

Noncoincidence in *The Brothers Karamazov*

"It's marvellous, extraordinary, impossible"—Dmitri Karamazov

Abstract

The intricate plot of *The Brothers Karamazov* turns upon conjunctions of events which, upon inspection, turn out not to be coincidental. Only by probing the often-subtle connections between events can we appreciate the implications of actions and failures to act in this astonishing work. *The Brothers Karamazov* tells not of a mysterious power called Coincidence that orders human affairs, but of the responsibilities of human agents, and its wonder lies not only in philosophical excurses like the Grand Inquisitor episode, which seem to transcend its pages, but in the complexity of its own construction.

As the *Odyssey* begins, Poseidon's departure for Ethiopia creates an opening for Athena to release Odysseus, her favorite, from Calypso's island. Elsewhere, the suitors, having discovered Penelope's trick of unweaving her web nightly, have taken their insolence to the very height of the outrageous. Penelope has reached her breaking point. But Poseidon, Odysseus' persecutor since he blinded Polyphemus, did not time his visit to Ethiopia to allow for Odysseus' return to Ithaca just when he is most sorely needed. He did not act for Odysseus' benefit at all. Odysseus' release from captivity at the poetically perfect moment is simply coincidental.

Coincidence—a remarkable conjunction of unconnected events—is in the genetic code of narrative.¹ We are all familiar with tales of improbable convergences, tales where A turns

out to be the long-lost child of B. The story-line of *Great Expectations*, in which Estella proves to be the daughter of the convict Magwitch (Pip's benefactor), hinges upon the accident of Magwitch and Miss Havisham using the same lawyer—not in a village but London. Through Miss Havisham, however, Dickens suggests that this circumstance is not at all implausible. "His being my lawyer, and his being the lawyer of your patron," says Miss Havisham to Pip, "is a coincidence. He holds the same relation towards numbers of people, and it might easily arise." Readers may or may not accept this apologia or approve the strategy of predicating a novel on coincidence in the first place.

This essay examines a great 19th-century novel of intricate design whose plot abounds with concurrent or paired events: *The Brothers Karamazov*.² Among the initial conditions of *The Brothers Karamazov* (as the reader learns in the course of events themselves) is that Dmitri Karamazov is betrothed to Katerina Ivanovna, with whom his half-brother Ivan appears to be in love; but in addition, Dmitri is mad for another woman (Grushenka), as is his own father. Such doubling or overlap seems like fertile ground for coincidence, and the same is true of the swirling events of this novel generally. Yet little in *The Brothers Karamazov* actually traces to coincidence when events are well looked into. It is characteristic of *The Brothers Karamazov* that when a courtroom orator speaks of a "strange and fatal coincidence" in the history of the Karamazov family (as if intoxicated by his own eloquence),³ he is wrong; and when a woman saves her father at the last possible minute from committing suicide, this convergence of two lives in one place at one moment results not from luck but moral intelligence and filial love. The surprise, confusion, tragedy and comedy of *The Brothers Karamazov* owe much more to the play of intention than to chance. Interested not in the marvels of coincidence but the

responsibilities of human agents, *The Brothers Karamazov* asks us, through the intricacy of its construction, to suspend any assumption we may have absorbed from the history of the novel that coincidence holds the key to human events.

The complex, five-party drama built into the initial conditions of *The Brothers Karamazov* must be deciphered by the reader from clues strewn throughout its pages. A more convenient test-case for the handling of coincidence in the novel—more convenient because the episode is self-contained and stands out almost like a reference point—concerns an event that took place some time around the birth of the second Karamazov son, Ivan. Twenty-four years before the present, Fyodor Karamazov, while carousing one night, almost certainly raped the town idiot Lizaveta,⁴ as a result of which his eventual murderer was born. (That Lizaveta died in childbirth makes the crime a deferred murder in its own right.) The narrator's account of the episode notes two temporal conjunctions: that it took place "just at the time when [Karamazov] received the news of his first wife's death in Petersburg" and that a certain dangerous convict named Karp "had been in the neighbourhood just at that time" (116-17). If the mysterious Karp committed the crime, then the news from Petersburg is beside the point. Upon reflection, though, we find it hard to believe that Karamazov's presence is purely coincidental and that someone else (Karp) assaulted Lizaveta just around the time he himself, goaded by his fellow revelers, avowed that he could find something to his taste even in a creature like her.⁵ For that matter, we can more readily believe that Karp had nothing to do with the rape of Lizaveta than that Lizaveta slipped out of confinement and made her way by chance to Karamazov's property to give birth to her child. The Lizaveta episode tells not of a mysterious power called Coincidence that orders human affairs, but of a horror committed by a

uniquely depraved libertine who supposes he can act with impunity. That old Karamazov is murdered by the denied son born in his bath-house is far from coincidental.

Or consider the case of the unfortunate Captain Snegiryov, who reports that Dmitri “was in a towering rage and happened to come upon me” (240) in a tavern and proceeded to drag him by the beard in the market-place in front of his young son.⁶ According to the captain’s account, he is an innocent victim of circumstance. However, we already know that he works for Fyodor Karamazov and has been instrumental in a scheme to have Dmitri prosecuted for bad debts (82); the attack therefore cannot be coincidental. But there is a grain of truth in the captain’s version of events, in that Dmitri’s rage has sources that go beyond anything the captain has or hasn’t done, sources which we readers come to understand only much later (599), after working our way through a complex tale of false coincidences involving the sum of 3000 rubles. That is what reading *The Brothers Karamazov* is like. As with the murder of Fyodor Karamazov moments after Dmitri refrains from murdering him, many an apparent coincidence in this novel of investigation dissolves upon investigation. Its plot consists of an almost unfathomably rich network of events. If *The Brothers Karamazov* is a carpet, noncoincidences are the knots.

A coincidence, though striking, cannot be interesting, because there is nothing more to say about it than that it *is* a coincidence. Noncoincidences are another matter. A murder that looks like Dmitri’s work but is not; the confusion of a 1500-ruble spree for a 3000-ruble spree *twice*; Dmitri’s involvement with two women at once—pseudo-coincidences like these, which characterize *The Brothers Karamazov*, invite discussion rather than silencing it.

