
http://www.nupress.northwestern.edu/
A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov
A New Word on
The Brothers Karamazov

Edited by Robert Louis Jackson
With an introductory essay by Robin Feuer Miller
and a concluding one by William Mills Todd III

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS / EVANSTON, ILLINOIS
Donna Orwin

Did Dostoevsky or Tolstoy Believe in Miracles?

SEANCES AND MEDIUMS claiming to be in contact with the dead were very fashionable in the 1870s among the educated Russian public. Within the context of larger debates of that time, spiritualism had a weightiness and plausibility not apparent when we view it in isolation. In the United States, where the modern spiritualist movement had arisen in 1848, the eminent philosopher and scientist William James investigated it in the 1890s and found its claims to be valid. Two scientists at the University of St. Petersburg, chemist A. M. Butlerov and zoologist N. P. Vagner, spearheaded the spiritualist movement in the 1870s in Russia. In polemics of the time, the chief antagonist of these two was N. N. Strakhov, a close friend of both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Philosopher V. S. Soloviev, a protégé of Strakhov and a friend of Dostoevsky, met his philosophical mentor, P. D. Iurkevich, at a séance in 1874 and supposedly remained in communication with him after his death. In this climate, it is not surprising that both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy comment on the subject in their writings. For both, it is connected to the larger issue of the role of miracles and religion in the modern world.

In Anna Karenina, Tolstoy created a medium named Jules Landau based on a clairvoyant whom he himself had seen in Paris in 1857 and who had “conducted seances and lectures in Russia in the early 1870s.” When the hysterical and sexually repressed Lydia Ivanovna convinces Aleksey Karenin to consult Landau on whether he should grant Anna a divorce, Landau, whether by accident or design, obliges the secret wish of Lydia Ivanovna and Karenin to torture Anna by forbidding the divorce. This surrender of his conscience to a clairvoyant signals the moral bankruptcy of Karenin, who now also believes in miraculous salvation without good works or repentance. Yet it is appropriate that it is he and Lydia Ivanovna rather than Stiva Oblonsky (who is horrified by the whole event) who are drawn to spiritualism. It supplies answers, debased and compromised though they may be, to ethical questions that do not even exist for Stiva.

Dostoevsky’s January 1876 Diary of a Writer included a satire on spiritualism in which he argued that the discord on this issue was sown by dev-
ils whose real existence it therefore proved.' The implication is that the whole debate about devils and angels, if scientifically illegitimate, is psychologically and ethically understandable and sound. Dostoevsky subsequently visited a séance in February and reported on it in the Diary for March and April (Ps, 22:98–101, 126–32). This séance, with its concealed springs and wires, as he explained in April, deprived him of any wish he might have had to believe in spiritualism and therefore any possibility that he might ever actually believe in it. Although spiritualism itself is not a topic in The Brothers Karamazov, as it is in Anna Karenina, the issues with which Dostoevsky associates it in his three issues of the Diary are. Both the erstwhile existence of devils and the relation between a wish to believe and the possibility of religious belief become important themes in the novel. The malicious and prideful monk Ferapont sees devils because he wants to, and Alyosha believes both in God and in miracles because he is temperamentally inclined to do so.

Given Dostoevsky’s forceful denunciation of spiritualism in the April Diary, it is striking that it includes an important caveat. He tells his readers that “even now,” despite his resolute rejection of spiritualism, he does not deny the possibility of “spiritualist phenomena” [spiritskie iavlentia]; in other words, he does not think that these “phenomena,” of which he has had some personal experience, can simply be disproved by the learned commissions currently investigating séances (Ps, 22:127). Spiritualism interested Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as psychologists and moralists because it expressed at one and the same time the spiritual poverty of contemporary life and a suppressed longing for spirituality. Both Anna Karenina and The Brothers Karamazov locate the cause of spiritual impoverishment in modern scientific thought; and both novels contain experiences that cannot be explained “scientifically.” In this essay, I will explore the status of the miraculous in the two novels with an eye, finally, to defining what kind of “spiritual phenomena,” if any, the two writers might have regarded as real.

In both Anna Karenina and The Brothers Karamazov, characters question their belief in God and religion. Konstantin Levin weathers a religious crisis to ground his belief firmly in his own life and consciousness. The Brothers Karamazov, begun in 1878 just after these final episodes of Tolstoy’s novel were published, seems to stand in relation to them as an inferno to a brush fire that the town brigade beats back before it burns out of control. Not only the four Karamazov brothers but also many other characters in the novel wrestle with the temptation of atheism and its consequences. No matter how much Dostoevsky, in his typical fashion, has chosen to escalate the drama, however, and no matter how Tolstoy, as is his wont, plays it down, the situations are similar at their core.

Of the various crises of faith that occur in The Brothers Karamazov, the one that most resembles Levin’s is that of Alyosha Karamazov. Both are
Did Dostoevsky or Tolstoy Believe in Miracles?

reactions to the death of someone close—in Levin’s case, his brother Nikolai, and in Alyosha’s, Father Zosima. Before these deaths, both men are said to have believed in miracles that would somehow save themselves and others from annihilation (AK, 720; BK, 26). When his brother dies, Levin abandons his innate optimism and interprets the death—and, by extension, the fate awaiting all men—as “an evil mockery by some sort of devil” (AK, 721).

Ideas acquired from an education dominated by scientific concepts—“organisms, their destruction, the indestructibility of matter, the law of the conservation of energy, development”—are cold comfort to Levin (AK, 711). No matter how hard he tries to escape the conclusions of scientific reasoning, he eventually has to concede that if one relies on thought alone, the human individual seems to be nothing but a bubble that persists for a while and then bursts. This “untruth” is understood by him as “the cruel mockery by some evil power, a wicked and disgusting power to which it was impossible to submit” (AK, 714).

