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## **Bakhtin's Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics and the Ideological Problem of The Brothers Karamazov**

Natalie N. Griner  
*University of Southern Mississippi*

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The University of Southern Mississippi

*Bakhtin's Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and the Ideological Problem of *The Brothers Karamazov*

by

Natalie Griner

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Approved by

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Monika Gehlawat, Ph.D., Thesis Adviser  
Professor of English

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Eric Tribunella, Ph.D., Chair  
Department of English

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Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean  
Honors College

## Abstract

Dostoevsky's final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, strives to resolve the question of God's existence. But many critics have acknowledged that Dostoevsky seems to present Ivan's skeptical voice with equal, if not greater, force than Alyosha's affirmative voice—a feature of the novel that is difficult to explain in the context of Dostoevsky's avowed Christianity. There is an overwhelming consensus among critics that *The Brothers* is a thesis-novel. But in order to establish the novel as a defense of faith, the critic must ultimately dismiss the strength of Ivan's voice; and in attempting to demonstrate that the voice of doubt prevails, the critic must similarly dismiss the value of Alyosha's faith. By utilizing Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, I propose an interpretation of *The Brothers* that does not attempt to resolve this opposition. Because Bakhtin's theory is often seen to sanction all interpretations as equally valid, it has been used to endorse each of these mutually incompatible positions on the novel. But I hope to show that the theory of polyphony is, in its essence, diametrically opposed to the interpretation of Dostoevsky's work as either a defense of faith or a concession to doubt. Further, I propose—contra Bakhtin—that the polyphonic novel *can* be thesis-driven, if its very thesis resides in its formal polyphony. The thesis of *The Brothers*, I argue, does not resolve the question of God's existence, but posits instead that the inability to resolve this question is fundamental to human nature.

Key Words: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Problems of*

*Dostoevsky's Poetics*, polyphony, faith

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Fyodor Dostoevsky's final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), strives to resolve a fundamental problem that underlies much of his work: the question of God's existence. Though the Russian novelist remained an avowed Christian until his death, he maintained this faith in the midst of a constant struggle with doubt. In a personal letter, Dostoevsky writes, "I will tell you that I am a child of the century, a child of disbelief and doubt, I am that today and (I know it) will remain so until the grave. How much terrible torture this thirst for faith has cost me and costs me even now, which is all the stronger in my soul the more arguments I can find against it" (Frank, 220). *The Brothers Karamazov* manifests this internal struggle. Dostoevsky writes, "The chief problem dealt with throughout this particular work is the very one which has, my whole life long, tormented my conscious and subconscious being: The question of the existence of God" (Komroff, xv). In *The Brothers Karamazov*, three brothers—Ivan, Dmitri, and Alyosha Karamazov—suffer from this very question. On the surface, Alyosha, living as a novice in the local monastery, represents the voice of faith, while his older brother, Ivan, represents the voice of doubt. Thus the opposing voices within the novel are embodied by Alyosha and his mentor Father Zossima, on the one hand, and Ivan and his creation the Grand Inquisitor, on the other. Zossima, an elder at the monastery, preaches a message of total faith in God and unquestioning acceptance of the mysteries of the universe; while the Grand Inquisitor—a Cardinal during the Inquisition who is the central character of Ivan's poem about Jesus' return to earth—questions God's wisdom in creating this world and rejects Jesus' message on the grounds that it can never bring



men happiness. Alyosha accepts Zossima's teaching unreservedly, while Ivan, like his Inquisitor, refuses to accept God's world. But although Alyosha is often perceived as the unfailing voice of faith, and Ivan, the staunch atheist, this binary is complicated when the two characters repeatedly cross into each other's camps. Their suffering throughout the novel lies in their ambivalence, their inability to reach a final resolution on the problem of God's existence.

*The Brothers Karamazov* (hereafter *The Brothers*) has accrued an immense body of criticism dealing with the monumental religious and philosophical themes that pervade Dostoevsky's work. Though it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive review of the scholarship existing on Dostoevsky's final novel, certain details of the author's biography are often considered indispensable to understanding the novel's religious theme. As *The Brothers* represents Dostoevsky's ultimate confrontation with the question of God's existence, reflecting his lifelong inner struggle, many critics have emphasized the events of his life surrounding its creation in an attempt to clarify his intentions for the work. *The Brothers* appeared in late nineteenth century Russia, which was undergoing a political evolution that influenced Dostoevsky's life, literary vision, and ultimately, if indirectly, the nature of his faith. The novel, though set against this backdrop, was published during a time of relative calm in Dostoevsky's personal life. He was married to his second wife, Anna Grigorevna; his financial situation—which had always been volatile due to incessant gambling—was finally stable; and his reputation was secure among the Russian intelligentsia. This period of Dostoevsky's life stands in stark contrast to his earlier years. In the 1840s, Dostoevsky's involvement with utopian socialist groups

had led to his arrest. The traumatic events that followed—his death sentence, which was commuted only moments before the time of execution, and his subsequent eight years in exile in Siberia, with no written word save the New Testament—undoubtedly had a profound effect on his faith. And his continuous struggle to comprehend these formative experiences is evidenced in his greatest novels: *Notes from the Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868), *Demons* (1871), and finally, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). But while Dostoevsky's later years represented a brief reprieve from many of his struggles, his faith was further tested when his three-year-old son Alyosha died of epilepsy in 1878, a condition with which Dostoevsky himself also suffered.

There are a couple of facts concerning *The Brothers'* conception that tend to play a crucial role in how critics interpret Dostoevsky's religious theme. First, Dostoevsky's declared intention to refute Ivan's arguments through Father Zossima's testament, primarily in Book Six, has led some critics to argue that the novel must be interpreted as an unequivocal defense of faith. Of course, this leads to the question of whether Dostoevsky himself considered his refutation a success. As critic Malcolm Jones notes, Dostoevsky was "very worried by the thought that he might fail to refute Ivan's blasphemy convincingly" (xvi). Second, Dostoevsky suggests in his preface entitled "From the Author" that he intends to write a sequel: "The main novel is the second one—about the activities of my hero in our time" (3). While this could mean that the refutation provided in *The Brothers* is incomplete, there is some debate over whether Dostoevsky writes this preface in his own voice or in the voice of his narrator. And though there is evidence in Dostoevsky's

notebooks of plans for the rest of the projected work, which was to be entitled *The Life of a Great Sinner*, Jones points out that the notebooks of Dostoevsky's other novels demonstrate the mutability of such plans. While there is a large body of scholarship on *The Brothers* that attempts to explain the novel in terms of Dostoevsky's biography and convictions, the alleged incompleteness of the work is often taken for granted as the only explanation for the novel's fundamental ambivalence and inconclusiveness.

*The Brothers* has inspired an unusually polarized response from critics since its initial reception. Many have acknowledged that Dostoevsky seems to present Ivan's skeptical voice with equal, if not greater, force than Alyosha's affirmative voice—a feature of the novel that is difficult to explain in the context of Dostoevsky's avowed Christianity. This problem has caused critical discussion on the novel to become locked into a binary of its own: in order to reconcile the author's ideological position with the novel's, the critic must either deny the force of Ivan's voice, or deny the conviction of Dostoevsky's faith. In the first model, the critic argues that despite the apparently equal treatment of Ivan's voice, it is Alyosha's voice that ultimately triumphs in the novel.<sup>1</sup> In the second, the critic calls Dostoevsky's faith into question, arguing that Ivan's voice is presented with greater force because it is the voice with which Dostoevsky in fact identifies.<sup>2</sup> Critic Lee Trepanier describes this fundamental divide in early responses to *The Brothers*: “Both liberal atheists and conservative believers upbraided Dostoevsky for his alleged identification with

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<sup>1</sup> A few critics who seem to fall into this category are Joseph Frank, Lee Trepanier, James Scanlan, and Roger Cox.

<sup>2</sup> Critics such as Andrea Lešić-Thomas and Vladimir Kantor.

the Inquisitor's position against God. However, a minority of critics, such as Vladimir Soloviev, applauded Dostoevsky's exploration and defense of Christianity" (197).

