

How Not to Read:

A Psychiatrist Diagnoses Fyodor Karamazov

Abstract

What happens when a reader uses a checklist of symptoms to diagnose a fictional character with a mental disorder? This essay examines such an attempt by the author of the original checklist of the symptoms of psychopathy, Hervey Cleckley. Brilliantly descriptive, Cleckley's *Mask of Sanity* (first published in 1941) profiles a number of patients whose lives seem to be a never-ending series of pranks and swindles, all committed for no earthly reason. Among the few fictional figures identified by Cleckley as psychopaths in their own right is the patriarch of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Karamazov. However, Cleckley is a poor reader, ignoring textual evidence in conflict with his understanding of this figure—in particular, an atrocity committed by Karamazov that lies well outside the range of the psychopaths of *The Mask of Sanity*. In working through Cleckley's errors we come to see Karamazov as a ruthless opportunist whose crime springs from an assurance of impunity and a confluence of circumstances. It does not spring from a mental disturbance, which is perhaps why Cleckley ignores it. Cleckley also ignores questions of time and place. By transforming Karamazov into a specimen of the same disorder exhibited by a set of practical jokers and minor criminals in a different social world, he illustrates only too well the risks of reading with an interpretive key that takes precedence over the text.

Diagnosis and Anachronism

As if the current taxonomy of mental disorders were valid for all time, critics have diagnosed fictional characters of the past with disorders that capture the imagination of the present. An extreme example of such anachronism is the diagnosis of Odysseus—arguably the archetypal character of Western literature¹—with post-traumatic stress disorder,² a malady coined only in the 1970's and known in the early stages as “post-Vietnam syndrome.”³ Such a wildly ahistorical reading of an ancient work is bound to run into textual trouble. Far from

being wounded mentally by the experience of war, the hero of the *Odyssey* is clear-minded and composed under all circumstances. When Circe says to him, “Hardy man, your mind is full forever of fighting / and battle work” (12.116-17), he is not suffering a flashback but trying to determine if he can sail between Scylla and Charybdis without loss of life. As always, he thinks, and thinks clearly. For that matter, the story behind the hero’s telltale scar takes us not to the fields of Troy but Mount Parnassus, the site of a hunting exploit of his childhood. But if the *Odyssey* proves refractory to a concept of trauma that suddenly became popular in the late twentieth century,⁴ this does not mean that works only one or two centuries old should be expected to conform more closely to recently crafted diagnoses.

While certain maladies, such as inordinate sadness,⁵ may well exist across cultures, at the other end of the scale are disorders voted into existence by committee or favored by diagnostic fashion—the sort of condition that has enlarged the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* from a little-regarded, spiral bound document to a tome whose table of contents alone now runs to some 27 pages. The architect of the transformation of DSM from an obscure handbook to an authoritative taxonomy, Robert Spitzer, rose to prominence in the 1970s with his handling of the crisis within the APA over the status of homosexuality: a crisis that led to the removal of that diagnosis from DSM-III (1980). For those APA members who were not quite ready to let go of homosexuality he invented the interim malady “Sexual Orientation Disturbance,” in which the disorder lies not in homosexuality per se but in maladaptation to it. Under the more clinical name of “Ego-dystonic Homosexuality,” this disorder enjoyed a flicker of existence from 1980 to 1987, when it was removed in turn from DSM-III-R. Designed to meet political conditions in the APA at a

certain historical juncture, the diagnosis served its purpose and vanished, never to be revived or lamented. To diagnose a character from, say, a nineteenth-century novel with “ego-dystonic homosexuality,” as if it were an objective disorder, would be folly.

But if some disorders seem too much like offspring of the present to extend back into the past, others may extend into the past in variant guises instead of presenting a single timeless profile. Consider psychopathy. Though the term now connotes the utmost ruthlessness, in the pioneering work on the topic—Hervey Cleckley’s *Mask of Sanity*, first published almost a century ago—psychopathy manifests itself in pointless stunts, shameless exhibitions, offenses outside the purview of the law, and crimes unlikely to send the perpetrator to the state prison. Even while appearing to lack self-restraint, Cleckley’s offenders go only so far, often engaging in purely symbolic acts. In DSM-III and its successors, psychopathy becomes Antisocial Personality Disorder, with no trace remaining of the florid antics that are everywhere to be found in Cleckley’s case studies.

The Mask of Sanity

Probably few fields of investigation owe more to a single seminal work than the study of psychopathy owes to Cleckley’s *The Mask of Sanity*, originally published in 1941. The title refers to the psychopath’s ability to mimic normal responses even as he or she pursues an extravagantly abnormal life of pranks and thefts, all for no apparent reason. Confounding the very concept of sanity as they did, such persons—of whom Cleckley saw hundreds as a professor of psychiatry at the University of Georgia—posed an insoluble riddle not only for judges and juries but psychiatry itself. It was this impasse that called forth *The Mask of Sanity*,

a richly descriptive work containing studies of nine (soon to be 13, then 15) patients so incorrigibly deviant and so vividly absurd that they seem to have risen from a highly imaginative work of fiction. One of Cleckley's patients marries diverse taxi drivers, bar patrons and vagrants. Another defecates inside a piano. A certain physicist, warned that he is going to the dogs, makes for an animal hospital, climbs into a kennel, and lies there singing and cursing, his din rising above the howls of the actual dogs.

