the first place, it was impossible for a man to become the ideal, and hence it must be a failure in some way; on the other hand, such a mythicization of Christ came up against faith. Thus Vyacheslav Ivanov could not reconcile himself to this variant of Christ, both as fiction and as failure;⁸⁹ and Konstantin Mochulsky flatly denied its possibility in such terms:

“The depiction of a ‘positively beautiful individual’ is a prodigious task. Art can approach it, but not solve it, for the beautiful individual is a saint. Sanctity is not a literary theme. In order to create the image of a saint, one has to be a saint oneself. Sanctity is a miracle; the writer cannot be a miracle-worker. Christ only is holy, but a novel about Christ is impossible.”⁹⁰

⁸⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 255, 258, 270.

⁸⁶ Murav, *Holy Foolishness*, p. 159.

⁸⁷ Frank, *Dostoevsky, 1871-1881*, pp. 279-281.

⁸⁸ Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky*, p. 344.

⁸⁹ Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 264.

⁹⁰ Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky*, p. 346.

Wholly innocent of sin and naturally prepared to escape his ego and love his neighbour, Myshkin abruptly enters this world of corruption, pride, self-will, avarice, and depravity. Everyone taunts him for his naïveté, simplicity, helplessness and maladroitness. He does not assert himself; but they are all disoriented, for their polluted world cannot co-exist with his. His very humility becomes a fearsome power on its own, as Zosima was to advise Alyosha: “A loving humility is a terrible power, the most powerful of all, nothing compares with it.”⁹¹ He sees beauty and poetry in everything, just as Don Quixote imagined his Dulcinea in the most unlikely of persons; he is a prelapsarian innocent like those who had peopled the dream of the Ridiculous Man; and, as he admitted, he did not even know women. The problem was how such a person could exist in this world.

The tension between his ego and the effort to dissolve it reaches its impossible moment in his relationship with the two women who are attracted to him, Nastasya Filippovna and Aglaya. Myshkin responds to Nastasya with pity and universal selfless love, as befits a Christ, but he is attracted to Aglaya as a most unChristlike man. In his innocence or holy foolishness he cannot discern the incompatibility between the two roles and the two types of relation. He drives Nastasya in her despair into the hands of Rogozhin who murders her, and he is hopelessly incapable of functioning as the heroic medieval knight as the exalted Aglaya expects of him. In the event he descends into darkness and idiocy, the destiny of the absolutely beautiful person who was a man but strove to be a Christ.

His other Christ and Holy Fool was Alyosha, the third of the Karamazov brothers, the hero of that final masterpiece which was famously unfinished even after nine hundred pages of so many inspired scenes. He was introduced at the beginning of the novel as “very strange”⁹² even from the cradle, one who never gave offence or took offence, utterly trusting, and ridiculed and mocked especially by his adolescent schoolfellows for his modesty and innocence. He is a continuation of Myshkin, but this time as a successful Christ; rather, since success did not belong in the lexicon, he was not a failed Christ like Myshkin and was on the right path. Unlike Myshkin, he was a nineteen year old lad in perfect health, neither a simpleton nor naïve, ruddy-cheeked and passionate like a typical Karamazov, but unlike them blushing and virginal, and to top it all, a monk. His evil genius Rakitin saw deeply if malevolently into him:

“ ‘Ah, you virgin! You, Alyoshka, are the quiet type, you’re a saint, I admit; you’re the quiet type, but the devil knows what hasn’t gone through your head, the devil knows what you don’t know already! A virgin, and you’ve already dug so deep—I’ve been observing you for a long time. You are a Karamazov yourself, a full-fledged Karamazov—so race and selection do mean something. You’re a sensualist after your father, and after your mother—a holy fool.’ ”⁹³

Like his elder brother Dmitry, he worked against the part of his natural self that he had inherited from his father, the sensualist Fyodor Pavlovich; but he emptied himself to experience “world harmony”, which could be read as fulfillment of the other half of his natural self derived from his saintly and suffering mother.

Rakitin manoeuvred Alyosha into the clutches of Grushenka and he was aroused to passion by the temptress; but he pities her and she appreciates his selfless

⁹¹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 271.

⁹² *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 13.