Despite their fundamental opposition, these two conflicting approaches to *The Brothers* ultimately rest on a shared assumption—the assumption that it is in fact a thesis-novel, a novel that is centered on the advancement and defense of a particular position. “*The Brothers Karamazov* is after all a thesis novel, no matter how thoroughly dramatized that thesis may be,” writes Roger Cox in his book *Between Earth and Heaven*, “Differences of interpretation arise not from any dispute as to whether the novel is based on a thesis, but from disagreement as to precisely what that thesis is” (214). If the novel is based on a thesis, this thesis must address the novel's central problem, which explains why the criticism can generally be divided based on how the critic classifies the novel's position on the existence of God. But the novel resists this reductive approach by creating an irreconcilable binary. In order to establish the novel as a defense of faith, the critic must ultimately dismiss the undeniable persuasion of Ivan's voice within the novel. But in attempting to demonstrate that the voice of doubt prevails, the critic must similarly dismiss the value of Alyosha's faith. Though both interpretations find support within the novel, neither provides the entire picture. Although I will argue that the novel does in fact possess a thesis, I will propose a thesis that lies outside of this framework and thus accounts for the strength of both voices within the novel.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), Mikhail Bakhtin—Russian philosopher and prominent critic of Dostoevsky's work—seems to offer an

explanation for the polarization of critical response to *The Brothers*. I will argue that, in doing so, he also provides an indication of the novel's true thesis. Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky has created a completely new form of the novel, which he terms "polyphonic," its chief characteristic being "*a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices*" (6). In describing the polyphonic nature of Dostoevsky's work, Bakhtin writes, "In actual fact, the utterly incompatible elements comprising Dostoevsky's material are distributed among several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses; they are presented not within a single field of vision but within several fields of vision, each full and of equal worth" (16). It is this feature of Dostoevsky's work that has caused such polarization of opinion on the novel's thesis; in fact, Bakhtin's theory of polyphony is often used by the critic as a license to, in Trepanier's words, "construct the novel's significance any way he wishes" (197). But this is a misunderstanding of Bakhtin's theory; rather than sanctioning the contradictory interpretations of Dostoevsky's work—a defense of his faith or a concession to doubt—as equally valid, Bakhtin gives us an alternative approach that transcends this dichotomy. Of Dostoevsky's work, Bakhtin writes, "Within the limits of the novel the heroes' worlds interact by means of the event, but these interrelationships, as we have said before, are the last thing that can be reduced to thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" (26). By arguing for the triumph of either the voice of doubt or of faith, the critic attempts just this sort of reduction. Bakhtin repeatedly suggests that the polyphonic novel is not reducible to a thesis and ultimately presents *The Brothers* as the culmination of Dostoevsky's polyphonic artistic vision. Thus, Bakhtin does not

consider *The Brothers* a thesis-driven novel; for Bakhtin, a thesis within polyphony is impossible.

Although Bakhtin intends to examine Dostoevsky's poetics only, his suggestion that the polyphonic novel cannot be reduced to a thesis has great implications for the ideological problem of *The Brothers*. If the novel lacks a thesis, then it cannot take a position on the question of the existence of God, but demonstrates instead that it is impossible for man to ever resolve this question. However, after following Bakhtin's theory to this conclusion, it becomes clear that *The Brothers* itself provides a counterexample to Bakhtin's position that the polyphonic novel does not possess a thesis: the thesis of *The Brothers*, in fact, lies in this very refusal to take a position on the question of God's existence. Therefore, I argue that the polyphonic novel *can* be thesis-driven, if its very thesis resides in its formal polyphony. This polyphonic thesis must assert the "unfinalizable" nature of man, which Bakhtin identifies as the ultimate value of the polyphonic novel. The thesis of *The Brothers*, then, does not resolve the question of God's existence, but posits instead that the inability to resolve this question is fundamental to human nature—not only is man capable of simultaneously experiencing the extreme polarities of doubt and faith, but he cannot experience one without the other, and each internal voice is strengthened by the opposition. Because Bakhtin identifies the "carnivalized" laughter present in Dostoevsky's work as a representation of the simultaneous affirmation of these polarities, Alyosha's laughter in the final scene is pivotal, ultimately serving as a final confirmation of the novel's polyphonic thesis. While Bakhtin suggests that the very attempt to attribute a thesis to Dostoevsky's

work is a mistake, I argue that the mistake lies, not in the assumption that the novel possesses a thesis, but in the false dichotomy that is seen to follow—the reductive idea that if the novel possesses a thesis, it must be either a defense of faith or a concession to doubt.

Bakhtin opens his discussion of Dostoevsky's work with a problematic distinction between form and content: "The present book is devoted to problems of Dostoevsky's *poetics*," he writes, "and surveys his work from that viewpoint *only*" (3). 'Poetics' is a term that generally refers to the theory of literary form; Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's critics have focused primarily on the ideological problems of his work and have thereby missed his fundamental structural innovation in the genre of the novel. In distinguishing his approach from that of previous critics, Bakhtin seems to define 'poetics' in the strictest sense, suggesting that he will consider the form of Dostoevsky's work in a way that is entirely independent of its ideological content. But while Bakhtin claims to discuss Dostoevsky's poetics only, his theory of polyphony refutes any interpretation that would ascribe validity to a single voice in Dostoevsky's work—whether the voice of doubt or of faith—and is thus incompatible with any approach that claims to solve the ideological problem of the novel in this way. He writes, "Everyone interprets in his own way Dostoevsky's ultimate word, but all equally interpret it as a *single* word, a *single* voice, a *single* accent, and therein lies their fundamental mistake" (43). Bakhtin terms this type of approach 'monologic,' as opposed to polyphonic, in that it posits that only one of the voices within a work possesses full validity. But if the novel does not affirm the validity of a single voice among the mutually incompatible voices it presents, it fails

to answer its central question of God's existence. In refuting this approach to *The Brothers*, a novel in which each competing voice clearly represents an ideological position, Bakhtin's theory becomes inseparable from the novel's ideological problem.

Despite the implication of Bakhtin's opening disclaimer that his theory is indifferent to the ideological content of Dostoevsky's work, Bakhtin's theory actually demonstrates how Dostoevsky addresses his ideological problem through form. In its rejection of any approach that would reduce Dostoevsky to a "single word," Bakhtin's theory of polyphony does not endorse all interpretations as equally valid, but ultimately leads, paradoxically, to a single conclusion on the ideological import of Dostoevsky's work: the utter inconclusiveness of all conclusions, due to the "unfinalizable" nature of man. If Bakhtin's theory accurately describes Dostoevsky's final novel, neither the voice of doubt nor the voice of faith ultimately "wins out." The inevitable conclusion is that, in the face of the question of the existence of God, man is forever trapped in a position of uncertainty. I contend that this very notion of unfinalizability—which is ultimately the novel's thesis—rests on the novel's utter inconclusiveness, a quality inherent to its formal polyphony.



## Chapter 2: Review of Criticism on *The Brothers Karamazov*

### I. Two Positions on the Novel's Thesis

Bakhtin's theory of polyphony challenges the binary that frames criticism on *The Brothers*. Among critics who consider *The Brothers* a thesis-novel in the monologic sense, the question of whether the novel is ultimately a defense of faith centers on the debate over the significance of authorial intent. Those who argue that the voice of faith is strongest in the novel tend to defend this interpretation by maintaining its consistency with Dostoevsky's intentions. Joseph Frank—author of the preeminent biography of the novelist, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*—holds this position, as well as critic Lee Trepanier. Trepanier's interpretation matters because he uses Bakhtin's theory to support his argument that the voice of faith ultimately triumphs in *The Brothers*. Both Frank and Trepanier base their interpretations of *The Brothers* on the ideas expressed in Dostoevsky's nonfiction and approach the novel as an expression of Dostoevsky's ideological position. This type of interpretation posits that the arguments of Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor are refuted by the action of the latter section of the novel, namely, Ivan's breakdown due to his rejection of God and Alyosha's demonstrations of active love. In his article "The Politics and Experience of Active Love in *The Brothers Karamazov*," Trepanier describes the position of this group of critics, himself included: "In this book, the chief spokespersons for Christianity, Alyosha and Zossima, refute Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor not by logic and reason, but rather by indirection and example" (198). In his critical biography of Dostoevsky, Frank concludes his discussion of *The Brothers* with this interpretation of the novel's ending: "And just as those earlier

examples pointed to the moral of the story, so Dostoevsky reaffirms, in a naively acceptable and touching form, the basic beliefs and moral-religious convictions he has sought to champion so peerlessly all through his greatest novel" (911). For Frank and Trepanier, the voice of faith unquestionably conquers the voice of doubt in Dostoevsky's work. But both of their interpretations are heavily guided by the position, based on Dostoevsky's letters and nonfiction writings, that this is what Dostoevsky intended.