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In the great narrative expanse of *The Brothers Karamazov*, nowhere is sheer coincidence more strikingly exhibited than in the story of the mysterious visitor who, years before the novel's present, confessed to the young Zossima that he killed a woman in a jealous rage. As chance would have it,

A serf of hers called Pyotr was at once suspected, and every circumstance confirmed the suspicion. The man knew . . . that having to send one of her serfs as a recruit she had decided to send him . . . People had heard him angrily threatening to murder her when he was drunk in a tavern. . . . The day after the murder, he was found on the road leading out of the town, dead drunk, with a knife in his pocket and his right hand happened to be stained with blood. (366)

"Happened to be." Enmeshed in a web of coincidence, Pyotr is arrested for a crime he did not commit and dies of a fever shortly thereafter, leaving the actual murderer, whom no one suspects, to rise to a position of local prominence even while suffering unbearable pangs of guilt. While the story of a murder rendered undetectable by a series of coincidences sets up very well the moral tortures of the mysterious visitor, an entire novel built on this device would soon become a parody of itself and in any case would not resemble *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The murder of the Karamazov patriarch is quite unlike that of Pyotr's mistress. Not only does a man in a jealous rage (Dmitri) refrain from killing him while a servant (Smerdyakov)

actually does, but this servant makes the crime look like the work of Dmitri, whereas in the other case the murderer makes the crime appear the work of a servant. Above all, however, the murder of Fyodor Karamazov is not a solitary enterprise; it requires the actions and inactions of several parties, concerted in ways they may or may not understand. (Of which more as we go.) As in this instance, *The Brothers Karamazov* is not a tale of happenstance.

For Dmitri a most unfortunate coincidence, or pseudo-coincidence, is that the sum entrusted to him by his betrothed, Katerina, to post and the sum offered by his father as a bribe to Grushenka happen to be exactly the same: 3000 rubles. The figure is mentioned in the text of *The Brothers Karamazov* no less than 175 times, as if it haunted Dmitri's story like a curse. By itself, however, the fact of two stacks of rubles, each amounting to 3000, is trivial. (Indeed, after Dmitri's arrest for murder, a celebrated defense lawyer is retained for the same figure.) Only because Dmitri, for reasons of his own, publishes lies about how much of Katerina's money he spent and how much he squandered on a second escapade does it appear to the world that the gaudy banknotes that materialize in his hands after his father's murder are none other than the money old Karamazov set aside for Grushenka, which Dmitri must therefore have stolen.⁷ This confusion, which contributes so richly to his ruin, is entirely of his own making. But for his deliberate, reiterated, almost boastful lies (all of which project a romantic image of wild extravagance), the two stacks of 3000 rubles would have nothing to do with each other, and thus coincidence would not come into play. Dmitri lies so vociferously about "3000 rubles" that it is as if he were trying to convince not only the world but even himself (602), in defiance of Fr. Zossima's teaching that "the man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie . . . loses all respect for himself and for others" (48), which is what happens to him.⁸ Dmitri is the

victim of his own words and deeds, not the malignity of circumstance. But while he himself, and no one else, is responsible for the “coincidence” that undoes him,⁹ so much of the novel elapses before he discloses the truth about his spending sprees, the entire affair is so dizzying, and the author refrains so studiously from intervening in the narrative to correct Dmitri’s falsehoods, that it may appear to the reader that Dmitri is caught in the toils of a terrible coincidence after the murder of his father.

Under interrogation, Dmitri finally reveals the facts of his spending binges only because he reaches his breaking point when the faithful servant Grigory vows that on the night of the crime the door from the Karamazov house to the garden was open, although in reality it was closed—a piece of bad luck for Dmitri. The error is not inexplicable, though, in that Grigory (who had just wakened from a deep sleep) did see both the garden gate and Karamazov’s window open; evidently his cloudy mind simply added the door to these troubling anomalies. In keeping with the character of *The Brothers Karamazov* as a tale of human agency, Grigory appears on stage at the hour of the crime not because he happened coincidentally to wake up just then but because he takes care to perform his duties (in this case, closing the gate), especially at a time of palpable danger. Much as if he realized that the responsibility to protect old Karamazov rests entirely with him, he may even have worried in his sleep about the peril in which his master stands, as we are told (477). We also learn how it is that Grigory, though hobbled, manages to catch Dmitri at the last minute in flight from the house, an encounter that leads straight to the murder and Dmitri’s wrongful conviction. It is because he knows a shortcut across the garden (477). Like Lizaveta, he has local knowledge. Evidently Dostoevsky did not want to make the critical clash between Dmitri and Grigory a matter of chance.

The one truly unearthly coincidence in *The Brothers Karamazov* is that Alyosha and the unstable Lise have the same dream (709)—an oddity with no connection to the realm of events, like an exception that proves the rule. The rule is noncoincidence. Toward the beginning of a critical scene near the same garden gate on the eve of the murder, Ivan is about to ask the cook and valet Smerdyakov, “What have I to do with you?” when the words “Is my father still asleep?” pop out of his mouth (317). One answer to the first question is that he and Smerdyakov have the same patronymic and are both 24 years old. The curious expression “my father” suggests that Ivan—who earlier bristled when old Karamazov forgot that he and Alyosha have the same mother (164)—cannot really take in this noncoincidence. His inability to fathom Smerdyakov, which is a precondition for everything that follows, begins with his inability to comprehend that he and this menial in fact have only too much to do with one another.

The scene in question consists of a conversation between Ivan and Smerdyakov later to be reviewed like a transcript no less than three times. Here Smerdyakov sounds Ivan by sketching a danger scenario with one coincidence too many, namely that he himself will happen to suffer an epileptic fit even as Grigory lies incapacitated as a result of a periodic alcohol treatment, all in all leaving no one to protect old Karamazov from Dmitri’s murderous rage.¹⁰ When Ivan does not insist that such an opportune fit simply cannot be coincidental and boards a train for Moscow, Smerdyakov interprets his actions as assent to murder. Though Ivan later claims he intended no such thing, by letting a glaring noncoincidence pass he did signal that he didn’t care if his father lived or died, and by journeying to Moscow he confirmed that message

in deeds. Without this passive or implied authorization, Smerdyakov would not have ventured to commit the crime that lies at the center of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

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If, as the sage Zossima teaches, “a touch in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth” (384), then events in *The Brothers Karamazov* itself will intertwine, all the more because the actors are in immediate proximity. In the final analysis, only by probing such connections can we possibly measure the import of actions and failures to act in the novel’s world. To that end I review here a related series of coincidences in *The Brothers Karamazov* that dissolve upon analysis.

1. “Just in Time”

Setting aside the prefatory history of the Karamazov family, we might say the plot of *The Brothers Karamazov* originates in the highly charged scene, some months before the curtain rises, wherein Katerina presented herself at Dmitri’s door to obtain 4500 rubles which her father, a colonel, needed immediately in order to replace the regimental funds he misappropriated and lost. Given that the colonel had already fallen from favor and was suspected of misusing regimental funds, it is probably no accident that his superiors demanded the 4500 rubles just when his usual scheme for profiteering on these funds broke down. (Now that their game was coming to an end, the merchant with whom he schemed no longer had any

reason not to defraud him, except common honesty, which he lacked.)¹¹ In any case, according to Dmitri's account, Katerina appeared at his threshold as he was "just preparing to go out" (133), whereupon Dmitri, who had thoughts of exploiting her desperation, instead gallantly gave her 5000 rubles without conditions. Aftershocks of this episode are felt throughout the novel, but it would never have occurred but for a melodramatic coincidence—or noncoincidence.