⁹³ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 66.

love; they understand each other and bear each other's guilt. Following Zosima's instructions, the youthful monk goes out into the world rather than seclude himself in his cell; the virgin matures through union with the earth and is "not ashamed of the ecstasy", which culminates in wanting to forgive everyone for everything and in the feeling of universal brotherhood. Alyosha has been taken through a tour of hell by Ivan; the reader has been taken through hell throughout the novel; and, as with Dante, the ascent into the light follows this experience of Hades.⁹⁴ His perfect Christlike moment comes at the very end when he gathers the twelve children around him, as Christ did his apostles, and, at the stone under which their unhappy friend Ilyusha had wished to be buried, they commit themselves to universal love. This group of boys has also undergone a transfiguration like Alyosha himself instead of going the way of their posterity in *Lord of the Flies*. The end of *The Brothers Karamazov* opened on to a new world in which Alyosha would carry out his mission and the children would grow; it was full of promise and potential; nothing had come to an end.

Holy fools were in imitation of Christ; but Dostoevsky saw the negative side of it, with a hint of the possibility of positive iconoclasm. In his museum of depravity and absurdity, old Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, the father of the four brothers, is by far the most repellent. He was degenerate in the extreme, a glutton, a drunkard, indebted to all and sundry, a sensualist who degraded women, especially Alyosha's mother, a buffoon who made jokes in bad taste about everything and everyone. As the narrator described him:

"I have already mentioned that he had grown very bloated. His physiognomy by that time presented something that testified acutely to the characteristics and essence of his whole life. Besides the long, fleshy bags under his eternally insolent, suspicious, and leering little eyes, besides the multitude of deep wrinkles on his fat little face, a big Adam's apple, fleshy and oblong like a purse, hung below his sharp chin, giving him a sort of repulsively sensual appearance. Add to that a long, carnivorous mouth with plump lips, behind which could be seen the little stumps of black, almost decayed teeth. He sprayed saliva whenever he spoke. However, he himself liked to make jokes about his own face, although he was apparently pleased with it. He pointed especially to his nose, which was not very big but was very thin and noticeably hooked. 'A real Roman one,' he used to say. 'Along with my Adam's apple, it gives me the real physiognomy of an ancient Roman patrician of the decadent period.' He seemed to be proud of it."⁹⁵

To complete the picture of degeneracy, Dostoevsky inserted the hooked Roman nose, that thing of beauty to some and nobility to others, but to the pious Christian imagination, the incarnation of evil and decadence along with all things Roman, which paired so well with the hideous Adam's apple, that other visible evidence of sin.

However, Fyodor Pavlovich also described himself as a holy fool, using the specific term *iurodivyi*, but combined it with "there's maybe an unclean spirit living in me."⁹⁶ His appearance and behavior were faithful to the fool of Russian folklore; but his uncouth jests supposedly revealed inconvenient truths about the world, about monks and women, about traders and business, and much else. His excesses were meant to be iconoclastic, he mocked God and his creation, and with it himself most of

⁹⁴ Murav, *Holy Foolishness*, pp. 141-144.

⁹⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 18.

⁹⁶ PSS, vol. 14, p. 39; *The Brothers Karamazov*, part 1, book 2, chapter 2, p. 33.

all. Such self-abasement coupled with truth-telling was a mark of the holy fool and of the clown. The boundaries are blurred, as usual with Dostoevsky, but it suggests that the holy fool could be demonic in his holiness, and that subversion may subvert subversion.

Faithful to his tragic vision, Dostoevsky presented the perverse aspect of his own theories. In the company of Marx and Nietzsche, he saw that modern human capacity for self-creativity could be unlimited, and therefore also that the nature of such self-generation could not be foreseen. Transformation and pursuit of the unattainable ideal could be for good or for ill; and criminal action by both Raskolnikov and Smerdyakov turned them into superior beings in peculiar ways. Rozanov noted this with his usual acuity.⁹⁷ Raskolnikov was suffused with a new potency the moment he murdered the old woman:

“He took the axe all the way out, swung it with both hands, scarcely aware of himself, and almost without effort, almost mechanically, brought the butt-end down on her head. His own strength seemed to have no part in it. But the moment he brought the axe down, strength was born in him.”⁹⁸