Those critics, who, on the other hand, argue that the voice of doubt is too strong to be overcome in the novel, are seen to dismiss the relevance of the author's intentions to the interpretation of his work. There are some who consider Dostoevsky's intentions irrelevant; for example, critic Gorman Beauchamp points out, "D. H. Lawrence and others have argued that, whatever Dostoevsky's intent, the Grand Inquisitor speaks the truth about mankind" (142). But the majority of critics who take the position that the voice of doubt is insurmountable in the novel defend this position not by disregarding the author's intentions, but by calling his faith into question. Critic Michael Stoeber summarizes this approach:

Many commentators regard Fyodor Dostoevsky's confessional faith stance with suspicion...some scholars argue, this optimistic and positive stance lacks the level of forcefulness, assurance, and cogency that is conveyed in his religious critique, and the reader is left with unresolved tensions and questions that are often interpreted to reflect Dostoevsky's own ambiguity on these matters. So, they proclaim,

Dostoevsky's doubts remain ever unappeased, and Ivan's skepticism ultimately wins out. (26)

According to this interpretation, Dostoevsky subconsciously identifies with the position of his atheist characters, which is why the voice of doubt is so much more powerful than the voice of faith in his work. Rather than disregarding the author's intentions, this psychoanalytic approach appeals to intentions that may be unknown even to the author himself. But instead of providing a framework from which to understand the novel, this approach uses the novel as a means of understanding its author. While it is sometimes difficult to determine the nature of an author's intentions based on his explicit statements in nonfiction writings, it seems impossible to draw a stronger conclusion based on implicit intentions attributed to the same source. These two conflicting approaches appeal equally to the biography of the author in order to legitimate their respective interpretations, and thus each fails to capture the essence of the novel itself insofar as it forces the novel's thesis to coincide with a particular reading of the author's ideology external to the work.

## II. The Camus Problem

In his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus—French novelist and existentialist—struggles with this problem of authorial intent in relation to the ideological problem of *The Brothers*. While his final conclusion on the novel is ultimately the contrary of Bakhtin's, Camus' analysis of *The Brothers* is significant to this discussion due to the fundamental similarity between his concept of the absurd work of art and Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel. Though Camus has been

accused of emphasizing the ambiguities of Dostoevsky's faith in order to use Dostoevsky's atheist characters as positive symbols of his absurdist philosophy, Camus' interpretation of *The Brothers* is an exception. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus ultimately argues that the voice of faith is victorious in *The Brothers*, concurring with what most critics consider to be Dostoevsky's explicit intention:

Then again in the last pages of his last novel, at the conclusion of that gigantic combat with God, some children ask Aliocha: "Karamazov, is it true what religion says, that we shall rise from the dead, that we shall see one another again?" And Aliocha answers: "Certainly, we shall see one another again, we shall joyfully tell one another everything that has happened." Thus Kirilov, Stavrogin, and Ivan are defeated. *The Brothers Karamazov* replies to *The Possessed*. And it is indeed a conclusion. (110-111)

In describing the ending of *The Brothers* as conclusive, Camus points to the fact that Alyosha is given the final word. Because Alyosha represents the voice of faith throughout the novel, Camus considers this choice of ending a deliberate privileging of Alyosha's position in a final attempt to overcome the voice of doubt and impose resolution, supplying an affirmative answer to the question of God's existence. This interpretation of the ending is also central to the arguments put forth by critics like Frank and Trepanier. In the case of this novel, at least, Camus explicitly uses Dostoevsky's atheist characters as positive symbols of his philosophy in opposition to what he considers the intentions of their creator. But in doing so, he continues to consider Dostoevsky's intentions significant for the interpretation of the novel itself.

Although Camus considers Dostoevsky's intention for *The Brothers* to be a final affirmation of his faith and reads the ending as the realization of that intention, he too calls Dostoevsky's faith into question: "It is hard to believe that a novel sufficed to transform into joyful certainty the suffering of a lifetime. One commentator correctly pointed out that Dostoevsky is on Ivan's side and that the affirmative chapters took three months of effort whereas what he called 'the blasphemies' were written in three weeks in a state of excitement" (111). The "blasphemies" of which Camus speaks are the chapters in which Ivan's voice is the strongest, such as "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor"—the chapters that present Ivan's unrelenting indictment of God and his creation. Although this appears to be a perfect example of the psychoanalytic approach described by Stoeber, Camus himself does not seem to consider suspicion of Dostoevsky's faith sufficient reason to argue that it is the atheist who triumphs in Dostoevsky's novel. Even if the textual unconscious seems strongly in favor of Ivan's voice, Camus concludes that this fact is ultimately superseded by Dostoevsky's conscious choice to give Alyosha the final word, which establishes the novel as a defense of faith.

Despite his conclusion that the novel is ultimately a defense of faith, Camus cites *The Brothers* as a work that approximates his vision of the "absurd" novel. An absurd work of art, as Camus conceives it, must confront the "absurd problem"—the conflict between an irrational world and the human longing for meaning—without attempting to provide a solution. He writes, "It is lucid thought that provokes it, but in that very act that thought repudiates itself. It will not yield to the temptation of adding to what is described a deeper meaning that it knows to be illegitimate" (97).

Camus identifies Ivan Karamazov as an absurd character, in that he does not yield to this temptation. Ivan confronts the idea that 'If God does not exist, everything is permitted,' without resorting to the convenient conclusion, 'Therefore, God exists.' But with the ending of *The Brothers*, Camus argues that Dostoevsky ultimately yields to temptation, affirming the existence of God and the afterlife and negating Ivan's courage in the face of the absurd: "Having reached the end, the creator makes his choice against his characters. That contradiction thus allows us to make a distinction. It is not an absurd work that is involved here, but a work that propounds the absurd problem" (112). Until this point, the novel explores the problem of an absurd, irrational world without attempting to provide a solution; but the affirmative ending undercuts this achievement, preventing the novel from qualifying as an absurd work of art. The absurd novel does not allow for conclusions, and for Camus, *The Brothers* is conclusive.

Camus would disagree with Cox's pronouncement that *The Brothers* is a thesis-novel, placing him in another category than most critics: "The greatest novelists are philosophical novelists—that is, the contrary of thesis-writers," he writes, "For instance, Balzac, Sade, Melville, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Proust, Malraux, Kafka, to cite but a few" (101). According to Camus, Dostoevsky is not a thesis-writer, and with the ending of *The Brothers*, he contradicts himself: he forces the novel to be conclusive, imposing a thesis on what was otherwise not a thesis-driven novel. Camus' classification of Dostoevsky as "the contrary of thesis-writers" resembles Bakhtin's position, making his analysis of *The Brothers* significant to the discussion of the novel's polyphonic thesis. Camus' absurd work of art and

Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel share an important condition: neither allow for any type of thesis or conclusion. But because of their very different positions on the ending, the two of them ultimately disagree about whether *The Brothers* satisfies this requirement. Where Camus feels that Dostoevsky imposes a forced conclusion, Bakhtin suggests that the novel is purposefully inconclusive: "In essence only *The Brothers Karamazov* has a completely polyphonic ending, but precisely for that reason, from the ordinary (that is, the monologic) point of view, the novel remained uncompleted" (40). Though Bakhtin does not present his interpretation of the ending, this comment holds the key to an application of his theory of polyphony to the novel. If the ending of *The Brothers* is completely polyphonic, "*a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices*" remains—neither the voice of doubt nor the voice of faith is refuted, and no resolution is achieved.

### Chapter 3: The Bakhtin Solution

By asserting that the ending of *The Brothers* is completely polyphonic, Bakhtin provides a way to justify Camus' suspicion of the novel's positive conclusion without calling Dostoevsky's faith into question or forcing him into a contradiction. I contend that Camus' suspicion is justified, but not for the reasons he concludes. Dostoevsky does not impose a forced conclusion on his characters because his very thesis lies in the inability of man to resolve the question of God's existence, and thus proposes unfinalizability as a fundamental condition of human experience. The novel is in fact thesis-driven, but in this *polyphonic* sense. Alyosha's response to Kolya's question in the final scene stands, at face value, as an affirmation of the existence of God and the afterlife. But I will attempt to show that Alyosha's laughter—which is ultimately a symbol of his own personal unfinalizability—serves to completely undermine the conclusiveness of his response: “Certainly we shall rise, certainly we shall see and gladly, joyfully tell one another all that has been,’ Alyosha replied, half laughing, half in ecstasy” (776). Camus reads the ending as conclusive because he fails to see the significance of Alyosha's laughter, which is demonstrated by his decision to end his quotation of the final scene directly before this laughter is revealed.