To induce Katerina to beg for the money in person, Dmitri informed her half-sister Agafya that their father was short 4500 rubles and unless he could produce the money on demand,

"he'll be tried and made to serve as a common soldier in his old age, unless you like to send me your young lady [that is, Katerina] secretly. I've just had money paid me. I'll give her four thousand, if you like, and keep the secret religiously." (132)

If the proud Katerina is terrified enough of the prospect of her father's ruin to put herself in the position of appearing to offer her body for money, Agafya has good reason to keep a close eye on her father when, in short order, a soldier arrives and requires the official funds in full within two hours. In the event, the colonel runs to his bedroom and is about to pull the trigger of his shotgun with his foot when Agafya races in.

"Agafya, remembering what I [that is, Dmitri] had told her, had her suspicions. She stole up and peeped into the room just in time. She rushed in, flung herself upon him from

behind, threw her arms around him, and the gun went off, hit the ceiling, but hurt no one.” (133)

The reader for whom the words “just in time” blot out all else will see this rescue at the last second as one of a string of dramatic coincidences running through *The Brothers Karamazov*. The context, however, tells us there was nothing coincidental about it. Agafya “had her suspicions,” and under the circumstances, well she might. She knew her father’s plight and saw him run to his room. It should not be remarkable that a child would go to the aid of a parent in danger, although in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where both Ivan and Alyosha fail to protect their father from an acute (albeit less immediate) danger, Agafya’s deed has the glow of rarity. Unlike others in this novel who somehow fail to register what is right in front of them, she sees what needs to be done and does it instantly. Her rescue of her father would have been coincidental if she had just happened to burst into his room in the nick of time without knowing about his misuse of official funds or without seeing him run to his room in a state of great distress. Neither condition applies.

But this doesn’t mean that circumstances conspire in Agafya favor or that she doesn’t have the opportunity to fail to save her father. She could have failed if she had disbelieved Dmitri’s account of the danger in which her father stood, as this account underwrote her suspicions, without which she might not have grasped the scene that unfolded when her father was ordered to restore the missing funds. And the possibility of disbelieving Dmitri was open to Agafya. After all, a depraved rake could well have made up a story about the colonel’s misappropriation of funds in order to extort favors from his daughter. But while Agafya

despises Dmitri for exploiting her father's peril, she does not doubt that he *is* in peril. Evidently she knows Dmitri well enough (131) to recognize that while he is something of a rake, he is not so depraved as to invent a lie to gratify his lust, just as (conversely) she recognizes that her father, a decent man, is capable of a shady financial practice. Not only are her perceptions fine enough to navigate these subtleties, her affections are deep enough to cherish her father despite his misdeeds.

2. Two Deaths

In *The Brothers Karamazov* two patriarchs—the debauched Fyodor Karamazov and the saintly Zossima—die more or less simultaneously. Arguably, this is not coincidental.

Fr. Zossima dies a natural, unpreventable death. Old Karamazov's murder was entirely preventable, in that a number of contingencies had to be in place in order for it to occur, and among these is the absence of anyone to protect him. In the conversation between Ivan and Smerdyakov at the gate before Ivan's departure for Moscow, the danger to which old Karamazov is exposed for want of a protector is established beyond doubt. So acute is the danger that on the night of the murder the servant Grigory awakens suddenly from a deep sleep possibly because "his conscience was uneasy at the thought of sleeping while the house was unguarded 'in such perilous times'" (477)—an odd expression perhaps, but not an odd sentiment. Under the circumstances, Ivan's flight to Moscow amounts to a decision to abandon old Karamazov to his fate, whatever that might be. If Agafya had her suspicions and acted, Ivan had his suspicions and left.

But Ivan is not the only one to desert his father at a moment of the utmost danger. If there were one person the reader would expect to be on hand to protect old Karamazov, it would be Alyosha, the only son with a particle of filial love and loyalty and the only legitimate son not openly indifferent to the man's life. Notably, however, in their haunting conversation neither Ivan nor Smerdyakov ever raises the possibility of Alyosha, as opposed to one of the servants, protecting old Karamazov, quite as if it went without saying that he will be absent when and where he is urgently needed (and this even though Ivan reminded him earlier, "We must . . . not let Dmitri in the house" [170]). After parting with Ivan following the Grand Inquisitor episode, Alyosha is next seen retiring for the night in Fr. Zossima's dwelling, his desertion of his biological father taking place offstage, as imperceptible to the reader as it is to him. The duty to keep watch over his father on the night of the murder is so dim to Alyosha's mind that nowhere in the immensity of *The Brothers Karamazov* does it so much as occur to him.

Pulled this way and that by his several errands, Alyosha is caught in the midst of so many dramas and sideshows in the early books of *The Brothers Karamazov* that it is perhaps no wonder that he cannot seem to focus on the crisis in his family. But towering over all the other concerns is the impending death of the figure he reveres, Fr. Zossima. Bound by ties of love and discipleship to Zossima (whose long-dead brother he resembles), Alyosha is so overwhelmed by the imminence of his elder's death that the peril in which his father stands does not fully register with him, even though he witnesses Dmitri's furious assault on him after dinner and hears Dmitri avow that he might well kill him. (Alyosha later confesses, too, that at the time he believed Ivan was "prepared to help bring [the father's death] about" [744]).

Evidently his thoughts are elsewhere. In contrast to his divided attention outside the monastery is the feat of recollection represented by Book VI (“The Russian Monk”), containing as it does Zossima’s last words to the world as transcribed later by Alyosha *from memory*. That is, these words made such a profound impression on Alyosha at the time that he was able to commit them to writing at a later date. But despite being present for and later recording his elder’s reflections on masters and servants (377-82), in the end Alyosha, like Ivan, acts as if protecting his father were servants’ work and not his own. If Karamazov could afford to forget the infant Dmitri precisely because Grigory was caring for him (6-7), perhaps Alyosha can forget Karamazov himself in the implicit assurance that Grigory—whom Alyosha has seen prepared to defend his hideous master “with the last drop of his blood” (165)—will look after him, too. Of Grigory’s plans to be unconscious for medical reasons Alyosha knows nothing.

While some might say Alyosha’s failure to attend to the danger brewing in his household is very forgivable under the circumstances, the fact is that the murder of his father would not have taken place if he had simply been in the house at the time. The murderer, Smerdyakov, is too sensitive to the risks of detection (763-64) to hazard the crime with Alyosha under the same roof; and while Smerdyakov marvels that Karamazov did not even cry out when struck (765), he could not plan on this piece of luck and could not, therefore, risk committing the murder with Alyosha well placed to overhear it. (He himself heard the shouts of both old Karamazov and Grigory [763].) The nearly perfect crime appears to be a case of fortune favoring the timorous. Inasmuch as his elder’s final illness so preoccupies Alyosha that his absence allows the crime to take place, the nearly simultaneous death of Fr. Zossima and Fyodor Karamazov is not exactly coincidental.