Smerdyakov, the cowardly, crawling fourth of the Karamazov brothers, possibly the most complete negative portrait of a male homosexual from among Dostoevsky's characters,⁹⁹ emitted the odour of guilt; he was obsessed with cleanliness and freshness; but not all the perfumes could cleanse him. Even he grew in confidence after he battered his father to death; and an exasperated Ivan found himself admiring this despicable lackey of a half-brother of his as he listened to the details of the murder, and especially how he had extracted the money from the envelope but discarded the torn envelope on the floor to incriminate Dmitry:

“ ‘Well ... well, then the devil himself helped you!’ Ivan Fyodorovich exclaimed again. ‘No, you're not stupid, you're much more intelligent than I thought ...’ ”¹⁰⁰

Crime, like holy foolishness, engendered great strength. As Rozanov pursued the insight, such transgression carries the agent into another world, and it reveals to us what we do not suspect in ourselves in our everyday lives.

Openendedness and Dialogue

Dostoevsky's creative process culminates in the fertile tension of unfinalizability and with it of dialogue, which have been investigated so productively by Bakhtin. Unfinalizability or openendedness suggests that every process and person is open to further change, that nothing is final, and that any theory of action, which tries to provide a complete account of it, is inherently flawed. The process of change is neither arbitrary nor inevitable, for it is based on individual choice, and such choices are neither frivolous even if they appear to be so, nor are they necessary even if prescribed by theory. Most of all, every situation or person may be transformed in any number of directions, and in every one of them inheres any number of possible futures. The last word has not been spoken nor will it ever be spoken; everything is in the future and everything will always be in the future. Without such uncertainty, there would be much discovery of that which is known to have existed or had always

⁹⁷ Rozanov, pp. 72-76.

⁹⁸ *Crime and Punishment*, Part 1, chapter 7.

⁹⁹ Suzanne Fusso, “The Sexuality of the Male Virgin,” p. 149.

¹⁰⁰ During his third meeting with Smerdyakov, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 535.

existed, but there would be no creation of the new. As a corollary, Dostoevsky, as also Bakhtin, denied the validity of laws which explained historical events and permitted advance knowledge. If every historical event was both unique and irreversible, such laws could not exist, and it would be illegitimate to attempt to either predict or to retrodict. If creativity does not permit us to obey laws, it does not allow us either to disobey them randomly. Such openness is disconcerting, as the Grand Inquisitor explained at some length to Christ; and Dostoevsky was well aware that a large part of humanity prefers the closed world offered by the Grand Inquisitor than the uncertainty of everything and everyone being unfinalizable in the universe of holy fools.

The unfinalizable is accompanied by the dialogue, Bakhtin's well-received explication of Dostoevskian art. Dialogue is not a mere exchange of views or an argument. It is also not the dialectic, through which the contradiction is absorbed and a single consciousness is constituted, a process that Bakhtin called typically monologic. Dialogue implied mutuality as anticipated by Vyacheslav Ivanov, where I recognize the other as a subject, whose existence I experience as my own. In the dialogic process, every utterance or action opens or discloses something new in either a speaker or the situation, and another speaker or actor discovers newer potential within himself or herself. The process never ends, it is always enriching, and to live is to communicate.

Given his penetration and fearlessness, Dostoevsky saw the danger of dialogue itself becoming stagnant. Bakhtin again analysed in illuminating detail the process of the "vicious circle of dialogue" in which a speaker speaks in anticipation of the other's response, struggles to free himself from such bondage by ignoring it altogether, fears that the attempt at indifference might be seen for what it was, and eventually can neither free himself nor admit the power of the other over him. The effort stagnates in a frustrating "*perpetuum mobile*" of internal dialogue where replies bounce off each other to infinity, as in reflecting mirrors.¹⁰¹

This vicious circle of dialogue induces the holy foolish process of self-abasement and self-mockery.¹⁰² It leads to both dependence on and rejection of the other's consciousness, which simultaneously wants the other to reject and accept oneself. It cultivates a deliberately debased style and appearance and affects cynicism and spite so that the speaker may be repudiated by the other's consciousness. By trying to free himself of the other's consciousness, by destroying himself in the other's eyes, the speaker hopes to break into his own self and into "spiritual sobriety." This "pointedly cynical, calculatedly cynical, yet also anguished" discourse was a form of holy foolishness, "a sort of aestheticism—but, as it were, in reverse", and was especially developed in the Underground Man.