#### I. Problems of Applying Bakhtin's Theory to *The Brothers*

Not only is Bakhtin's comment on the ending unexplained, but his analysis of the novel as a whole is somewhat brief. Bakhtin does not engage in a systematic analysis of the text, but focuses on certain passages at different points throughout



his book in order to make claims encompassing Dostoevsky's entire oeuvre. Wayne C. Booth writes of Bakhtin's approach, "His failure to settle into sustained study of any one of Dostoevsky's works and his persistently high level of generality often make me impatient for more of the sort of analysis he is capable of" (xxvi). This "high level of generality" causes disagreement on the implications of Bakhtin's theory of polyphony for Dostoevsky's individual works. The disagreement is increased in the case of *The Brothers*, as Bakhtin is primarily concerned with Dostoevsky's earlier works in *Problems*, spending comparatively little time analyzing his final novel. That Bakhtin's analysis of *The Brothers* lacks direct literary interpretation needn't indicate its incompatibility with his theory; to the contrary, he suggests that Dostoevsky's final novel is the culmination of his polyphonic artistic vision by singling it out as the only work with a completely polyphonic ending. But his minimal engagement with the novel leaves room for much debate as to how this polyphony is realized in *The Brothers*.

As Trepanier points out, Bakhtin provides an explanation of the polarization of critical opinion on the novel, not a sanction of it. But although Trepanier attempts to "reclaim Bakhtin" from those critics whom he believes have distorted Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, his interpretation of *The Brothers* seems to represent the very thing that Bakhtin rejects—Trepanier's interpretation of *The Brothers* as a defense of faith ultimately reduces Dostoevsky's work to a monologic thesis. In rejecting all interpretations that involve such a reduction, Bakhtin rejects the idea that any of Dostoevsky's novels contain a philosophical finalization affirming one position and denying the others. He writes of Dostoevsky's work, "But it is futile to seek in it a

*systemically monologic*, even if dialectical, *philosophical* finalization—and not because the author has failed in his attempts to achieve it, but because it did not enter into his design” (31). By asserting that the ending of *The Brothers* is completely polyphonic, he argues that none of the voices present in the work have been refuted, and therefore no philosophical finalization has been achieved. But Trepanier’s thesis, though it appeals to Bakhtin’s authority, emphatically asserts a philosophical finalization: “*The Brothers*, therefore, is not a polyphonic novel in the sense that no one view or position is privileged over another. Rather, the unity in diversity that Bakhtin has proclaimed can be located in the teachings of Zossima” (204). Trepanier’s intention to “reclaim Bakhtin” implies that he will attempt to reach a more accurate understanding of Bakhtin’s theory as Bakhtin himself conceived it. But by creating a divide between the concepts of polyphony and unity, Trepanier seems to stray further from Bakhtin’s intention. In attempting to use Bakhtin to argue that the voice of faith ultimately triumphs in *The Brothers*, Trepanier actually demonstrates the incompatibility of Bakhtin’s theory with such an interpretation; choosing sides within the polyphonic framework collapses its dialectical energy, negating the novel’s expression of the unfinalizable nature of man.

Trepanier’s conception of the unity of *The Brothers* is an ideological unity, grounded in Zossima’s teachings of active love and universal responsibility. Because this interpretation implies that Zossima’s voice is privileged—the only voice that proves to be fully valid—Trepanier’s thesis involves an understanding of Bakhtin’s concept of unity as somehow in opposition to his concept of polyphony. But this opposition is not present in Bakhtin’s theory. In fact, it is immediately after

asserting that the incompatible positions within Dostoevsky's work are presented as equally valid that Bakhtin introduces his conception of unity: "It is not the material directly but these worlds, their consciousnesses with their individual fields of vision that combine in a higher unity, a unity, so to speak, of the second order, the unity of a polyphonic novel" (16). The type of unity that Bakhtin describes—a unity that would not undermine the polyphonic nature of Dostoevsky's work—involves the combination of mutually incompatible positions in such a way that each remains equally valid, rather than a unity that can be located in one position, which would necessarily invalidate the others.

Although it may be difficult to define what this unity *is*, Bakhtin is clear about what it is not. He repeatedly emphasizes the incompatibility of the polyphonic novel with a "mono-ideational framework," revealing that the unity of the polyphonic novel is not an ideological unity. In the notes for his revised second edition of *Problems*, Bakhtin expresses this idea simply and concretely: "The unity of the whole in Dostoevsky is not a matter of plot nor of monologic idea, that is, not mono-ideational. It is a unity above plot and above idea" (298). When Trepanier concludes that the unity of *The Brothers* is an ideological unity located in the teachings of Zossima, he completely departs from Bakhtin's position on Dostoevsky's work. Bakhtin describes the mistake made by one critic whom he believes came close to realizing Dostoevsky's polyphonic vision: "So Askoldov, too, monologizes Dostoevsky's artistic world, shifting the *dominant* of that world to a monological sermon and thereby reducing characters to the status of simple illustrations to that sermon" (13). Trepanier makes the same mistake: he argues

that Alyosha's interactions with Grushenka and with the children demonstrate the power of Zossima's teachings, quite literally reducing Dostoevsky's characters to illustrations of Zossima's sermon. Trepanier fails to see that Bakhtin's theory of polyphony cannot be said to singly affirm either side of the faith-doubt dichotomy, as it locates the essence of Dostoevsky's work in the simultaneous affirmation of both. One might argue that the polyphonic unity of *The Brothers* lies in this simultaneous affirmation—or at least, articulation—of the polarities of doubt and faith.

Like most critics who argue for an interpretation of *The Brothers* as a defense of faith, Trepanier's analysis of the novel is informed by Dostoevsky's intentions as expressed in his nonfiction writings. Trepanier distinguishes himself from those whom he feels have distorted Bakhtin's theory of polyphony by classifying himself as a member of the group of critics who "start from the opposite assumption as the Bakhtin camp: the author's views are relevant to the interpretation of the novel" (197). In his conclusion, he makes a final appeal to Dostoevsky's nonfiction, revealing the level to which it has dictated his interpretation: "Furthermore," he writes, "such a position of polyphony—all diversity and no unity—is clearly repudiated by Dostoevsky's personal and public writings" (204). But disregarding the issue of how one defines Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and its relation to diversity and unity—which Trepanier feels has been misrepresented—the theory remains unsusceptible to this form of repudiation. Bakhtin explicitly affirms that Dostoevsky's nonfiction is monologic, but this fact does not compromise his theory of polyphony as it applies only to Dostoevsky's art. Of Dostoevsky's nonfiction,

Bakhtin writes: “he expressed definite philosophical, religious-philosophical, and socio-political *ideas*; he expressed them there (that is, in the articles) as *his own confirmed* ideas in a *systemically monologic* or rhetorically monologic (*in fact, journalistic*) form” (91). There is no “position of polyphony” to be found in Dostoevsky’s nonfiction because polyphony is not an ideological position but a form of “artistic thought” (92). By making this distinction between Dostoevsky’s personal ideology and his artistic expression, Bakhtin provides a solution to the problem of authorial intent that is largely responsible for the central schism in criticism on *The Brothers*. Although Bakhtin explicitly rejects any interpretation that draws its legitimacy from the concurrence between Dostoevsky’s ideas expressed in his nonfiction and the ideas of his hero, he does in fact consider the author’s intentions relevant, which is illustrated by his frequent references to Dostoevsky’s intentional creation of the polyphonic novel. Bakhtin’s theory does not rest on the position that the author’s intentions are irrelevant, but instead holds Dostoevsky’s intention to be something other than a defense of his faith.

## II. Dostoevsky’s Polyphonic Artistic Vision

According to Bakhtin’s theory, Dostoevsky’s artistic vision lies in the expression of the unfinalizable nature of man—the concept that I argue is embodied in *The Brothers’* polyphonic thesis. Bakhtin writes, “Every *true* reader of Dostoevsky...can sense this peculiar *active broadening* of his consciousness... primarily in the sense of a special dialogic mode of communication with the autonomous consciousnesses of others, something never before experienced, an

active dialogic penetration into the unfinalizable depths of man” (68). This understanding of Dostoevsky’s artistic intention is drawn directly from the works themselves, and thus offers an explanation of their polyphonic nature: only the polyphonic work allows for the expression of the unfinalizability of man. In *The Brothers*, the voices of Ivan and Alyosha are rendered as equally valid because this is crucial to Dostoevsky’s artistic vision. The clearest definition of what Bakhtin refers to as the ‘unfinalizability of man’ is revealed through his identification of this theme in Dostoevsky’s work: the unfinalizability of Dostoevsky’s heroes, Bakhtin argues, lies in their inability to resolve an idea. He writes, “And in this resolution of a thought (an idea) lies their entire real life and their own personal unfinalizability” (87). The unfinalizability of man *is* the unfinalizability of his idea. This theme manifests itself in Dostoevsky’s work as the heroes’ inability to reach a personal philosophical finalization.