Even if Alyosha had ignored his duty to protect his father when the man's life stands in clear and present danger, he might still have averted the murder if only he had kept watch over his tempestuous half-brother Dmitri. In the chaos of the day before the murder, he knows he must find Dmitri even while his thoughts gravitate to his dying elder.

It was getting late, nearly three o'clock. Alyosha's whole soul turned to the monastery, to his dying saint, but the necessity of seeing Dmitri outweighed everything. The conviction that a great inevitable catastrophe was about to happen grew stronger in Alyosha's mind with every hour. (264)

And yet Alyosha gets sidetracked and never does go in search of Dmitri, a failure all the more culpable in that the dying Zossima adjures him to do just that: "Make haste to find him [that is, Dmitri], go again tomorrow and make haste, leave everything and make haste. Perhaps you may still have time to prevent something terrible" (339; cf. 88). Both despite and because of his devotion to Fr. Zossima, Alyosha somehow manages not to heed this alarm. Ironically, "perhaps [at] the very hour" he falls to the earth and vows to love it following the death of Fr. Zossima, Dmitri is speeding toward the village of Mokroe with a loaded pistol, fully capable of shedding not only his own blood but others' (497).

After something terrible does occur, Alyosha seems not to recall Fr. Zossima's dire warning, and by the end of *The Brothers Karamazov* he has still not figured out that the proximity of his father's death to the elder's is probably not coincidental. This is a riddle he is not prepared to solve.

3. Two Women

None of the cyclonic drama of *The Brothers Karamazov* would take place if Dmitri were not entangled with two women at once: Katerina and Grushenka. These twin involvements are probably not coincidental, in that Dmitri's official engagement to Katerina seems to drive him to the less reputable, less self-righteous, but more sensual Grushenka, a woman who never proclaims, "I want to save you from yourself" (137). (That Grushenka happens to be flirtatious for reasons of her own when Dmitri becomes acquainted with her makes her all the more a respite or distraction from Katerina.) As Bakhtin reminds us, a Dostoevskian hero does not lend himself to a conventional biography,¹² and settling down to a conventional engagement to a woman like Katerina Ivanovna is not in the cards for a man like Dmitri Karamazov. Indeed, Katerina no sooner declares her love of Dmitri than he seeks extricate himself by interesting Ivan in her by means of a long letter that undoubtedly mentions her suddenly acquired fortune (138). Dmitri speaks more kindly of Agafya than of Katerina, whom he hardly seems to know at the time he becomes betrothed to her for some reason having little enough to do with love. Alyosha may well be right when he blurts out to Katerina in a moment of frustration, "Dmitri . . . has never loved you" (226; cf. 690), in which case the coincidence of his being in love with two women at the same time breaks down.

Certainly sheer chance is less of a factor in Dmitri's entanglement with these women than meets the eye.

According to the story Dmitri tells Alyosha, when he first visited Grushenka (with the intention of beating her because she held an IOU of his to his father) he had in his possession 3000 rubles which Katerina entrusted to him that very morning to post to her sister (140); and this money he then splurged on Grushenka. From this account it seems like the sorcery of coincidence is already at work in Dmitri and Grushenka's first encounter. Later, under interrogation, he offers a less fanciful chronology, confessing that Katerina put 3000 rubles in his hands "when I'd just come to love another," that is, Grushenka (595), a conjunction of events that can hardly be the work of chance, even though Dmitri refers to it as a "fatal moment." Note too that while Dmitri says he loved another, he does not quite say he loved Katerina.

When Katerina hands Dmitri 3000 rubles, he posts none of it, spends half on Grushenka in a two-day binge (595) *while professing to spend the full 3000*, and keeps the other 1500 in a rag worn secretly around his neck like an amulet, thus preserving the possibility of returning at least part of the original sum to Katerina. It is because he cannot bring himself to restore the 1500 that he later looks to one improbable source after another for the funds to clear his debt to Katerina in full—the age-old maneuver of borrowing from Peter to pay Paul. Throughout this self-incurred rigmarole, the dishonor of his actions tortures Dmitri, driving him to the despair whose outward manifestations we witness. As if finally coming to an understanding of himself, he says toward the end of his interrogation,

"Yes, that's why I've been so savage all this month, that's why I fought in the tavern, that's why I attacked my father [before the murder], it was because I felt I was a thief. . .

. . But do you know, while I carried [the 1500] I said to myself at the same time every hour: 'No, Dmitri Fyodorovitch, you may yet not be a thief.' Why? Because I might go next day and pay back that fifteen hundred to Katya." (599)

In short, it is because of the unbearable position that Katerina has put him in that Dmitri acts so "savagely" that he makes himself the prime suspect in a murder he did not commit. It is one thing to be caught between two women and quite another to be placed by one of them in a tormenting bind that brings out the agonizing burdens of freedom so deplored by the Grand Inquisitor.

If the fact of being involved with two women presides like an evil star over Dmitri's story, the despair that seizes him as a result of his dual loyalties does not arise spontaneously. Up to the point of his arrest for murder, Dmitri is in such a crazed state that he poses an extreme danger both to himself and others. He could do anything. But it is Katerina who nurtures the private torment that drives this recklessness. Only at the trial near the end of *The Brothers Karamazov* does she admit,

"It was I, I, who gave him that money [that is, 3000 rubles], who offered it to him on the pretext of sending it to my sister in Moscow. And as I gave it to him, I looked him in the face and said that he could send it when he liked, 'in a month's time would do.' How, how could he have failed to understand that I was practically telling him to his face, 'You want money to be false to me with your creature, so here's the money for you.' . . . I wanted to prove what he was." (837)

The arrogance of the act of proving to Dmitri what he is helps explain why he might prefer Grushenka. In a strange noncoincidence, the betrothed couple enact a joint pantomime of love in the absence of love itself.

In effect, by handing Dmitri 3000 rubles, Katerina says, “If you are despicable enough to steal this in order to run off with your flame Grushenka, then go right ahead.” The act takes place a few weeks before *The Brothers Karamazov* begins, but not until hundreds of pages have elapsed does the reader understand the shocking artistry with which Katerina exploits and heightens the original contradiction of Dmitri’s entanglement with two women at once. The killing of old Karamazov would probably not have taken place but for the tortures inflicted by Katerina on her betrothed, in that his inability to summon up 3000 rubles (on top of his inability to bear the test she set the first place) leads him to the state of reckless despair in which he misinterprets Grushenka’s absence from her home to mean that she must be with his father.