But holy foolishness provided an escape from the static mobility of the vicious circle through what Bakhtin called the "loophole." "A loophole is the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's own words." As the dialogue proceeds, the person who condemns himself wants the other to reject the condemnation, which implies that the final word can never be said, for the next response is awaited and expected. The Underground Man pursued the most relentless explorations into this range of possibility.

¹⁰¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, introduction by Wayne C. Booth (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 229-231.

¹⁰² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 231-237.

“ ‘I calmly continue about people with strong nerves, who do not understand a certain refinement of pleasure. In the face of some mishaps, for example, these gentlemen may bellow at the top of their lungs like bulls, and let’s suppose this brings them the greatest honor, but still, as I’ve already said, they instantly resign themselves before impossibility. Impossibility – meaning a stone wall? What stone wall? Well, of course, the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science, mathematics.’ ”

But he would not accept that:

“ ‘there’s nothing to be done, because two times two is – mathematics. Try objecting to that. ‘For pity’s sake,’ they’ll shout at you, ‘you can’t rebel: it’s two times two is four! Nature doesn’t ask your permission; it doesn’t care about your wishes, or whether you like its laws or not. You’re obliged to accept it as it is, and consequently all its results as well. And so a wall is indeed a wall . . . etc., etc.’ My God, but what do I care about the laws of nature and arithmetic if for some reason these laws and two times two is four are not to my liking?’ ”¹⁰³

Bakhtin noted this especially about Ippolit’s confession and Nastasya Filippovna’s condition. She was a fallen woman who declared herself, but hated those who accepted her guilt, and despised those who, like Myshkin, vindicated her conduct. As a result, she could not define herself as either fallen or not fallen and existed in a state of ambiguity. But such ambiguity provided the possibility of exit from her condition: nothing about her could be finalized, and she could renew herself by pursuing an ideal, the final Dostoevskian solution to the dilemmas of human existence. This dialogical process with its vital component of holy foolishness must be distinguished from the well-worn one of repentance, confession, and expiation, which depended wholly on recognition by the other.

Truth itself could not be finalized. Words are inadequate to express the truth, for they limit its infinitude and coarsen its subtlety. Spoken words complete a thought and limit or otherwise constrain its further development. Even Tolstoy admitted to the strain. As he agonized for two years over the drafting of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, he noted: “A refined, perfected story will not make my conclusions more convincing. One has to be a holy fool in writing.”¹⁰⁴ And Merezhkovskii heartily concurred, that the iconoclastic Tolstoy sought to save the world, “peasant style, holy fool style.”¹⁰⁵ Turgenev has been famously counterposed to Dostoevsky for his minimalism to the other’s maximalism, harmony to turbulence, the centripetal to the centrifugal, as the “poet-echo” to the “poet-herald”; yet Turgenev confessed to a tragic vision, was austere with words, his novel *Rudin* was focused on their inadequacy, and he accused Tolstoy of seeking “completeness and clarity in everything.”¹⁰⁶ They were all grappling with similar problems of the falsity of appearance, of the inadequacy of language, and of contradiction. Dostoevsky wrote to Vsevolod Soloviev in July 1876: “I have never yet allowed myself in my writings to follow *some* of my convictions to the end, to say the *very last* word. . . . On the whole man somehow in no way likes the last word of a ‘spoken’ thought, [and] says that ‘the thought spoken is a lie.’ ”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Everyman’s Library, 1993), part 1 chapter 3.

¹⁰⁴ Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 225.

¹⁰⁵ Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 163.

¹⁰⁶ Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, chapter 9, esp. p. 175.

¹⁰⁷ Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 302.