In accordance with Bakhtin’s theory, it is the unfinalizability of Dostoevsky’s hero that leads directly to the lack of philosophical finalization in his work as a whole: “The author does indeed leave the final word to his hero” (53). Bakhtin uses the word ‘hero’ throughout his book to refer to multiple characters within a single work; we needn’t attempt to determine which of the Karamazov brothers is the hero, as he refers to both Ivan and Alyosha as Dostoevsky’s heroes. Bakhtin occasionally suggests that the hero may overcome his indeterminacy—for example, he writes that “...the ‘*truth*’ at which the hero must and indeed ultimately does arrive through clarifying the events to himself, can essentially be for Dostoevsky only *the truth of the hero’s own consciousness*” (55). But in a later statement, which seems far more

significant than its parenthetical status would suggest, Bakhtin reveals that this type of personal truth can never be final: “for self-consciousness cannot be finalized *from within*” (73). For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s intention to represent the unfinalizable nature of man, combined with his refusal to impose a final word on his hero, leads to the deliberate lack of philosophical finalization in his work.

By describing *The Brothers* as conclusive, Camus argues that Dostoevsky’s choice of ending represents a deliberate privileging of Alyosha’s position in an attempt to finally overcome the voice of doubt and impose resolution—a conclusion that would amount to philosophical finalization. This interpretation of the ending appears, at first glance, to be supported by the text: not only does the novel end with Alyosha’s voice, but with his explicit affirmation of the existence of the afterlife, which is equivalent, for Dostoevsky, to an affirmation of God’s existence. However, in a novel that is so deeply characterized by internal struggle, the external appearance of resolution is not enough. As Dmitri Karamazov observes, “Here the devil is struggling with God, and the battlefield is the human heart” (108). *The Brothers* fully realizes Dostoevsky’s theme of the unfinalizable nature of man, setting the stage for this seemingly affirmative conclusion. If the unfinalizability of Dostoevsky’s hero lies in his inability to resolve an idea, the ending of *The Brothers* must demonstrate that Alyosha has overcome this personal unfinalizability and reached a final resolution within himself in order to resolve its central problem of God’s existence. But I will argue that, in the context of the novel as a whole, Alyosha’s laughter in the final scene becomes the ultimate confirmation of his

personal unfinalizability, undermining the apparent conclusiveness of his words and affirming the novel's polyphonic thesis.



## Chapter 4: Interpreting *The Brothers* as “Completely Polyphonic”

### I. The Unfinalizability of Dostoevsky’s Hero

In describing the personal unfinalizability of Dostoevsky’s heroes, Bakhtin writes, “Dostoevsky’s hero never for an instant coincides with himself” (51)—a statement that perfectly illustrates the problem of attempting to classify Ivan and Alyosha according to their positions on the existence of God. Ivan fully embodies this lack of coincidence; his constant wavering on the question of God’s existence ensures that his position at one moment does not coincide with his position at another, making the attempt to classify him as an atheist ultimately reductive, no matter how obvious it may at first appear. Bakhtin captures this quality in his further description of Dostoevsky’s heroes, emphasizing that eluding all definition is a function of their personal unfinalizability: “They all acutely sense their own inner unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow, as it were, from within and to render *untrue* any externalizing and finalizing definition of them” (59). The position Ivan espouses in the chapter, “Rebellion”—which contains the most complete exposition of his ideological position—cannot be termed atheism, as he explicitly makes a distinction between the rejection of God and the rejection of his creation. In this chapter, Ivan claims emphatically, “It’s not that I don’t accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket,” describing himself as a “believer” (245). He professes belief in God, “his wisdom and his purpose,” “eternal harmony,” and “the Word for whom the universe is yearning, and who himself was ‘with God,’ who himself is God” (235).

Despite a certain level of sarcasm, there is some truth behind Ivan's words, which is demonstrated later on in the torment he experiences over his struggle with these questions. Yet early in the novel, the narrator informs us that Alyosha, who is characterized as extremely perceptive, "knew perfectly well that his brother was an atheist" (31). In fact, when questioned by his father in Alyosha's presence, Ivan asserts unequivocally that there is no God and no immortality. Ivan's inability to resolve the question of God's existence exemplifies Bakhtin's concept of the personal unfinalizability of Dostoevsky's heroes. But while Ivan's inability to resolve this question is much more overt, the externalization of his struggle provides a framework from which to examine the subtle cues that point to the same phenomenon within Alyosha himself. Thus it is helpful to begin with an analysis of how Ivan's unfinalizability manifests within the novel.

When introducing Ivan, the narrator reveals that he has written an article on the separation of church and state, which was published in a major newspaper. The narrator's description of the extremely polarized response to Ivan's article resembles the wide-ranging response that the novel itself would receive:

The main thing was the tone of the article and its remarkably unexpected conclusion. And yet many churchmen decidedly counted the author as one of their own. Suddenly, however, along with them, not only secularists but even atheists themselves began to applaud from their side. Finally some quick-witted people concluded that the whole article was just a brazen farce and mockery. (16)

Like the novel itself, Ivan's article provides each position with support; and yet, it is this very feature that undermines all positions—the quality which leads some to conclude that the article is nothing more than a mockery. Of Ivan's article, Frank writes, "Ivan had presented both extreme positions with equal force, and each party thought it could claim him as an advocate. In reality his apparent refusal to choose already presents the inner conflict that will ultimately lead to his mental breakdown" (854). Frank sees weakness in Ivan's ability to grasp mutually incompatible positions, despite the fact that this is the central feature of the novel itself. But Frank also makes an important point that is often overlooked by those who argue that the voice of doubt ultimately triumphs in the novel: Ivan himself presents both positions with equal force, demonstrating that his religious critique is not strong enough to silence the voice of faith within and provide him with resolution.

During the meeting at the monastery in Book II, Ivan demonstrates his lack of resolution while discussing his article with the monks. Although he speaks openly about the article, reiterating its points with apparent sincerity and causing one of the monks to speak up in agreement, Ivan conceals his intention in writing it. His argument begins from a premise: if the proper role of the Church on earth according to Christ's teachings is to be established, then every state must be transformed into the Church. When combined with the premise that the Church *should* be established on earth according to Christ's teaching, it follows that the separation of Church and state must be revoked. But nothing Ivan says actually reveals whether or not he affirms this hidden second premise. It is the previously held beliefs of the listeners that determine their perception of Ivan's argument. In projecting their own views

onto his discourse, Ivan's listeners force him to take a position, anticipating the reaction of the novel's critics. The monks, implicitly accepting the premise that the Church should be established according to Christ's teachings, feel that Ivan is on their side, whereas Miusov, who is hostile towards religion, accuses Ivan of insincerity.

Bakhtin identifies this mutability of Ivan's propositions when analyzing his conversation with the devil in Book XII: "The devil, as it were, transfers to the main clause what had been for Ivan merely a subordinate clause. Ivan's reservation concerning the main motive for his decision is transformed by the devil into the main motive, and the main motive becomes merely a reservation" (222). The devil, Bakhtin explains, embodies Ivan's "second voice"—their conversation externalizes the internal dispute that prevents Ivan from reaching resolution. The arguments Ivan voices throughout the novel all possess a two-sidedness that is a function of this internal division. Ivan's arguments do not ultimately reveal his position, which depends entirely on the question of whether or not he affirms his own premises; a question that Ivan is incapable of answering because the presence of this inner second voice constantly undermines his resolution.