In the Greek novel *Callirhoe* the principals meet by coincidence and fall in love on the spot:

There was a public feast of Aphrodite, and almost every woman had gone to her temple. Callirhoe had not appeared in public before, but at the prompting of Love her mother took her to do homage to the goddess. Just then Chaereas was walking home from the gymnasium, radiant as a star. . . . As chance would have it, the two walked headlong into each other at the corner of a narrow intersection—a meeting contrived by the god to make sure that they saw each other. They fell in love at first sight.¹³

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, on the other hand, from the instant Dmitri notices Katerina sizing him up, the two are engaged in warfare (131). This first encounter is not providential, its after-effects extend all the way to the courtroom, and even as a betrothed couple their exchanges are tinged with hatred. Lovers in name only, Katerina and Dmitri seem to elicit the worst in each other. She brings out his reckless disregard for himself and others, he brings out her pride and spite, and both lose in some degree the ability to discern truth from fiction. Such a folie à deux cannot possibly be mistaken for a coincidence.

4. Father and Son in Pursuit of the Same Woman

Shockingly, in *The Brothers Karamazov* a father and son become enamored of the same woman around the same time; hence the prosecutor's poetic account of the "strange and fatal coincidence" by which Dmitri and Fyodor Karamazov "both lost their hearts to [Grushenka] simultaneously" (853). In the fumes of wild suspicion and fantasy engendered by this contest, or imaginary contest, Dmitri first storms into his father's house in the convinced belief that Grushenka is there (when she isn't) and later, on the night of the murder, races to the same place simply because Grushenka is not at home. The father is enthralled to a delusion of his own, believing as he does that Grushenka may actually accept his bribe and become his wife. Grushenka so inflames the brains of these two—and they so inflame each other—that both seem lost to reality; under the circumstances, it is almost miraculous that on the night of the

murder Dmitri infers correctly that Grushenka is *not* with his father and abandons the thought of killing him.

Given that the father “incited [Grushenka] to captivate” Dmitri (82), as the latter reports on the good authority of Grushenka herself, it cannot be coincidental that father and son fall head over heels for her around the same time. But the trick is on old Karamazov. Though he appears to calculate that Grushenka would never attach herself to someone as destitute as Dmitri (and that falling in love with her will therefore prove torture for him), this turns out to be as complete a misreading as his belief that she will be drawn to his own money. While at first Grushenka plays with Dmitri and his father—“I was laughing at them both,” she confesses during the trial (830)—in time she surprises herself and us by falling genuinely in love with the younger man. And just as she goes from jest to earnest, so Dmitri goes from amusing, distracting or debauching himself with Grushenka to loving her deeply. The true coincidence is that a month before the action of the novel begins—that is, close to the time Katerina tempted Dmitri with 3000 rubles—Grushenka received a romantic overture out of the blue from the Pole who once rejected her (426). It is to divert her mind from the excruciating conflict caused by this letter that she toys with Dmitri in particular. However, the returned Pole proves ridiculous, thereby at once curing Grushenka’s conflict and rendering the original coincidence absurd.

We now recognize that the initial conditions in *The Brothers Karamazov*—with Ivan interested in Dmitri’s betrothed, and father and son enthralled with the same woman—do not make for a tale of coincidences. As Dmitri lures Katerina with the promise of 4500 rubles, so she entraps him with the sum of 3000. Dmitri in turn lures Ivan to the newly wealthy Katerina in the fanciful belief that he can thereby get free and clear of her. Long accustomed to setting

traps for Dmitri by sending him fractions of his inheritance, old Karamazov sets another by prompting Grushenka to lead Dmitri on falsely—which she does, but only for a time and for reasons unknown to old Karamazov. Seeing the other infatuated drives both Dmitri and his father to frenzy.

In one dramatic instance, this reactivity accounts for the sort of “coincidence” that so fascinates the prosecutor. The prospect that Grushenka will actually take up with old Karamazov has such hallucinatory reality for Dmitri that (as noted) he bursts into his father’s house, ready to kill him then and there, because he seems to see her. “She’s here! . . . I saw her turn towards the house just now. But I couldn’t catch her. Where is she? Where is she?” (165). Upon hearing these magic words, old Karamazov loses his terror and instantly contracts the same hallucinatory sense of Grushenka’s presence. “Ivan! Alyosha! She must be here. Grushenka’s here. He saw her himself, running” (166). But Grushenka, who after all has a life of her own and is not a figment of others’ fantasies, does not happen to be in or near the Karamazov house and is not in the least tempted by the father or his bribe. This is a case of two men in the same place at the same time swept up in a single dangerous folly, not by coincidence but because one reacts to the other.

5. Two Confessions

Coincidentally or not, Dmitri delivers two extended confessions in *The Brothers Karamazov*, one voluntary (to his half-brother Alyosha early in the novel), one involuntary (to his interrogators after his arrest for his father’s murder). In the latter, Dmitri at last discloses

his most closely guarded secret: that the wad of money which suddenly appeared in his hands after the murder of his father came from under his shirt. But only as a result of the most extreme duress does Dmitri finally let go of this humiliating bit of information. He cannot bear the thought that he had the calculation to put half of Katerina's 3000 rubles aside and the weakness of character not to return it. (That the intercepted money was supposed to go to Agafya, a seamstress, never seems to bother him.)

His confession to Alyosha, occupying three chapters—each titled a “Confession of a Passionate Heart,” curiously matching the triplet of “ordeals” in Dmitri's interrogation—reads like an outpouring of the heart and gives every impression of holding nothing back. This impression proves false. As Dmitri later admits to his interrogators, “I didn't dare even to tell Alyosha, my brother, about that fifteen hundred” (599). The closest Dmitri comes to revealing the unspeakable secret of his locket is striking himself on his chest or neck after telling Alyosha, later the same day, that he bears the stigma of a terrible disgrace “here.” “As he said ‘here,’ Dmitri struck his chest with his fist with a strange air, as though the dishonour lay precisely on his chest, in some spot, in a pocket, perhaps, or hanging round his neck” (186). At the time, Alyosha cannot possibly divine what Dmitri's mysterious gesture signifies, and neither can the reader. As for coincidence, while it is true that in this scene Dmitri meets Alyosha at a cross-roads, there is nothing accidental about it; he has been waiting for Alyosha right there (183), at a spot Alyosha will pass on the way to the nearby monastery.

In the course of *The Brothers Karamazov* we learn that the agony of the secret he bears around his neck drives Dmitri to desperation; and it is in this state that he commits the follies and assaults that place him in the public eye and (as noted) inevitably make him the prime

suspect in the brutal murder of his father. In his confession to Alyosha, Dmitri pledges to tell “the whole truth” about Katerina’s visit to collect 4000 rubles (134), and evidently does so. What if he had summoned the courage to tell Alyosha—who loves him and would never lecture him—the whole truth about what he did with the money Katerina later gave *him*?