In *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (April 1977), the man was walking alone on a dismal wintry night, all prepared to shoot himself because nothing mattered to him. Suddenly a wailing eight-year old girl tugged at his sleeve uttering incoherent words. He surmised that her mother was dying and that she was seeking help. He shook her off and returned to his wretched attic: but he could not shoot himself as he kept thinking of the girl, all the while aware of the absurdity that he should be so bothered when he was on the verge of suicide. He dozed off and was thus saved by the little girl in effect. He travelled to the Garden of Eden in his dream, injected the virus of civilization and corruption among the people there, failed in his attempts to remind them of their lost innocence, and awakened to the harsh reality of this world. He tried to describe what he had seen in his dream but, “after my dream, I lost words.”¹⁰⁸ The little girl could not express herself, but had saved him; the truth that he had glimpsed could not be expressed in words; and he was considered a “holy fool” and threatened with the lunatic asylum.

The supreme moment of unfinalizability was the exchange between the Grand Inquisitor and the Silent Christ. The Inquisitor addressed Christ at great length but received no reply in words. But Christ was answering him all the while, with his eyes:

“And why are you looking at me so silently and understandingly with your meek eyes? Be angry! I do not want your love, for I do not love you. And what can I hide from you? Do I not know with whom I am speaking? What I have to tell you is all known to you already, I can read it in your eyes.”¹⁰⁹

The Inquisitor read Christ as he would an icon; and an icon or painting was amenable to further development in many directions, unconstrained by the meaning of a word. He had already accused Christ of wanting to replace the Old Testament with the New, which would have his image as a guide, and he had declared that the totality of human history could be captured in the three images of material security, moral quiescence, and worldly power. Zosima loved Alyosha’s face for its stimulus to recall and prophecy, he wanted to be guided by Christ’s image, and even Raskolnikov had to see Sonia Marmeladova’s face before he could confess.¹¹⁰ Dostoevsky repeatedly resorts to the power of the icon, the image, and the face, not only to carry meanings far in excess of words, but also to keep an infinite number of possibilities open through the enigma that was the image.

None of the holy fools debated directly with the rational and scientific mind and its arguments that culminated in Ivan’s Rebellion and the Grand Inquisitor’s harangue, for “To attempt a point-by-point refutation of the Inquisitor would of course be to accept the tempter’s turf; it would be to succumb to another form of disordered desire—the desire to win the intellectual battle of the gods.”¹¹¹ The openness of silence and the kiss that followed disoriented the Inquisitor. Christ dismissed the Inquisitor’s argumentation more than his argument, the constriction he had imposed on the potential of modern civilization, and the binary choice between two types of rationality; but the latter was neither convinced nor defeated, and he departed, presumably to continue his good work of sustaining miracle, mystery, and

¹⁰⁸ PSS, vol. 25, p. 118.

¹⁰⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 218.

¹¹⁰ Murav, *Holy Foolishness*, pp. 148-150.

¹¹¹ P. Travis Kroeker, Bruce K. Ward, *Remembering the End. Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (Boulder: Colorado, Westview, 2001), p. 110.

authority against the rational Tower of Babel.¹¹² The Inquisitor argued against modern rationality, which he called the Tower of Babel, on behalf of another rationality (or irrationality), that of miracle, mystery, and authority, paradoxical as it might seem. The Inquisitor was addressing himself, not Christ, and all the rationality and intelligence of the Inquisitor could not overwhelm Christ, his prisoner. Christ and his holy fools grappled with modern anxieties through submission to an Ideal of the community of all human beings which would dissolve the doomed isolation of individual self-assertion and allow for ceaseless creativity. Christ would appear to have captured the expansiveness of the modern better than his adversary had done. The Inquisitor and Christ disclosed the existence of multiple worlds which were incommensurable but which would coexist. While the Inquisitor's Tower of Babel and his miracle, mystery, and authority could engage in learned disputation, neither could contend with Christ. Yet Christ's world was not self-evidently superior in spite of its openness; it could be deliberately spurned on utterly rational grounds. It was open to all to choose between these options in the knowledge that they could amend their choice and that any choice must entail an inner struggle without terminus.

¹¹² Many critics have famously taken the side of the Inquisitor against Christ, among them Shestov, Rozanov, and D. H. Lawrence, see Ward, *Dostoyevsky's Critique of the West*, p. 136, for a summary.

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