In his assessment of Ivan, Zossima proves himself more perceptive than the others. He realizes that Ivan's argument does not involve taking a position because Ivan refuses to indicate whether or not he affirms his own premises: "...in all likelihood," he says to Ivan, "you yourself do not believe either in the immortality of your soul or even in what you have written about the Church and the Church question" (70). However, Zossima also realizes that the fact that Ivan has not taken

a position does not entail, as the “quick-witted” readers of his article conclude, that his argument is simply a mockery. Zossima’s insight causes Ivan to blush and to admit that he is not joking, inadvertently revealing that he is genuinely suffering from his lack of resolution. Zossima comments further on Ivan’s situation: “The question is not resolved in you, and there lies your great grief, for it urgently demands resolution... Even if it cannot be resolved in a positive way, it will never be resolved in the negative way either—you yourself know this property of your heart, and therein lies the whole of its torment” (70). Bakhtin quotes this passage and asserts that it offers a characterization of all of Dostoevsky’s heroes: “We could say that in Dostoevsky man transcends his ‘thingness’ and becomes the ‘man in man’ only by entering the pure and unfinalized realm of the idea... In this respect one might apply to all these characters the same definition that Zosima offered of Ivan Karamazov’s personality” (87). While Zossima implies that this property is characteristic of Ivan specifically, Bakhtin universalizes this definition, presenting it as Dostoevsky’s definition of man. Bakhtin seems to assert that Zossima’s “definition” of Ivan captures the elusion of all definition inherent to Dostoevsky’s hero. Bakhtin’s emphasis on Zossima’s definition suggests a direct link between the unfinalizable nature of man as it is manifested in Dostoevsky’s work and the ideological problem of *The Brothers*. The question of God’s existence is the very idea that Ivan cannot resolve, either in the positive or the negative, and by universalizing Zossima’s definition, Bakhtin implies that the personal unfinalizability of all of Dostoevsky’s heroes has its foundation in the inability to resolve this fundamental question.

The internal double-voicedness exemplified by Ivan is inherent to Bakhtin's definition of Dostoevsky's hero, as that which ensures his personal unfinalizability. Bakhtin makes this aspect of the definition explicit: "This second voice is present in every one of Dostoevsky's heroes," he writes, "What interests us now is only the intra-atomic counterpoint of voices, their combination solely within the bounds of a single dismantled consciousness (that is, a microdialogue)" (221). Bakhtin examines how this "intra-atomic counterpoint" manifests in Ivan's conversation with the devil, as well as in Dostoevsky's novel *The Double*. But this idea also has major implications for the traditional approach to the ideological problem of *The Brothers*. On the level of character, Ivan and Alyosha represent the mutually incompatible voices of doubt and faith present within the novel, and the forcefulness with which both of their voices are presented constitutes the polyphonic nature of the work—from this perspective, the fact that Alyosha is given the final word seems at odds with Bakhtin's claim that the ending is "completely polyphonic." But if there is a second voice present within both Ivan and Alyosha, the fact that Alyosha speaks the final word becomes less conclusive—"a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" can then be said to be contained *within* Alyosha himself. Though Alyosha speaks the final word, that word itself bears a double-voiced potential. Bakhtin implicitly includes Alyosha in his discussion of double-voicedness with his claim that this second voice is present in all of Dostoevsky's heroes, but he also references him explicitly, demonstrating that he is no exception: "The simplest expressions of this are the dual thoughts so characteristic of Dostoevsky's heroes (even Myshkin and Alyosha)" (247). But although he alludes to

the presence of this quality in Alyosha, Bakhtin does not elaborate on the manifestation of Alyosha's double-voicedness or its implications for the interpretation of the novel.

Those who argue that the voice of faith triumphs in *The Brothers* often make it appear as though Alyosha possesses no internal voice of doubt. Frank writes, "Alyosha was instinctively religious, and until his faith is tested later, he has had no doubts about God or immortality" (854). Presumably, Frank refers either to Ivan's unrelenting indictment of God during his conversation with Alyosha in the tavern or to the death of Father Zossima. But if this is the case, Frank's claim is untrue. Rather early in the novel, before either of these events has occurred, Alyosha expresses feelings of doubt. In a conversation with Lise, he makes the unexpected confession: "And, look, maybe I don't even believe in God" (220). The hypothetical construction of the statement itself reveals Alyosha's double-voicedness, preventing him from having to confirm or deny its validity. The structure of Alyosha's confession suggests that his mind might change, and in fact, that he is not even certain of his position on the question as he speaks, indicating the depth of his personal unfinalizability. The narrator adds, "There was, in these too-sudden words, something too mysterious and too subjective, perhaps not clear to himself, but that undoubtedly tormented him" (221). Though brief, this expression of doubt seems extremely significant. It does not appear to be triggered by anything external, but solely by Alyosha's internal struggle; and, the narrator informs us that this is not a momentary lapse of faith, but something that often torments Alyosha. While Alyosha's struggle is depicted far more subtly than Ivan's, this early confession

draws attention to it, suggesting that some level of Ivan's experience is present within Alyosha from the beginning, though he often succeeds in concealing it from his own awareness.

During a conversation with Alyosha early in the novel, Dmitri articulates the feeling that the 'Karamazov nature' lies in the vacillation between two internal polarities. Throughout the novel, the Karamazov name serves as a symbol for the central theme of the irresolvable polarities of doubt and faith inherent to human nature, and this conversation between Alyosha and Dmitri is one of the first indications of this symbolism. Torn between depravity and conscience, Dmitri feels that he can never resolve to do right, and blames this incapacity on his Karamazov nature:

Because I'm a Karamazov. Because when I fall into the abyss, I go straight into it, head down and heels up, and I'm even pleased that I'm falling in just such a humiliating position, and for me I find it beautiful. And in that very shame I suddenly begin a hymn. Let me be cursed, let me be base and vile, but let me also kiss the hem of that garment in which my God is clothed; let me be following the devil at the same time, but still I am also your son, Lord, and I love you, and I feel a joy without which the world cannot stand and be. (107)

This internal opposition reflects Bakhtin's idea of the double-voicedness of Dostoevsky's heroes. This 'Karamazov' symbolism is simply the language used within the novel itself to describe the presence of the internal second voice that constantly prevents inner resolution. The Karamazov nature manifests the



unfinalizable nature of man. One immediately recognizes the duality that Dmitri describes as a universal quality of human nature, which, though amplified in some and understated in others, is nevertheless always present. But this irony is intentional; the 'Karamazov' nature is nothing more than human nature, which, if not clear to Dmitri at this moment, is certainly clear to the reader by the end of the novel. According to this symbolism, Alyosha, being a Karamazov by name, should also possess this duality in its amplified form.

Dmitri's speech provokes Alyosha to admit that he too possesses this duality, this ability to simultaneously experience the polarities of doubt and faith, these opposing impulses towards obedience and rebellion. And if this internal conflict is not yet realized in Alyosha to the degree that Dmitri is experiencing, he is aware that it is inevitable. This revelation occurs through a polyphonic construction: Alyosha must hear Dmitri's words in order to fully recognize his own internal division. After Dmitri's speech, he notices Alyosha blush, and Alyosha responds, "I blushed not at your words, and not at your deeds, but because I'm the same as you... The steps are all the same. I'm on the lowest and you are above, somewhere on the thirteenth... Whoever steps on the lowest step will surely step on the highest" (109). In this way, the novel explicitly confirms Bakhtin's claim that Alyosha possesses the "dual thoughts" so characteristic of Dostoevsky's heroes. The narrator remarks parenthetically, "Apparently the thought had been with him for some time" (109), revealing that Alyosha's confession is not merely an attempt to comfort his brother, but the recognition of a powerful inner voice that he has been struggling to silence.

This confession of susceptibility to the voice of doubt prefigures Alyosha's greatest struggle with his faith after Zossima's death.

Alyosha's second voice, the inner voice of doubt that has previously remained subdued, makes itself known when his faith is ultimately tested by the circumstances of Zossima's death. When Zossima's corpse begins to immediately emit the smell of decomposition, the inhabitants of the town describe this occurrence as the "odor of corruption," believing that the body of a truly holy man is exempt from such physical realities. Alyosha experiences his greatest struggle with doubt when faced with this injustice, going so far as to voice a rebellion against God in the form demonstrated by Ivan: "I do not rebel against my God, I simply "do not accept his world,"" Alyosha suddenly smiled crookedly" (341). As he himself predicted, Alyosha falls into temptation, temporarily leaving the monastery as Father Paissy accuses him of being with "those of little faith." The narrator expresses judgment here more explicitly than anywhere else in the novel, explaining that Alyosha is not, in fact, with those of little faith, but that "all his dismay arose precisely because his faith was so great" (338). This detail seems, contra the narrator's intention, to provide a real indication that Alyosha's faith is in question. On the surface, the narrator simply reminds us that Alyosha possesses great faith that Zossima's death will be accompanied by miracles, and when this does not come to be his faith in God is necessarily shaken. But the narrator's comment also serves a function more central to the novel's theme.