In this novel concerned not only with what happens but with what could have happened,¹⁴ it’s entirely possible that if Dmitri had poured out his heart to Alyosha (and perhaps literally gotten his secret off his chest), he would not have proceeded to race from one place to another, and ultimately to his father’s very window under cover of darkness, in a state of frantic despair and in a sort of hopeless flight from himself. He might have found enough solace in the act of confiding in his loving brother to avoid this madness. When Dmitri finally reveals his dreadful secret under interrogation—namely, that he has stolen from one woman in order to finance his flight, or imagined flight, with another—his auditors profess not to understand why he finds it so shameful. He would not have received that obtuse response from Alyosha.

It is not just the shame betokened by the locket around his neck but the act of keeping it a strict secret, contrary to the frankness of his nature, that drives Dmitri to distraction and so disorders his behavior that he becomes an ideal screen for the actual murderer. What this means is that the occurrence of two lengthy confessions by Dmitri may not be coincidental after all, in that it is possibly just because the first disburdening of his heart is woefully incomplete that Dmitri eventually finds himself arrested and compelled to reveal his secret. If he had told all to Alyosha as he could not bring himself to do, his own crazed actions might not have enabled the murder of his father, and so he might not have been arrested and subjected

to an official inquisition. At the very least, Alyosha would have been able to confirm his story about the rubles around his neck, thus dispelling the suspicious coincidence of a sum that looks like 3000 suddenly appearing in his hands after the murder.

But Dmitri's confession to Alyosha is incomplete in another critical respect. If he had been truly frank with himself as befits a confession, he would have come to realize that he does not really love Katerina and that this is the reason he cannot manage to act or speak like someone who does. He tells Alyosha that Ivan is in love with her and describes himself as betrothed to her, but conspicuously does not say that he loves her, as if he cannot bring himself to lie but cannot come out with the truth, either. When he exclaims "involuntarily" that Katerina loves her own virtue but not him (138), he does not complete the thought by admitting a reciprocal absence of love. In confirmation of Bakhtin's concept of him as one standing "on the threshold of great internal decisions,"¹⁵ Dmitri is on the verge—but only the verge—of confessing that his love of Katerina is a painful charade. If he had come to recognize the true state of his affections in the course of revealing them to Alyosha, maybe he would not have remained caught in such a furious conflict with himself that he pens a drunken letter to Katerina alternately affirming and denying his love and threatening to break his father's skull to repay her cursed 3000 rubles (752-53)—a performance for which he pays dearly in the end (837). Just as the letter (signed "Your slave and enemy, D. Karamazov" [753]) reads more like a statement of hatred than love, so Katerina switches from love to hatred in the courtroom when she suddenly produces the letter itself to protect Ivan.

The lie that he somehow loves Katerina survives Dmitri's confession to Alyosha (so much of which centers on Katerina) and continues to poison his actions and passions. In the chapter

of the Epilogue titled “For a Moment the Lie Becomes Truth,” the lie is Dmitri and Katerina’s mutual love.

6. A Near-Murder Followed by a Murder

Is it a coincidence that old Karamazov is murdered by Smerdyakov minutes after Dmitri, wielding a weapon and boiling with hatred, vanquishes the urge to kill him as he stands before him? Hardly.

In his confession to Alyosha, Dmitri reports that after Katerina moved to Moscow her fortunes changed “with the swiftness of lightning and the unexpectedness of an Arabian fairy tale” (137). Upon learning of the murder of his father so soon after he managed *not* to murder him, Dmitri exclaims, “It’s marvellous, extraordinary, impossible” (557), as if confronting a coincidence as astounding as three one-eyed viziers in the same place at the same time. But of course there is nothing impossible about the murder of his father. It could not have been impossible, because it occurred.

After his ill-conceived attempts to conjure up 3000 rubles come to nothing, Dmitri, in the last extremity of desperation and with a blunt instrument in his hand, stalks up to his father’s window at night, suspecting Grushenka is within and knowing that the very sum he is in need of lies there also. In an impressive demonstration of unpredictability, the ordinarily irrational Dmitri reads the signs of Grushenka’s absence correctly and somehow finds the fortitude not to surrender to his hatred of his father, instead fleeing the scene only to be caught at the last minute (but not exactly by chance) by the faithful servant, Grigory. Without thinking,

he deals Grigory the blow to the head he did not deal his father and leaves him for dead, unknowingly handing Smerdyakov a golden opportunity.

Finding Grigory unconscious and covered with blood, Smerdyakov seizes the moment and murders old Karamazov. He does not exactly model the deed on Dmitri's assault of Grigory, which he did not witness, but its timing right on the heels of the assault is as noncoincidental as if it *had* been. By his unpremeditated actions, Dmitri, for whom Smerdyakov scarcely registers as a human being, creates the perfect opening and the perfect decoy for Smerdyakov.

Upon killing his biological father with a series of blows to the head which, unfortunately for Dmitri, superficially resemble the treatment he meted out to Grigory, Smerdyakov tears the envelope containing 3000 rubles in pieces and strews them about, knowing this is the kind of thing Dmitri would do. He does not just chance to do what Dmitri would do; he does it by design. And just as he models this action on Dmitri's thoughtless style, so the murder itself reads like Dmitri's deed. This is stagecraft, not coincidence.

Of course Dmitri knows none of this, which is why the news of his father's murder so soon after he fought down the temptation to kill him strikes him as inconceivable. The actual details of the crime emerge only in Smerdyakov's accusatory confession to Ivan in Book XI, but no one in the novel—not even Dmitri's defense lawyer, who believes him guilty—seems really to grasp the noncoincidence of a murder committed by someone in the background following an assault by someone in the spotlight.

For Dmitri the most incriminating coincidence in the entirety of *The Brothers Karamazov* is that Smerdyakov kills old Karamazov seemingly in the manner he himself outlined in his

drunken letter to Katerina: “To-morrow I shall try to get [3000 rubles] from every one, and if I can’t borrow it, I give you my word of honour I shall go to my father and break his skull and take the money . . .” (752). That Smerdyakov breaks the old man’s skull and takes the money therefore looks like proof positive that Dmitri committed a premeditated murder.¹⁶ While the text does not discuss or explain the enactment by a second party of what Dmitri threatened to do in a letter the party never saw, the coincidence falls short of an Arabian fairy tale, and the fact is that Smerdyakov attacks old Karamazov in a manner quite opposed the forthright, frontal style of a man who once fought a duel (8).

Smerdyakov kills old Karamazov *from behind*, using an iron paperweight, an article familiar enough that he later asks Ivan if he remembers it (765). From the author’s point of view, Smerdyakov’s use of such an ordinary, ready-to-hand object is probably a “perfectly simple” act, like the gathering of Dmitri’s interrogators in the same place at the same time, before news of the murder arrives (550). In any event, for one as cowardly, devious and vengeful as Smerdyakov, using a blunt instrument to fracture the skull of a victim with his back turned seems perfectly in character, just as Dmitri’s use of a different blunt instrument to attack Grigory frontally accords with his history of recklessness and indeed his prior assault of Grigory. If in *The Brothers Karamazov* character is fate¹⁷—implying that destiny does not descend from above in the shape of a coincidence—by the same token, action is character.