Without providing any particulars to back up his judgment, Cleckley assures the reader that it is provocateurs and expressionists like this, not hardened criminals, who represent not only the overwhelming majority of psychopaths in the United States but the essence of the syndrome itself. While he grants that some psychopaths commit crimes of violence, they are, so he claims, exceptions to the type.⁶ None of his profiled patients fall into that category. Though they certainly cause trouble, many of their characteristic acts—such as offending decency, lying, stealing from relatives—seem beyond the law's reach, and neither the courts nor the officers of psychiatric hospitals know quite what to do with them, as if they had perfectly targeted some ambiguity or loophole in prevailing legal and medical standards. They are a species flourishing as a result of excellent camouflage and an ability to exploit opportunities, with Cleckley documenting their remarkable adaptations like a naturalist. All at once a source of grief and shame to family, a scandal to neighbors, a joker in the deck of psychiatric classification, and an object of some amusement to Cleckley, they themselves are generally the primary loser by their deeds, and they are regarded by the authorities more as nuisances than threats to the community.

From the reader's perspective, the center of *The Mask of Sanity* is its gallery of case studies. Consider "Max."

Max's story so abounds with "adventures" in some lesser sense of the word that the involved, 20-page chronicle given by Cleckley seems to be much abbreviated. He has been arrested "dozens of times" (p. 53) not counting the many arrests that exposed him to penalties he escaped by getting himself admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Max uses the hospital to dodge jail (or to get out when in), then manages to be discharged from the hospital because he exhibits no known mental disorder, then goes on a petty crime spree only to be arrested again, riding the same carousel round and round, year after year. Throughout all this his manner is not that of someone worn down by repetition or oppressed by the trials he brings on himself; on the contrary, he rides in circles with élan and self-fanfare, celebrating his abilities and accomplishments.

Between hospital admissions Max leads a life so disorderly that he brings embarrassment to the madame who happens to be his legal wife.

Though enjoying a good part of the revenue from this ever-lucrative business, Max troubled himself little to maintain the dignity of the house. In fact, he went out of his way, it seemed, to complicate matters for his wife. If not through his daily or nightly brawls or uproars in various low grogshops, dancehalls, "juke-joints," etc., then by putting slugs into slot machines or serving as fence in some petty thieving racket, he brought the police in search of him down on the House of Joy which maintained him.

(p. 53)

It is characteristic of Max that his acts of fraud lack the cover of secrecy and that no one seems to get hurt in the minor riots he is mixed up in. His misdeeds are part petty crime, part theater. Not only do they resemble the displays he stages inside the walls of psychiatric hospitals, they launch the process of getting him sent there by attracting the police. Our general impression is of someone living not life but a semblance of life to its fullest, someone who invests all he has in a perfectly pointless course of behavior.

In an episode recounted at length, Max during one of his psychiatric detentions requests a loaf of bread, “stating that he would mold from it creations of great beauty and worth” (p. 61). He proceeds to chew the bread, spit it out, and work the mass into decorative shapes, all of them hideous. The entire episode is like him. Spewing bread from his mouth is a form of expression in the most literal sense, and, as such, seems related to his practice of dramatizing his talents at all times and in all places, including places of confinement. The sickening objects he fashions, including a cross, read like actions in a war against propriety, a cause that occupies many of Cleckley’s patients.

Whether we classify the disfigurement of the cross as a crime against sanctity, a victimless crime, or no crime at all, it is in any case not an act of violence. If Max has enjoyed “immunity from penal consequences,” it is largely because he has “seldom, if ever, tried to do anyone serious physical injury” (p. 65). Restricting himself to minor crimes or crimes against propriety (in effect, offenses against everyone and no one) does not tie Max’s hands, but on the contrary seems to give him a field of play and enlist his energy and invention. Unlike more serious crimes, too, Max’s are intended to be witnessed, quite as if he were more interested in

staging than getting away with them. If he appears to find fulfillment in pursuing what looks very much like a cycle of futility—if he celebrates his history as a series of exploits and his release from psychiatric detention as a feat or escape—the fact is that he can have all this drama or dumb show only if he keeps his crimes below the level likely to cause him real trouble. On occasion he misjudges and gets sent to prison, and does not like it.

The idea of a psychopath rational enough to manage his behavior to this extent appears to clash with the portrayal of the psychopath in *The Mask of Sanity* as a nonsensical creature. However, while Cleckley's psychopaths behave erratically, they are not without method. Thus, Cleckley observes that they know how and when to mime normal behavior—know what phrases to parrot, for example, “when trying to obtain parole, discharge from the hospital, or some other end” (p. 379). If psychopaths like Max have this much artistry at their disposal, maybe they have enough to keep their infractions within the limits necessary to preserve their relative immunity from serious punishment. Max himself refrains from violence despite getting in trouble and knowing how to box, and a similarly mysterious restraint serves to make others in *The Mask of Sanity* less dangerous than their official symptoms, such as a complete and utter lack of remorse, would imply. Cleckley distinguishes emphatically, and repeatedly, between the criminal psychopath and his own allegedly more representative population of troublemakers, petty thieves, and public nuisances.