The narrator's comment about the greatness of Alyosha's faith suggests an inevitable implication of the 'Karamazov' theme: not only is man capable of

simultaneously experiencing the extreme polarities of doubt and faith, but he cannot experience one without the other, and each internal voice is strengthened by the opposition. This implication is first hinted in Dmitri's speech, but it is later developed more fully. When the devil tells Ivan what type of victim he finds most valuable, he uses the same language as Dmitri to describe the same duality: "And some of them, by God, are not inferior to you in development, though you won't believe it: they can contemplate such abysses of belief and disbelief at one and the same moment that, really, it sometimes seems that another hair's breadth and a man would fall in 'heel-over-headed,' as the actor Gorbunov says" (645). The men the devil describes are those who thirst after faith most of all, those who "eat locusts and pray for seventeen years in the barren desert." The narrator's comment on Alyosha's dismay indicates more than just the height from which he had to fall—rather than functioning to undermine the realness of Alyosha's doubt, it serves as a confirmation of the novel's polyphonic thesis: no matter how man strives after faith, he only experiences greater doubt.

During Dmitri's trial, the prosecutor, Ippolit Kirillovich, makes the explicit connection between the 'Karamazov' nature—a phrase he uses synonymously with human nature—and the inability to reach a final truth. The specific truth to which he refers is the truth of what occurred on the night of Fyodor Karamazov's murder; but for a moment, his speech becomes much more universal, as he begins to make proclamations not just about Dmitri's psychology, but about human nature in general and man's search for ultimate truth:

It is usually so in life that when there are two opposites one must look

for truth in the middle; in the present case it is literally not so... Why? Precisely because we are of a broad, Karamazovian nature—and this is what I am driving at—capable of containing all possible opposites and of contemplating both abysses at once, the abyss above us, an abyss of lofty ideals, and the abyss beneath us, an abyss of the lowest and foulest degradation... Two abysses, two abysses, gentlemen, in one and the same moment—without that we are wretched and dissatisfied, our existence is incomplete. (699)

Kirillovich uses the same language as Dmitri and Ivan's devil, and the repetition of similar phrases at three such pivotal moments in the novel draws attention to the centrality of this theme. But Kirillovich takes the idea of Ivan's devil even further—not only does Kirillovich corroborate the devil's point that this internal opposition strengthens the polarity, but he explicitly states that this polarity can never be, and *should* never be, eliminated. According to Kirillovich, the internal second voice can never be silenced because the polarities of doubt and faith can never be eliminated: they are inherent to human nature and necessary for life. The truth is not found in the middle, as Kirillovich points out, but neither is it found in the affirmation of a single side of this polarity; without the simultaneous affirmation of both, "existence is incomplete." This statement does not rest on Kirillovich's authority. Delivered towards the end of the novel, Kirillovich's speech serves as a final confirmation of the theme that has been developed throughout the novel and demonstrated in the experiences of all three brothers. If the conclusion were to establish the ultimate

triumph of the voice of doubt or faith, it would eliminate this crucial polarity and contradict the novel's central theme.

When Bakhtin discusses the dual thoughts of Dostoevsky's heroes, he makes a second distinction between form and content—a distinction that is vital for interpreting the ending of the novel as completely polyphonic and therefore congruous with the novel's theme: "One of the thoughts is obvious, determining the *content* of speech; the other is hidden, but nevertheless determines the *structuring* of speech, casting its shadow upon it" (247). While the content of the hero's speech may appear definitive, his inner second voice, a voice of opposition, at the same time determines the structure of his speech—in this way, the hero's internal division can produce a self-negating utterance. Bakhtin discusses this phenomenon in Ivan's speech:

But the voice that answers Smerdyakov is interrupted here and there by the hidden rejoinder of his second voice... These interruptions in Ivan's voice are very subtle, and express themselves not so much in words as in pauses quite inappropriate from the point of view of the meaning of his speech, in changes of tone that are incomprehensible from the point of view of his first voice, in his unexpected and inappropriate laughter. (259)

Though Bakhtin fails to discuss this occurrence in Alyosha's speech, his previous statements demonstrate that Alyosha is not exempt from this internal division.

Because of this, one could use his analysis of Ivan's voice as a template. For example, the presence of a "hidden rejoinder" by Alyosha's second voice is revealed in the

tone of his frantic answer to Rakitin's taunts after Zossima's death: "I believed, I believe, and I want to believe, and I will believe, and what more do you want!' Alyosha cried irritably" (341). Alyosha's composure has not previously been susceptible to Rakitin's attempts to lead him astray, but when the voice of faith within him becomes weakened, he experiences a new level of internal division. Alyosha's defensive tone is a response, not to Rakitin, but to the battle within himself between the voices of doubt and faith. His hyperbolic expression overshoots the mark, suggesting an overcompensation. The narrator informs us that, "Alyosha gave Rakitin a long look, his eyes somehow narrowed, and something flashed in them . . . but not anger at Rakitin" (341). Another passage in which Bakhtin describes the hidden rejoinder present within Ivan's speech perfectly characterizes Alyosha's response: "The other's discourse gradually, stealthily penetrates the consciousness and speech of the hero...now in the form of an abnormally heightened, exaggerated, or anguished personal tone" (222). It is at this moment that Alyosha's second voice temporarily triumphs in a rebellion against God. If the influence of the hero's inner second voice is indicated by a subtle interruption in tone, it is also significant that Alyosha "smiled crookedly," immediately after voicing this rebellion. In terms of Bakhtin's distinction, the content of Alyosha's answer to Rakitin is an obvious affirmation of his faith, but the structure is determined by the hidden rejoinder of his second voice, which is soon revealed to be a voice of doubt and rebellion.

## II. Alyosha's Response to Kolya

Alyosha's response to Kolya's question in the final scene stands, at face value, as a definitive affirmation of the existence of God and the afterlife: "Karamazov!" cried Kolya, 'can it really be true as religion says, that we shall all rise from the dead, and come to life, and see one another again, and everyone, and Ilyushechka?' 'Certainly we shall rise, certainly we shall see and gladly, joyfully tell one another all that has been,' Alyosha replied, half laughing, half in ecstasy" (776). The content of his answer is affirmative, but even here the hidden rejoinder of his second voice is present, determining its structure: the truly revealing detail of the conclusion, and the key to interpreting the novel as completely polyphonic, is this characterization of Alyosha's demeanor as "half laughing, half in ecstasy." However subtle the shadow that is cast by the hidden rejoinder of Alyosha's laughter, the context of the novel as a whole points to its significance. Not only is the presence of an internal counterpoint of voices in Dostoevsky's heroes central throughout the novel, but the significance of this internal counterpoint is continually highlighted by the recurrence of the novel's central theme of the irresolvable polarities of human nature.

Alyosha's laughter first appears significant when one considers what an inappropriate time this is to be laughing—Alyosha and the children have just left Ilyusha's funeral, and it seems uncharacteristic of Alyosha to laugh at such a solemn moment. Alyosha laughs not because he is in ecstasy at the contemplation of the afterlife, but because he is divided in half. This depiction perfectly corresponds to Bakhtin's description of the internal double-voicedness of Dostoevsky's heroes:

“Finally, dialogic relationships are also possible toward one’s own utterance as a whole, toward its separate parts and toward an individual word within it, if we somehow detach ourselves from them, speak with an inner reservation, if we observe a certain distance from them, as if limiting our own authorship or dividing it in two” (184). Alyosha is explicitly divided in two within the very same moment that he affirms the existence of God and the afterlife, demonstrating that he has entered into a dialogic relationship with his own speech due to some inner reservation. Alyosha’s second voice bursts through in this significant moment of inappropriate laughter—inappropriate laughter is, in fact, one of the specific ways Bakhtin identifies Ivan’s second voice repeatedly manifesting itself. Because Alyosha’s laughter fits the pattern of Bakhtin’s description of the hidden rejoinder of Ivan’s second voice, a polyphonic interpretation of the ending seems to have a strong foundation in this detail.