7. A Near-Miss

When Dmitri steals up to his father's window under cover of darkness, weapon in hand, he strongly suspects that Grushenka is with him—a tragicomical misreading, as Grushenka has no interest in the repulsive Karamazov or his bribe (830). What are the grounds of Dmitri's suspicions? Simply that she was not home when he looked for her a few moments before. At the time, she was speeding toward the village of Mokroe on a mission of her own.

Dmitri appeared at her house "not more than a quarter of an hour after her departure" (472), which means that if he had not wasted perhaps twice that time in an absurdly misconceived visit to Madame Hohlakov immediately beforehand, he would have found Grushenka at home and would not have suspected that she was even then consorting with old Karamazov, he would not have grabbed the pestle near Grushenka's door and crept into his father's garden, he would not have assaulted Grigory, and the murder itself would not have occurred. Here, as elsewhere, Dmitri is not a sacrificial victim of circumstance. His visit to the featherbrained Madame Hohlakov was the last of a series of fool's errands undertaken in an effort to get his hands on 3000 rubles to clear his debt to Katerina. It is not fate's fault that he learned nothing from the utter failure of the prior errands, both of which were quite as mad as his application to Madame Hohlakov. If Dmitri's near-miss of Grushenka is a coincidence, it is one he himself wrote.

After departing from Mme. Hohlakov in a kind of despairing fury but before he makes for his father's house, Dmitri almost literally bumps into a servant of Grushenka's common-law patron, Samsonov, in the town square, and it is after this nameless woman informs him that Grushenka is not, in fact, with Samsonov that he is seized by a crazed suspicion that she is even then with his father. Is Dmitri's encounter with the servant thus an illustration of Victor Terras'

principle that space in *The Brothers Karamazov* “is turned into a stage, where characters who have to meet just happen to cross each other’s paths”?¹⁸ No. It was Dmitri’s own folly that took him to Samsonov, his actual rival for Grushenka and possibly the last man on earth who would come to his assistance. Just as he would not have narrowly missed Grushenka but for his visit to Mme. Hohlakov, he would not have recognized and questioned the servant (and then gone in search of Grushenka) if not for his ludicrously misjudged visit to her patron. He is a victim, if that is the word, of his own fantastic errors of judgment, not of fortune or a trap set by a clever plot. In an alternative *Brothers Karamazov* Dmitri could have missed the old servant and sped directly to his father’s bedroom in one last attempt to secure 3000 rubles, a sum he knows to be there and feels he is owed. Dmitri and the old woman do not have to meet, and if they had not, readers would not have felt something was missing. “In Dostoevsky, plot loses its inevitability.”¹⁹

8. A Calamitous Convergence

How is it that we find the generally aloof Ivan living with his father as the novel opens? According to the narrator, Ivan arrived in town inexplicably, only to initiate the train of events that followed. “Why Ivan Fyodorovitch had come amongst us I remember asking myself at the time with a certain uneasiness. This fateful visit, which was the first step leading to so many consequences, I never fully explained to myself” [14]. It is as if, by the bad luck of coincidence, Ivan arrived at a time and place ripe for disaster. As we later learn, however, Dmitri has

interested Ivan in the fabulously wealthy heiress to whom he is miserably engaged. In all probability, no coincidence is in play.²⁰

Now that the Karamazov family is “united for the first time” (15), is it coincidental that Fyodor Karamazov is murdered? The question answers itself.

Each of the brothers, and there are four, plays a part by action or default in the death of the family patriarch. Without certain ambiguously implicit assurances from Ivan, without Dmitri’s highly distracting sideshow, and without Alyosha’s excusably or inexcusably lax attitude toward protecting his father, Smerdyakov would not have undertaken to murder old Karamazov. Alternatively, if Ivan had heeded his well-founded suspicions of Smerdyakov during their critical first conversation, if Dmitri had confided his closely held secret to the brother he loves, if Alyosha had taken to heart his mentor’s solemn warning or Dmitri’s confession that the mere sight of their father might drive him to murder, the machinery of the murder might not gone into motion. As *The Brothers Karamazov* ends, Dmitri still does not really understand that his actions enabled the murder; Alyosha still has no idea that for some reason he ignored a dire admonition and the evidence of his eyes and allowed a murder to proceed unwitnessed; and Ivan is still wrestling with the intolerable thought that he entered into an obscure pact with the murderer. These acts of complicity are written into the plot of *The Brothers Karamazov*, as if the very architecture of the novel held its most elusive secrets.

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And here I must disagree with the reader of Dostoevsky from whom I have learned the most: Bakhtin. While Bakhtin's writings point straight to the conclusion that "one must not read [*The Brothers Karamazov*] for its plot,"²¹ the mistake, if any, surely lies in *not* attending to the carefully sequenced drama of events in *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is true that the novel's philosophical interludes take place while the plot pauses; but despite their power it would be unwise, even unphilosophical, to abstract these discussions from the narrative context in which they occur, a context meticulously constructed and dramatically compelling. Even as Ivan's creation, the Grand Inquisitor, soliloquizes in the grandest manner on humanity's incapacity for responsibility, Smerdyakov is preparing to test Ivan himself in the here and now, and Dmitri is being sorely tested already. In its subtlety and intricacy, the plot of *The Brothers Karamazov* is the chronicle of such trials. It is not a cage in which the author has trapped his characters, but a stage on which they enact their freedom.

In and of itself, the astonishing construction of *The Brothers Karamazov* refutes Bakhtin's theory that Dostoevsky did not plan, lest he compromise his characters' freedom.²² According to Bakhtin, plot in Dostoevsky serves merely as a contrivance to set up what really matters (dialogue), and speakers rise up from the plot with the autonomy of independent beings. As he wrote in the 1929 edition of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*,

Plot in Dostoevsky is absolutely devoid of any sort of finalizing function. Its goal is to place a person in various situations that expose and provoke him, to bring people together and make them collide in conflict—in such a way, however, that they do not remain within this area of plot-related contact but exceed its bounds. The real

connections begin where the ordinary plot ends, having fulfilled its service function.

(276-77)

From this dismissive comment one would never guess that the plot of *The Brothers Karamazov* was constructed with such care and precision. Dostoevsky invested far too much thought in its intricacies for a critic to reduce it to a “service function,” as if it shared with servants in the novel the quality of being beneath regard. Are we to believe Dostoevsky did not plan Dmitri’s amulet of shame even though Dmitri gestures toward it hundreds of pages before he reveals it, and even though it helps explain his errant actions over that interval? Are we to believe Dostoevsky had no idea that Katerina tempted Dmitri with 3000 rubles until she revealed this near the end of the novel? At the same time, I think we have seen that the intricacy of the plot of *The Brothers Karamazov* does not reduce the major characters to clockwork figures or predictable puppets. In no respect do Dmitri, Ivan, Alyosha, Katerina, Grushenka or indeed others lose their capacity to surprise us, their autonomy, to the constructed character of the plot. Those who argue that Dostoevsky could not have really planned *The Brothers Karamazov* because planning would prejudice his characters’ freedom²³ begin with a false assumption.