In Cleckley's judgment, the behavioral pattern shown by his patients reflects a deficiency of emotional depth—a “general poverty of affect,” as his checklist of symptoms puts it.⁷ It was his conclusion that because the psychopath knows only a shadow of human emotion, he or she does not experience failures as someone with a normal emotional endowment would

(that is, as bitter or humiliating defeats) and therefore cannot possibly be instructed by them. From this point of view, the cycle of arrest to hospital to freedom to arrest which is Max's life stands as an emblem of therapeutic futility; Max emerges from treatment exactly as he began it, learning no more than he does from the continual reverses he suffers when free. However, in view of the dangerous potential of traits very like his,⁸ it appears that the absurd, semi-comical life he pursues has the benign effect of channeling his deviance into minor scrapes and scandals. Certainly the cycle in which his life is invested looks like a vicious one, with each arrest setting off a chain of events leading to another; but we can also view it as a virtuous cycle that ties up his potential and plays it out at a tolerable cost to society. This benign effect arises not because society has wisely devised its ways to reduce the risk posed by persons like Max, but because of historical accident. Specifically, at the time Max's saga is set (evidently the 1930's), it so happens that in his part of the world the courts usually send people like him not to prison but hospital, and yet when admitted they can be held only so long because they appear normal by virtue of their mask of sanity and thus do not qualify for detention. And so they are released—free to start the cycle all over again. Max has become a master exploiter of this arrangement which, in retrospect, we can see was both peculiar and transient.⁹

Also historically contingent are the standards of propriety that Cleckley's patients offend in every manner possible, committing bigamy, befouling symbols of elegance and refinement, wandering the countryside with their trousers down, indulging in "senseless, bawdy escapades" (p. 129). Such acts take on heightened meaning at a time when bourgeois standards were the law of the land, morally speaking, and when letters of recommendation like those on Cleckley's desk were supposed to comment on the candidate's character and probity. A felt presence in

the biographies of Cleckley's patients, it is this code governing their world that makes their acts of indecency so provocative. They attack the norms held most dear by the world around them: the sanctity of marriage, the security of private property, the importance of work and the diligent pursuit of goals. They are less interested in violence than in the violation of all that others deem right and proper.

Fyodor Karamazov

In addition to depicting psychopaths like Max with stunning vividness, Cleckley discusses approximately similar figures in the world of fiction, most of whom fall short of the type, in his judgment. Of only a handful deemed to fulfill the type, one is the libertine whose murder lies at the center of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Writes Cleckley:

A literary creation who impresses me as remarkably like a psychopath in the full sense is Dostoevski's senior Karamazov, father of the wonderful and puzzling brothers who themselves offer so much of interest to the psychiatrist. The elder Karamazov is not only free from major human feelings, but he also drives actively at folly. He shows a greedy relish for the very sort of buffoonery and high-jinks that the psychopath seeks. He has no regard apparently for consequences and cannot be persuaded by reason or appealed to by sentiment. He appears superficially to be a man of strong passions but, in my opinion, this is only an appearance. He does not pursue selfish or vicious ways consistently in the aim of self-interest. He immerses himself in indignity for its own

sake. He does outrageous things, especially to his son Dimitri, yet he scarcely seems, to a psychiatrist at any rate, vindictive or cruel in the ordinary lay sense. (p. 353)

Emerging as a showman who devotes himself to folly and disgrace but does little or no actual injury to others, Karamazov has become one of the absurdists of *The Mask of Sanity*. However, the view of Karamazov as one incapable of pursuing his own interests with any method does not survive a reading of the first paragraph of the novel, where we learn that at the time of his death the man was in possession of a fortune of 100,000 rubles. If there were a cardinal symptom of psychopathy for Cleckley, it might well be the “failure to follow any life plan” (p. 392) responsible for the endless loops of his patients’ biographies, and yet Karamazov has adhered unwaveringly to his master plan for decades. Having appropriated 25,000 from his first wife, he “never neglected investing his capital, and managed his business affairs very successfully, though, no doubt, not over scrupulously.”¹⁰ (Fittingly, he is last shown importuning his middle son to conduct a business deal for him, with three thousand rubles at stake [pp. 328-30].) In holding up Karamazov as a textbook example of his chosen disorder, Cleckley has not paid much attention to the text of *The Brothers Karamazov*. That his checklist of psychopathic symptoms emphasizes absence (of shame, motivation, insight, love) and his description of Karamazov does the same (major human feelings, regard for consequences, consistency, even malice being absent) suggests that Cleckley read *The Brothers Karamazov* through the lens of his own construct. No wonder so much of the text seems to escape him, including Karamazov’s perpetration of an atrocity that beggars the word “cruel,” an act of

violence resulting in the birth of his own eventual murderer. Yet despite this enormous omission (discussed below), Cleckley's reading is probably better than many of its kind.

Like Cleckley's parade of psychopaths, Fyodor Karamazov is indecent, insincere and incorrigible. Where Max seems to enact a pantomime of human life, Karamazov is a habitual performer who can no longer distinguish between simulated and real emotion; and where Max continually abuses the fairness of those who allow him such comparative freedom, Karamazov abuses the good will of his family as well as the hospitality of the monastery in Book II of *The Brothers Karamazov*, gathering his sons (at least his legitimate sons) together under the pretense of reconciliation, only to stage an inconceivable exhibition of folly. In the spirit of the physicist who climbs into a kennel when told he is going to the dogs, Karamazov confesses, "I always feel when I meet people that I am lower than all, and that they all take me for a buffoon. So I say, 'Let me really play the buffoon. I am not afraid of your opinion'" (p. 47). And so he plays the buffoon then and there, in front of the elder, Fr. Zossima. Culminating in a ludicrous threat of legal action against his eldest son, whose inheritance he pocketed, Karamazov's antics throughout the monastery scenes brilliantly illustrate his penchant for play-acting "without any motive . . . and even to his own direct disadvantage" (p. 8), all too much like Cleckley's psychopaths. For all this apparent kinship, however, he is both less erratic and more dangerous.