The novel itself indicates the significance of Alyosha’s laughter in the moments leading up to the final scene, providing an unambiguous signal that we should interpret his laughter as a sign of internal division. Only moments before Kolya’s question, Alyosha places great emphasis on laughter in his parting speech to the children:

And yet, no matter how wicked we may be...the most cruel and jeering man among us, if we should become so, will still not dare laugh within himself at how kind and good he was at this present moment! ... Let him laugh to himself, it’s no matter, a man often laughs at what is kind and good; it just comes from thoughtlessness; but I assure you,



gentlemen, that as soon as he laughs, he will say at once in his heart:  
'No, it's a bad thing for me to laugh, because one should not laugh at  
that!' (775)

Alyosha associates laughter with wickedness, or at best, thoughtlessness, and the proximity of this speech to the final page of the novel draws attention to Alyosha's strange laughter, informing its interpretation. When someone laughs in a moment of solemnity, Alyosha himself interprets this as a sign of internal division. This type of laughter is a sign of wickedness, but in the same moment, it is possible to condemn the wickedness of one's own laughter. Alyosha affirms the duality of human nature, claiming that both the laughter and its condemnation—which he characterizes as impulses of wickedness and goodness—can exist simultaneously within the individual. Alyosha's inappropriate laughter, then, confirms the existence of these mutually incompatible impulses within himself. In the final moments of the novel, he remains divided in two; and although the content of his speech is affirmative, the hidden rejoinder of his second voice comes through, preventing his words from being conclusive. Alyosha's ironic laugh indicates that, though his simple affirmation may suffice for the children, it fails to silence the voice of doubt within himself.

Bakhtin's identification of the symbolic import of laughter in Dostoevsky's artistic thought further emphasizes the significance of Alyosha's laughter. In his chapter on genre, Bakhtin discusses the "carnivalized laughter" present in the Menippean satire, a genre he believes led to the "carnivalistic" novels of Dostoevsky: "This laughter... could fix in a phenomenon both poles of its evolution in their

uninterrupted and creative renewing changeability,” he writes, “Carnival laughter does not permit a single one of these aspects of change to be absolutized or to congeal in one-sided seriousness” (164). For Bakhtin, laughter itself seems to be a symbol of the inability of man to reach final resolution, a representation of the simultaneous affirmation of the polarities of human nature. In this sense, Alyosha’s laughter prevents the voice of doubt or the voice of faith from being affirmed in “one-sided seriousness”—both of these mutually incompatible voices are simultaneously affirmed, along with the constant state of internal struggle and opposition that this affirmation entails. One might say that the polyphonic unity of *The Brothers* is embodied in this final scene in Alyosha’s laughter, the very symbol of his affirmation of his own internal division. The laughter Bakhtin discusses is both literal and figurative. It is present in the content and the structure of Dostoevsky’s work, ranging from the actual laughter of his hero, to the tone of his speech, to the nature of Dostoevsky’s authorial position:

In all his novels...we find a trace of that ambivalent laughter... But the most important—one could say, the decisive—expression of reduced laughter is to be found in the ultimate position of the author. This position excludes all one-sided or dogmatic seriousness and does not permit any single point of view, any single polar extreme of life or of thought, to be absolutized. All one-sided seriousness (of life and thought), all one-sided pathos is handed over to the heroes, but the author, who causes them all to collide in the “great dialogue” of the novel, leaves that dialogue open and puts no finalizing period at the

end... It should be pointed out that the carnival sense of the world also knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of *conclusive conclusion*... (165)

Here again, Bakhtin reiterates the connection between the personal unfinalizability of Dostoevsky's hero and the lack of philosophical finalization in his work. Laughter is symbolic, not only of the simultaneous affirmation of the polarities, but also of the author's refusal to impose a conclusion on his characters. The absence of the narrator's voice in the final pages of the novel points to Alyosha's freedom to determine the final word. But if Alyosha's final word stands only on the authority of his own voice, and if his laughter suggests that he has not overcome his own personal unfinalizability, this small detail of Alyosha's laughter has the power to completely undermine the affirmative content of his response, preventing the novel from reaching a "conclusive conclusion." However, by negating all conclusions, Alyosha's laughter paradoxically serves as a final confirmation of the novel's polyphonic thesis, demonstrating that the polarities of doubt and faith prevent man from ever resolving the question of God's existence.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Thus in the last pages of his final novel, Dostoevsky does not impose a conclusion on his heroes as Camus feared, but, on the contrary, demonstrates that it is impossible for man to ever reach a conclusion on the question of the existence of God. The final line of the novel affirms neither the voice of doubt nor the voice of faith, but celebrates the eternal existence of this polarity: “And eternally so, all our lives hand in hand! Hurrah for Karamazov!’ Kolya cried once more ecstatically, and once more all the boys joined in his exclamation” (776). The centrality of the Karamazov symbolism throughout the novel makes the choice to end with this image significant—the final line of the novel celebrates the unfinalizable nature of man, man’s ability to simultaneously experience the extreme polarities of doubt and faith. But if Dostoevsky’s choice of ending is not a deliberate attempt to overcome the voice of doubt, *The Brothers* does not in fact yield to the temptation of imposing ultimate meaning. The novel then faces the absurd problem without attempting to provide a solution, regaining its qualification as an absurd work of art. In light of the affinity between the polyphonic novel and the absurd, there arises a new dimension of Alyosha’s recognition of his inability to resolve the question of God’s existence, which is consistent not only with his laughter, but also his feeling of ecstasy.

If the ultimate value of the polyphonic novel is the recognition of the unfinalizable nature of man, its greatest virtue is the ability to hold oneself firm in this state of irresolution. The unfinalizable nature of man places a limitation on his ability to reach a final truth, and Alyosha’s laughter is symbolic of his recognition of this limitation. This virtue of the polyphonic novel is comparable to Camus’ concept

of “absurd freedom,” which he describes as holding oneself firm in a state of irresolution by affirming man’s limitations and refusing to take refuge in a false sense of certainty: “Being able to remain on that dizzying crest—that is integrity and the rest is subterfuge” (50). Alyosha’s laughter, then, is the embodiment of absurd freedom. If Alyosha is “half laughing, half in ecstasy,” this ecstasy lies in his affirmation of his own limitations, his realization that without the ability to simultaneously contemplate the abysses of doubt and faith, “we are wretched and dissatisfied, our existence is incomplete.” It is that very feeling of beauty that inspires Dmitri to begin a hymn, that feeling of “joy without which the world cannot stand and be.” Bakhtin provides a characterization of the “finalization” of Dostoevsky’s novels that captures both Camus’ conception of absurd freedom and Alyosha’s feeling of ecstasy:

The catharsis that finalizes Dostoevsky’s novels might be—of course inadequately and somewhat rationalistically—expressed in this way: *nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.* But this is, after all, also the *purifying sense* of ambivalent laughter. (166)

Bakhtin rejects the attempt to reduce Dostoevsky’s work to a thesis for the same reason that Camus designates Dostoevsky as the “contrary of thesis-writers”: both Bakhtin and Camus feel that such a reductive approach could never capture the essence of Dostoevsky’s work, which lies in this fundamental ambivalence. Camus

makes this feeling explicit: “The thesis-novel, the work that proves, the most hateful of all, is the one that most often is inspired by a *smug* thought. You demonstrate the truth you feel sure of possessing” (115-6). But a polyphonic thesis, being defined in negative terms, provides no resolution, no truth, and no certainty. A polyphonic thesis must, by definition, assert the unfinalizable nature of man—the ultimate value of the polyphonic novel. The concept of a polyphonic thesis is therefore fundamentally non-reductive. It can only ever be an affirmation of absurd freedom, as it must always express an awareness of man’s limitations.

Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony provides a way out of the irreconcilable binary that confines the critical discussion on *The Brothers* by undermining the false dichotomy that lies at its foundation—the reductive idea that the novel must be either a defense of faith or a concession to doubt. By implementing the concept of a polyphonic thesis, however paradoxical the term itself appears, one can advance Bakhtin’s theory to address the ideological problem of *The Brothers* and its corresponding critical conversation. The ambivalence and inconclusiveness of the novel is then captured in a thesis that translates its formal polyphony into language directly addressing the problem of God’s existence, making it apparent that the novel is neither a defense of faith nor a concession to doubt. Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony transcends this faith-doubt dichotomy, not by endorsing these contradictory interpretations as equally valid—which would only reinforce the binary—but by recognizing the inability of all such monologic interpretations to capture the essence of Dostoevsky’s work. Bakhtin’s analysis implies that Dostoevsky’s work is based on a polyphonic thesis that is fundamentally

incompatible with the monologic theses entailed by such interpretations. But if Bakhtin's theory is misunderstood to endorse all interpretations as equally valid, the significance of his contribution is lost, and the binary remains unchanged.

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