Investigating Bakhtin’s thought, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson observe that

Bakhtin provides no sustained readings of whole novels, and so one must guess at how he would analyze the role of extra-plot connections in a specific work. His analysis suggests that the truly central moments of *The Brothers Karamazov* are its great dialogic encounters, which although enabled by the plot seem to arise out of it. They seem to

be somehow “excessive” in terms of the novel’s action. Most likely, Bakhtin would focus on the Grand Inquisitor legend, which seems to have a life of its own; on Ivan’s conversation with the devil; and on Dmitri’s “Confession of a Passionate Heart—in Verse,” in which he describes “the beauty of Sodom” to Alyosha.²⁴

However, the brothers Karamazov dare not suppose they can somehow float themselves out of the responsibilities each has incurred in the course of “the novel’s action.” They are enmeshed in the story of their own acts and failures to act and cannot escape from it or rise free of it. The Grand Inquisitor legend tells of the agonies of freedom, such as Dmitri’s maddening inability to decide what to do with the misappropriated money he wears around his neck—for if he returns it, he has nothing to fund his imaginary escape with Grushenka, and if he doesn’t return it, he is a thief. Just as Ivan wrestles with the question of whether the devil he encounters is merely himself, he wrestles with the issue of whether Smerdyakov acted for him in killing their father.²⁵ In “Confession of a Passionate Heart—in Verse,” upon learning that Alyosha intends to visit Katerina and their father, Dmitri exclaims, “What a coincidence! Why was I waiting for you? . . . Why, to send you to father and to her, Katerina Ivanovna, so as to have done with her and with father” (123). It is just like Dmitri to imagine that he can somehow clear his accounts with both parties at one stroke, another escape fantasy. The fact is that neither Katerina nor old Karamazov, both of whom have already summoned Alyosha, has any intention to oblige Dmitri. Whether all this makes for a coincidence the attentive reader can decide.

To the end, it seems, Dmitri is immersed in the fiction that his life is a tale of coincidence. When he exclaims in the courtroom, “I meant to become an honest man for good,

just at the moment when I was struck down by fate" (805), he appears to mean that by catastrophically bad luck he was arrested for murder just when he was about to run off with Grushenka to a life of virtue. Even with two months to think about the murder of his father, he still does not understand that he made it possible and that its timing had everything to do with his own habit of violence. He was not struck down by fate; rather, he struck Grigory down. By reading his own life as if he were a character in a romance ruled by the magic of coincidence, he shows how not to read *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Committed to the doctrine of historical inevitability, Marxist historians used to say, "It is no accident that . . ." ²⁶ In *The Brothers Karamazov* we learn to question accident without falling back on the conceit of laws of history that determine all things. Dostoevsky opposed that and all forms of determinism with his whole heart, and in *The Brothers Karamazov* created a world of events that surprise us continually. Assuredly there exists no law or theory that would allow us to foretell the continuation of *The Brothers Karamazov* the author may have intended but did not live to write. All we know is that no superior force overrides human agency and that all three surviving brothers—each with the spark of indeterminacy—have much unfinished business. As Bakhtin might put it, they have not spoken their final word. Far from it. They have scarcely begun to grasp (or in Ivan's case, accept) the nature and degree of their complicity in the murder of their father, which is also to say that they do not understand that their own story confirms Fr. Zossima's precept that all are responsible for all.

¹ On coincidence in the Greek romance or novel, see M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 93, 116.

² The intricacy of *The Brothers Karamazov* is established unforgettably in Robert Belknap, *The Structure of The Brothers Karamazov* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1989; orig. pub. 1967). However, the author does not treat coincidence or noncoincidence.

³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Constance Garnett (New York: Vintage, 1955), 853. Subsequent page references given in my text.

⁴ Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* and his use of the same term for Alyosha Karamazov in his notes point to the honorific connotations of this descriptor.

⁵ Cf. 162: "My rule has been that you can always find something devilishly interesting in every woman that you wouldn't find in any other."

⁶ It is only because Kolya Krassotkin turns the schoolboys against Ilyusha after he throws a dog some bread stuffed with a pin that they mock him with the public shaming of his father (650). The disastrous double impact of the pin and beard episodes is noncoincidental.

⁷ For Dmitri's lies, see e.g. 141, 486, 504, 584, 595, 602-3.

⁸ If Dmitri did not lose all self-respect, he would not talk of betaking himself to "the back-alley" (139) in an act of moral suicide and would not plan actual suicide. If he did not lose all respect for others, he would not come so close to killing others he happens to encounter, like Fenya (479, 570) or Grigory.

⁹ "The evidence of the 'sixth' thousand made an extraordinary impression on the two lawyers. They were delighted with this new mode of reckoning, three and three made six, three thousand then and three now made six, that was clear" (608).

¹⁰ That Smerdyakov's feigned fit soon becomes a real and serious one may or may not be coincidental. Given that Ivan and Grushenka become gravely ill for purely nervous or moral reasons, Smerdyakov might conceivably suffer a medical crisis after murdering his father.

¹¹ The merchant defrauds the colonel after gaining his trust by returning the regimental money regularly. Smerdyakov robs (and murders) old Karamazov after gaining his trust by returning 300 rubles he lost when drunk (149).

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), e.g. 101.

¹³ Chariton, *Callirhoe*, tr. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995), 31.

¹⁴ Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994); "The Prosaics of Process," *Literary Imagination* 2 (2000): 377-88.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 62.

¹⁶ The Dmitri Karamazov we observe acts with a striking absence of premeditation. Even when he lures Katerina with the money her father needs desperately, it is not with the fully formed intention of assaulting her. Conversely, when he arrives at the settled intention to commit suicide, events supervene and he puts his intention aside.

¹⁷ Robin Feuer Miller, *The Brothers Karamazov: Worlds of the Novel* (New Haven: Yale UP 2008), 130.

¹⁸ Victor Terras, *A Karamazov Companion: Commentary on the Genesis, Language, and Style of Dostoevsky's Novel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 84.

¹⁹ Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 99.

²⁰ Ivan's "presence in town could have been due simply to Katerina Ivanovna's presence there." Belknap, *The Structure of The Brothers Karamazov*, 29.

²¹ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 249.

²² Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*: 250.

²³ Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 99. On the notebooks as a plan for the novel, see Edward Wasiolek, ed., *The Notebooks for The Brothers Karamazov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 18.

²⁴ Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 248.

²⁵ The devil who tortures Ivan by parroting his own worst ideas has something to do with Smerdyakov, who throws the theory that all is permitted in his face.

²⁶ As noted by the historian Michael Mayer (personal communication).