The brief but shocking story of Karamazov's first marriage approximates something in *The Mask of Sanity* and yet goes quite beyond it. Initiating his practice of thieving from his own, Karamazov, upon marrying a woman of good family, quickly takes possession of her dowry, leaving her penniless. Other than as a source of cash (which he pursues over the years

with a singlemindedness unknown to Cleckley's patients), marriage appears to mean nothing to him. Indeed, he drives Adelaïda to her grave by making her existence so intolerable that she abandons him for a life of imaginary emancipation but actual poverty in Petersburg. It is upon receiving the news of her death there that he takes his outrages to a still higher level—not because he has a plan that calls for it or because some unrealized potential of his soul demands to be expressed, but simply because the opportunity arises.

Twenty-four years before the novel's present, Karamazov raped the idiot Lizaveta, who regularly wandered half-clothed through the streets and alleys of the town.¹¹ While the circumstances surrounding the crime are more than reminiscent of Cleckley's "buffoonery and high-jinks," nevertheless the crime itself transcends the follies and misdemeanors that are the typical repertoire of psychopathy, according to Cleckley. It is one thing to violate the norms held dear by the world around you and quite another to violate physically a woman cherished by a town as being "specially dear to God" (p. 115).¹² When Lizaveta dies in childbirth nine months later, she becomes the second woman Karamazov kills without murdering, as if he had taken the art of the loophole to extremes undreamed of by the psychopaths of *The Mask of Sanity*. How is it that this figure judged "remarkably like a psychopath in the full sense" commits a crime so foreign to *The Mask of Sanity*? Though the topic of psychopathy necessarily draws us into a discussion of mentality, context matters also; and regardless of his apparent lack of restraint, Karamazov would not have committed the crime but for a unique alignment of circumstances—a golden opportunity.

If stories like Max's presuppose certain historical conditions (such as hospitals that can admit but not diagnose him), the crime that sets off so many distant consequences in *The*

Brothers Karamazov comes about by a twist of circumstance: a man who scoffs at everything holy happens upon a young woman whom local custom allows to wear as little as she likes and to wander and sleep wherever she chooses because she is a child of God. That this young woman cannot communicate only means, for Karamazov, that she cannot testify against an attacker.

In short, then, while drinking one night with his companions to mourn or celebrate the news of Adelaïda's death in Petersburg, Karamazov comes across the woman Lizaveta asleep in the brambles.

Among the nettles and burdocks . . . our revellers saw Lizaveta asleep. They stopped to look at her, laughing, and began jesting with unbridled licentiousness. It occurred to one young gentleman to make the whimsical inquiry whether any one could possibly look upon such an animal as a woman, and so forth. . . . [ellipses in the original] They all pronounced with lofty repugnance that it was impossible. But Fyodor Pavlovitch, who was among them, sprang forward and declared that it was by no means impossible, and that, indeed, there was a certain piquancy about it, and so on. . . . [ellipses in the original] (p. 116)

How strange that as little as "a certain piquancy" is enough to inspire the ultimate act of violation. Suggesting as it does that Karamazov commits rape not out of lust, or lust for power, but as a theatrical stunt, the episode lends some support to Cleckley's portrayal of him as a man of spurious passions, and his portrayal of psychopathy itself as performative in nature.

Yet if Cleckley had acknowledged this episode, it would have undermined his theory that Karamazov exhibits the same disorder as his own assorted psychopaths. The rape of a kind of adult child—an act so shocking it might almost take its place in Ivan Karamazov’s litany of atrocities against children per se—not only destroys the claim that Karamazov shows no real cruelty but conflicts with the portrayal of the psychopath as a petty offender who doesn’t really care about getting caught (or anything else). In the episode in question Karamazov does not act as if he had no care about being caught—after all, he commits the crime in an out-of-the-way place, under cover of darkness, unwitnessed by anyone with the possible exception of his fellow carousers—but he does act as if he knew he cannot and will not be prosecuted. If, in the novel’s terms, “everything is permitted” among the nettles and burdocks, this means only that there can be no testimony by the victim, not so much as a “she said” in answer to a “he said,” when the victim cannot possibly communicate. Regardless of Cleckley’s portrayal of him as a stranger to rational calculation, Karamazov would never have attempted the crime without this implicit assurance of impunity. If, like Max, he succeeds in enjoying freedom from “penal consequences,” this surely means that he *does* have a regard for consequences, not that he doesn’t.

Contrary to Cleckley’s portrayal of a man who has abandoned rationality, Karamazov knows there is a line not to be crossed if he means to stay out of trouble, and he knows not to cross it. Just as Cleckley’s psychopaths frame their crimes to end up in jail or hospital but not prison—for they are not as uncalculating as they appear, either—Karamazov has a fine sense of the line dividing a mere outrage from an offense he cannot get away with. As soon as his formidable first wife departs for Petersburg, but not before, he conducts drunken orgies (p. 5).

Even though it appears she lives apart from him for some months, he takes a second wife only after she dies. (A bigamist like Max would not have bothered waiting.) Let us not forget, either, that while he drives both to their death by one means or another, he does nothing that incurs the risk of a penalty. In the novel's present he talks of prosecuting Dmitri (Adelaïda's son) for bad debts (p. 81), but instead of pursuing this dangerous line of action offers the IOUs to someone else—the young woman in whom he is interested—with the suggestion that *she* prosecute (p. 82). In the family gathering in the monastery which he sets up in bad faith, he comes close to challenging Dmitri, a former soldier, to a duel but stays on the prudent side of the line, exclaiming with simulated passion, "Dmitri Fyodorovitch, if you were not my son, I would challenge you this instant to a duel . . . with pistols, at three paces . . . across a handkerchief" (p. 83). (Dmitri has actually fought a duel [p. 8].) As he is about to stage his encore at the monastery a little later, we are told, "He had no clear idea of what he would do, but he knew that he could not control himself, and that a touch might drive him to the utmost limits of obscenity, but only to obscenity, to nothing criminal, nothing for which he could be legally punished. In the last resort, he could always restrain himself, and he had marvelled indeed at himself, on that score, sometimes" (p. 99).

If Cleckley had noticed Karamazov's paradoxical ability to restrain himself despite not being able to control himself, he might have reconsidered how it is that the psychopaths of *The Mask of Sanity* manage to confine themselves to lesser offenses despite a nominally complete lack of inhibition. Karamazov appears to think a good deal about prosecution. Not only does he suggest to a third party that she bring charges against Dmitri, but after being beaten by him he plays with the idea himself. "Of course," he says, "in these fashionable days fathers and

mothers are looked upon as a prejudice, but even now the law does not allow you to drag your old father about by the hair, to kick him in the face in his own house, and to brag of murdering him outright—all in the presence of witnesses” (p. 206). It says worlds about Karamazov that he appeals to the law in this case but did not hesitate to commit rape when he knew the law could not touch him.

Five or six months after the crime,

All the town was talking, with intense and sincere indignation, of Lizaveta’s condition and trying to find out who was the miscreant who had wronged her. Then suddenly a terrible rumour was all over town that this miscreant was no other than Fyodor Pavlovitch. . . . Of course this was no great grievance to him; he would not have troubled to contradict a set of tradespeople. In those days he was proud, and did not condescend to talk except to his own circle of the officials and nobles, whom he entertained so well. (p. 117)

In keeping with his personal paradox of recklessness tempered with a saving grain of prudence, it seems that while Karamazov does not condescend to answer his accusers, he persists in denying paternity (p. 118).

Though local opinion is incensed against him, the authorities do nothing, even after Lizaveta dies in childbirth. In a novel that includes a brilliantly depicted investigation of a murder (his own), there is no investigation of the rape of Lizaveta, aside from people asking one another who could have done such a thing. Presumably, the town concludes that the special

nature of the crime renders it at once unprovable and blasphemous, so that its punishment is best left to God. And so Karamazov gets away scot-free with a rape that is also a kind of deferred murder. If people in *The Mask of Sanity* do not commit such acts, perhaps it is not because their scruples forbid it; in Cleckley's view, they have no scruples as commonly understood. In the United States at the time of *The Mask of Sanity*, a Lizaveta would be housed in a state hospital, not left to wander the streets, and in any case the residents of an American town might be less willing to leave punishment to God than their counterparts in *The Brothers Karamazov*, who happen to live in proximity to a monastery and a cathedral. Much depends on context.

The Brothers Karamazov takes place in a medium-sized provincial town—not “the chief town of the province” (pp. 141, 799)—whose distinct character shapes Lizaveta's story. She herself is a kind of local institution, beloved as a child of God, allowed to roam at will through streets, shops and even houses, cared for by all. The uniqueness of the town's attitude toward Lizaveta becomes clear when a new provincial governor on a tour of inspection declares that “for a young woman of twenty to wander about in nothing but a smock was a breach of the proprieties, and must not occur again” (p. 115). It may be a breach of the proprieties elsewhere, but in the town in question (“Skotoprigonyevsk” by name) people do not feel that way. Possibly if Lizaveta had been fully clothed, Karamazov's companions would not have made the lewd insinuations that lead him to rape her as if acting out a dare. That *The Brothers Karamazov* contains no hint that Fyodor Karamazov committed an act of violence either before or after this one suggests it was indeed inspired by a unique set of circumstances. It was a crime of opportunity “in the full sense.” All but espousing a philosophy of opportunism,

Karamazov many years later says over his brandy, “My rule has been that you can always find something devilishly interesting in every woman that you wouldn’t find in any other. Only, one must know how to find it, that’s the point!” (p. 162). You take what’s there but you have to look for it, as with his discovery of Lizaveta in the brush.

When it becomes apparent that Lizaveta is pregnant, the town talks but does not rise up in outrage; more charitable than ever, it looks after her, until on the last day of her confinement she escapes and makes her way to the Karamazov property to give birth. While the meaning of this mute act seems clear enough, it does not, of course, rise to the level of proof in the eyes of the law.

From references to Euclid, to the Grand Inquisitor’s argument that Jesus should have condescended to prove his existence to humanity, to the exhibits on a table in the middle of the courtroom during Dmitri’s trial, the topic of proof runs strongly through *The Brothers Karamazov*, and twenty-four years after the death of Lizaveta, during a dinner conversation, Karamazov challenges the son born to her to prove that under certain circumstances—note the play of conditions again—he would be perfectly justified in renouncing Christianity (p. 152). In the monastery Karamazov boasts of having “documentary proof” that Dmitri is in debt to him (p. 81). Preoccupied as he is with proof, Karamazov might well regard an unprovable crime as a perfect crime. (Of course, no one can prove him responsible for the death of his wives either.) And Karamazov’s assumption that he can get away with the rape of Lizaveta appears well founded. As if recognizing the futility of prosecution, the townspeople close the case by simply attaching the patronymic “Fyodorovitch” to Lizaveta’s child, a disposition Fyodor finds “amusing” (p. 118). Possibly he likes being named as Smerdyakov’s father because it tickles his

shamelessness and confirms his legal immunity. Karamazov may share a number of traits with the psychopaths of *The Mask of Sanity*, but where else would we find this unusual arrangement, whereby a town virtually hangs a placard around the neck of a rapist but lets him walk free, while he enjoys his infamy and goes on leading an undisturbed life of joyless hedonism?

A good indication that we are on the right track in interpreting the rape of Lizaveta as resulting from a confluence of circumstances and an assurance of impunity is that the murder of Karamazov himself by Lizaveta's son can be described in the same way, making it all the more an act of poetic justice. As we learn in a critical conversation on the eve of the crime in which Smerdyakov secures Ivan's complicity, a set of uniquely opportune circumstances has fallen into place, including not only Dmitri's desperate need of the very sum that sits in a beribboned envelope in Karamazov's apartment, but the absence (as a result of certain other factors) of anyone to prevent or witness a murder. In brief, the stars align. Smerdyakov conducts his side of the conversation in a code of the unspoken, so that his words could never be cited as evidence of any criminal intention. After committing the murder (using Dmitri as a decoy), he feels sure nothing whatsoever can be proved against him, as he reveals in his last conversation with the conscience-stricken Ivan. "What proof could you have had?" (p. 763). Just as the only evidence tending to show that Fyodor Karamazov committed rape consists of a suggestive remark to his drinking companions—which is no evidence at all, legally speaking—so the only evidence against Smerdyakov consists of a suggestive but legally meaningless exchange with Ivan before the fact. It is as if the father's immunity from prosecution had passed to his own murderer. An unprovable crime is a perfect crime.

Psychopathy and Circumstance

If Karamazov “has no regard apparently for consequences,” as Cleckley alleges, why did he rape a woman who lives outside of language instead of one who could name him as her attacker? Karamazov rapes Lizaveta because circumstances hand him the chance to do so and he has no reason to fear the law. That is, he does it because he can. He does not acquire new traits in the moments it takes him to advance from clown to rapist; he simply responds to conditions. The psychopath of *The Mask of Sanity* is a walking checklist of symptoms, many of them markers of absence or deficiency (*lack of remorse, inadequate motivation, unresponsiveness to others*), all in all suggesting that life for this person is less complicated than for the rest of us. That is true of Karamazov as well, but in his case the barrenness is due to a ruling maxim that sweeps all else aside: the principle that everything is lawful. That Karamazov shows the same alacrity in raping Lizaveta as he did in despoiling his wife of her wealth suggests that underneath his behavior lies a ruthless opportunism. The most economical explanation of his retention of Lizaveta’s child as his cook and servant—an arrangement whose cynicism exceeds anything in *The Mask of Sanity*—is that the circumstance of the child’s birth on his property made Smerdyakov a natural choice. Not only is circumstance as important as mentality in Karamazov’s story, but his mentality is such that it trains him on the openings offered by conditions around him.

At this point we return to *A Mask of Sanity*. While Cleckley enumerates 16 traits of psychopathy, including those just noted, he does not call any particular attention to the

psychopath's ability to exploit the norms of his or her world. In order to convert life itself into a sort of board game, Cleckley's patients have to know the rules—in particular, what is going to be prosecuted (and to what degree) and what isn't. Of one of his featured patients he remarks that "Anna, like so many whose conduct resembles her[s] in other respects, seems never to have committed a major felony or tried to do serious physical injury to another" (pp. 149-50). Surely this is not by chance and not as a result of moral considerations. By the same token, the ascendancy of bourgeois standards in the world around her gives Anna's many offenses against them an edge of significance that they would not have under other conditions.

But if Anna and Max play the system, the system also plays them. Though the legal and behavioral controls in place in their local worlds were not designed to reward less dangerous expressions of psychopathy, they have that effect in that they allow these two to believe they are leading lives full of exploits and adventures by getting in and out of trouble continually. The entire scheme is contingent, depending as it does on such variables as community standards and even the state of agreed psychiatric knowledge (in that the nonrecognition of psychopathy as a disorder means Cleckley's patients can escape psychiatric detention whenever they want, merely by simulating appropriate responses). Community standards also vary from place to place. A Bostonian reviewer of the first edition of *The Mask of Sanity* commented that the tolerance shown by the authorities and others in the pages of *The Mask of Sanity* lies outside the field of his experience.¹³

For his part, Karamazov plays adroitly on time and place. In his first recorded act, he succeeds in attracting Adelaïda not by donning a mask but being his cynical self, thereby convincing her that he is "one of the bold and ironical spirits of that progressive epoch" (p. 4),

that is, the years around 1840. In her eyes he becomes the spirit of the age. In attacking Lizaveta he puts his spurious boldness into action, now exploiting a unique local opportunity. Shortly thereafter, in convincing another young woman to marry him, he takes advantage of both time and place—time, in that Sofya Ivanovna elopes with him before she has known him long enough to perceive his nature; place, in that his infamy does not follow him to her province (p. 10). Contrary to Cleckley's portrayal of him as a man strangely lacking in malice, he appears to revel in torturing this unfortunate woman, and it is undoubtedly in consequence of her marriage to him that she dies at the age of twenty, the third of his casualties. The trail of deaths he leaves behind him sets him apart from Cleckley's comedians.

In devoting a chapter to the rape of Lizaveta, Dostoevsky's concern is not to document an overlooked mental disorder but to show what the maxim "everything is lawful" translates into under conditions that allow a libertine to act it out. The conditions matter as much as the mentality of the perpetrator.¹⁴ The text does not state, but does imply, that Karamazov probably would not have committed the crime but for the presence of the companions who rouse him to action, and whom he seeks to impress and astonish. No theater without an audience. If he had not been reveling in observance of Adelaïda's death, he might not have committed the crime, either. Indeed, if the moon did not happen to be shining, the revelers might never have noticed Lizaveta to begin with. If all the necessary conditions obtained but Karamazov and his companions had come across Lizaveta fully clothed, again he might not have proceeded to assault her. Above all, however, he would not have committed the crime of rape unless assured that he could do so without fear of the consequences, and this assurance he received from Lizaveta's profound inability to communicate, guaranteeing as it did that she

could never testify and that the identity of her attacker could therefore never be proved as the law requires. In other words, the crime underlying the plot of *The Brothers Karamazov* takes place not because Fyodor Karamazov suffers from a certain highly distinctive mental disorder, but because a set of uniquely propitious conditions comes together, allowing a man who lives by opportunism to take that principle farther than he ever has. Before this incident, Karamazov himself may not have known what he was capable of.

In the end, it is this open-ended capacity for transgression that distinguishes Fyodor Karamazov, not his possession of a certain number of the 16 traits of psychopathy inventoried in *The Mask of Sanity*. The real similarity between Karamazov and the cast of characters in *The Mask of Sanity* lies not at the level of symptoms but in their common interest in abusing the norms that the world around them lives by, as if they were not parties to the human compact. Living under the reign of bourgeois morality, Cleckley's psychopaths stage a provocative attack on the sanctity of property (as by habitual stealing), marriage (as by bigamy), and work (by their refusal of any steady pursuit). Living as he does in a different world, Karamazov never has to feign normality and never has to pretend to be anything other than himself, in high contrast to the characters who give Cleckley's book its title. His interest seems to lie not in random thieving but steady accumulation, and not so much in the defilement of marriage (for he has been unmarried for many years when the novel opens) as the desecration of sanctity itself. Living in proximity to a monastery and a cathedral, he attacks sanctity in toto and a child of God in particular.

Arrested, jailed and hospitalized too many times to count, Cleckley's patients manage not to live out the extremely dangerous potential of their own traits. Never arrested, jailed or

hospitalized, Karamazov lives out his deviant potential in full with the rape of Lizaveta. Only he has a philosophy of libertinism that he drives to the limits of its implications, circumstances permitting. They do permit. With an opportunist like Karamazov, sheer contingency takes on critical import. If the visiting governor had not just disapproved of Lizaveta's undress but removed her from Skotoprigonyevsk on the spot, Karamazov would not have committed an unthinkable crime, and Cleckley's characterization of him, while still wide of the mark, would have been less grossly erroneous.¹⁵

Poor Reading

When Cleckley first proposed his theory of psychopathy, it was a bold one, departing implicitly from the Freudian ideas then on the rise or already prevailing. That all patients in *The Mask of Sanity* display the same exceptionally florid pattern of behavior regardless of their respective upbringings suggests their disorder does not, in fact, arise from upbringing. While Freudians could explain to their own satisfaction how self-defeating behavior meets a need for punishment, such analysis necessarily focuses on individual cases with all their psychodynamic intricacy. The sameness of the perverse behavior documented so descriptively in *The Mask of Sanity* cuts through all that, much as the revolutionary third edition of the DSM (1980) discards the creaking machinery of Freudian explanation, the better to concentrate on the work of empirical description. However, even if all patients profiled in *The Mask of Sanity* exhibit the same bizarre pattern, this certainly does not mean that the disorder in question cannot vary, or that a figure in a nineteenth-century Russian novel who shows some features of the pattern

suffers from the identical disorder. Besides, description needs to be accurate, and Cleckley's portrayal of this figure is far from it.

While Cleckley argues that psychopathy calls for recognition as a mental disorder because that is the only way to make sense of such nonsensical behavior, there is nothing nonsensical about seizing an opportunity to commit an act of violence, as Karamazov does. In no way does this man appear to the reader of *The Brothers Karamazov* a victim of his own faulty wiring. Tellingly, when he asks Fr. Zossima in mock seriousness what he must do to be saved, the elder replies that he (Karamazov) has "sense enough" to know the answer for himself already (p. 48). The elder then launches into a subtle analysis of the practice of self-deception, from which we learn not that Karamazov is not really vindictive or cruel (as Cleckley would have it) but that he works himself up to "genuine vindictiveness" (p. 48) by entertaining himself with lies. Keeping in mind both Fr. Zossima's insight into the spiteful mind and the narrator's comment in the Lizaveta chapter that Karamazov was "on a servile footing" with his fellow revelers (p. 116), it appears that he took out on Lizaveta his resentment of the injuries, real or imagined, received at the hands of his boon companions. Whether or not Fr. Zossima knows of the crime of violence Karamazov committed a quarter century before, one can only wonder what he would say to the claim that the man's disordered brain renders him not responsible for his actions.

"Sanity" being a legal concept, to hold that someone like Cleckley's patients only appears sane (or wears a mask of sanity) means that this person is indeed not responsible for his or her actions and belongs in a hospital, not behind bars. Would Cleckley have been quite so willing to make this argument if Max, Anna and the others had committed crimes of violence

instead of limiting themselves to petty offenses, violations of decency, and miscellaneous absurdities? Not the least shocking aspect of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965) is the author's effort to extenuate Richard Hickock's responsibility for the murder of an entire family on the grounds that he suffered from a "severe character disorder" that impaired his sanity even while leaving his intellect untouched¹⁶—just as in *The Mask of Sanity*. In a psychiatric opinion given verbatim in the text of *In Cold Blood* the disorder in question is labeled "antisocial reaction," the term used in DSM-I (then in effect) for the condition Cleckley calls psychopathy. In rendering his opinion, the psychiatrist ignores actions by Hickock that are grossly inconsistent with it.¹⁷ Cleckley does the same with Fyodor Karamazov, editing out an entire chapter incompatible with his portrayal of the man as an absurdist of the same mold as the population of *The Mask of Sanity*. However, readers of *The Brothers Karamazov* do not have the option of not noticing the rape of Lizaveta. By the same token, if we ourselves play lawyer and excuse Karamazov on the grounds of diminished responsibility, we will have short-circuited a concept on which the entire novel depends, that of responsibility itself.

That Cleckley was able to view Fyodor Karamazov as an embodiment of the same disorder exhibited by the pranksters in *The Mask of Sanity* suggests he was too invested in the idea of psychopathy as a timeless entity reducible to a list of symptoms. The fact is that despite ticking many of the diagnostic boxes, Karamazov builds up his wealth with a persistence unknown to Cleckley's patients, never wears a mask, and sends three women to the grave without ever risking prosecution, a feat of calculated malice that reduces the misdeeds of Cleckley's patients to child's play.¹⁸ Evidently Cleckley was so impressed by a certain facial resemblance between Karamazov and his patients that he ignored everything else, including a

crime of violence which, in and of itself, is enough to invalidate the assimilation of him to them. Like reading the *Odyssey* as a drama of PTSD (or indeed reading any great work with a key in hand), reading *The Brothers Karamazov* with a paradigm of psychopathy as a study aid turns out to be a poor idea. The problem with such interpretations is not only that they turn upon concepts alien to the work itself, but that the interpreters pick up the work knowing exactly what to look for.

¹ On Odysseus and his afterlives, see W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968).

² Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002).

³ Chaim Shatan. "Post-Vietnam Syndrome," *New York Times*, May 6, 1972.

⁴ Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001).

⁵ Allan Horwitz and Jerome Wakefield, *The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sadness into Depressive Disorder* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007).

⁶ "Of course I am aware of the fact that persons showing the characteristics of those here described do commit major crimes and crimes of maximal violence. There are so many, however, who do not, that such tendencies should be regarded as the exception rather than as the rule, or, better still, as a pathologic trait independent, to a considerable degree, of the other manifestations which we regard as fundamental." Hervey Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues About the So-Called Psychopathic Personality*, 2nd edition (St. Louis: Mosby, 1950), p. 290. All quotations from the edition.

⁷ The checklist consists of: superficial charm and good "intelligence"; absence of delusions; absence of "nervousness"; unreliability; untruthfulness; lack of remorse or shame; inadequately motivated antisocial behavior; poor judgment and failure to learn by experience; pathological egocentricity and incapacity for love; poverty of affect; loss of insight; unresponsiveness; fantastic behavior with or without drink; impersonal sex; lack of a life plan.

⁸ Robert Hare, *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us* (New York: Guilford, 1993).

⁹ With the closure of state hospitals over the decades to come, the surviving facilities lost the luxury of housing abusers like Max who seek admission precisely because they cannot be held. By the end of the twentieth century, the number of patients in these institutions per 100,000 declined to 1/15 of the total around the time of the second edition of *The Mask of Sanity*. See H. Richard Lamb and Leona Bachrach, "Some Perspectives on Deinstitutionalization," *Psychiatric Services* 52 (2001): 1039-45.

¹⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Constance Garnett (New York: Vintage, 1955), p. 10. Moreover, Karamazov has a definite use in mind for his pile of money: "As I get older, you know, I shan't be a pretty object. The wenches won't come to me of their own accord, so I shall want my money. So I am saving up more and more, simply for myself" (p. 205). All quotations from this edition.

¹¹ Because a certain "dangerous convict" (p. 117) happened to be nearby at the time, we cannot say with perfect certainty that Karamazov raped Lizaveta. But it is a moral certainty.

¹² The word "idiot" had holy connotations for Dostoevsky.

¹³ William Healy, Review of *The Mask of Sanity*, by Hervey Cleckley, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 37 (1942): 139-41.

¹⁴ The importance of situational factors is underscored in the first chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the vignette of a fanciful woman who might not have committed suicide if the site had been less picturesque.

¹⁵ On Dostoevsky's interest in what *might* have happened as opposed to what had to happen, see Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994).

¹⁶ Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (New York: Vintage, 1965), p. 295. On psychopathy as a "character disorder," see *Mask of Sanity*, p. 418.

¹⁷ See Stewart Justman, "The Guilt-Free Psychopath," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 28 (2021): 87-104; "Murder Without Motive: Eichmann in Jerusalem and *In Cold Blood*," *Law and Humanities* 13 (2019): 177-97.

¹⁸ Contrary to Cleckley's checklist, Karamazov does not perceive reality accurately, either. If he did, he would not be so enthralled to the preposterous fantasy that Grushenka may actually decide to marry him—a delusion critical to the plot. As we discover in the final conversation

between Ivan and Smerdyakov, his last act on this earth was to look for Grushenka in the bushes in the hallucinatory belief that she had come to him.