In his February 1877 Diary of a Writer, Dostoevsky calls Levin “pure of heart” [chisty sertseml (Ps, 25:56). Alyosha Karamazov is a Dostoevskian version of this new Russian type. Alyosha had attached himself to Father Zosima in order to “escape the world.” He longs for a spiritual purity that the world lacks and Father Zosima exemplifies. The rapid putrefaction of Zosima’s corpse seems to Alyosha to be a direct slap in the face by “Some­one,” bent on humiliating the best of men. For Alyosha as for Levin, this insult takes the form of the subordination of everything human to mere physical laws.

Where was Providence and its finger? Why did it hide its finger “at the most necessary moment” (Alyosha thought), as if wanting to submit itself to the blind, mute, merciless laws of nature? (BK, 340)

Nineteenth-century science of course conceived of nature as merely indifferent. Levin and Alyosha experience it as hostile because it makes no provision for and indeed denies the value of the human individual. Belief in science and especially in physiological materialism, which became widespread in Russia for the first time in the 1860s, gave rise to the modern psychological dilemma, described first by Turgenev in Fathers and Children, then by Dostoevsky in Notes from Underground, of the human personality trapped inside a machine. Turgenev’s Bazarov advocates a scientific understanding of nature, but he mistakenly thinks that he will be exempt from the rules as he formulates them for others. His creator is content simply to make this point and to record Bazarov’s response when he is hoisted on his own petard. In Notes From Underground Dostoevsky goes a step beyond Turgenev to explore the effects on personality of an internalized belief in physiological materialism. The underground man makes fun of those whose actions are not consistent with their science, and at the same time he struggles irra-
tionally to assert his own freedom. A decade later, similar beliefs in a purely mechanistic universe prompt Konstantin Levin’s desire to kill himself.

In the 1870s, both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky worked out responses to the threat posed by modern scientific views. If these responses seem similar, that may be because each man was separately discussing his ideas with their mutual friend Strakhov. The many letters preserved from an intense correspondence between Tolstoy and Strakhov give us some idea of their conversations, which mostly took place at Iasnaia Poliana. Dostoevsky and Strakhov were together in Petersburg for most of the 1870s and met frequently. They were no longer soul mates, as they had been in the early 1860s, but they were still close intellectual friends. In a letter to Tolstoy written in May 1881, Strakhov wrote that he keenly missed the recently deceased Dostoevsky, who as “his most ardent reader” had read and “subtly understood” his every article. One of these articles, a long monograph published in several installments in 1878 in the Zhurnal ministerstva narodnogo prosvescheniia (journal of the Ministry of Public Education), is called Ob osnovnykh poniatiiakh psikhologii (Basic Concepts of Psychology). It is both a history of modern psychology from Descartes onward and a treatise on the nature of the soul and its relation to external reality. It is also a continuation of Strakhov’s polemics against the spiritualists, in which Strakhov sets out to delineate the physical and spiritual spheres with their respective and mutually exclusive laws.

There can be no doubt that Strakhov was discussing these subjects with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as he planned and wrote his monograph. If proof were needed, Tolstoy at least supplies it when he writes Strakhov that he had learned a great deal from reading the book, but not as much as he would have had he read it two years ago: “[N]ow what you demonstrate is so indubitable and simple for me (as it is so for 99.999 percent of humanity) that, not carried away by proof of what rings so true to me, I see as well inadequacies in the methods of the proofs.” During the two years in which Tolstoy was absorbing the psychological truths that he finds so ably stated in Strakhov’s monograph, he was writing Anna Karenina. The monograph came out just as Dostoevsky was beginning The Brothers Karamazov. Both novels depend upon an account of psychology similar to that given in it; and both authors use that psychology in their defense of the possibility of religion in a scientific age. To ground that psychology in transcendent reality, both rely on “methods of proof” that are very different from Strakhov’s.

Strakhov proposes a psychology that validates the individual in terms that are not simply hostile to science. He borrows from empirical psychology, which he credits but which he also corrects in one critical respect. According to him, Descartes, when he emptied the external world of spiritual content, laid the basis for a modern psychology that relocates all meaning
in the individual soul. Only my soul, understood as "just the self itself" (prosto samogo sebia) indubitably exists for me. Everything else, including my body, is part of the external world, whose existence can be doubted (Oop, 20–25). The self becomes Descartes's Archimedean point, from which he can investigate everything else. To know something means to separate it from the self and hence to objectify it. Each object of analysis requires a subject, which, as the knower, cannot itself be known. The subject, then, by its very nature is not susceptible to being known as an object. By the self, Strakhov claims that Descartes meant that part of the soul that generates not only thoughts, but all emanations of psychic life (Oop, 10). All thoughts, feelings, and acts of will can be objectified and studied, but their cause within the soul cannot. The cause itself has no content, no number, it is "always one, and always unchanging" ("vsegda edinoe i vsegda neizmennoe"; Oop, 58). We can know it only negatively, by stating what it is not.

This insistence on the unknowability of the self is Strakhov's main departure from contemporary empirical psychology, and both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky develop its implications. Strakhov defends human autonomy and dignity from attacks by science by distinguishing between what is and is not susceptible to scientific analysis: according to him, materialists and scientists alike make the mistake of applying tools appropriate to the investigation of the objective world to the subjective one (Oop, 30, 60). As he prepared in his notes to the novel to defend Alyosha's faith and specifically his belief in miracles, Dostoevsky put it this way: "And as for so-called scientific proofs, he [Alyosha] did not believe in them, and was right in not believing in them, even though he had not finished his studies, it was not possible to disprove matters that by their essence were not of this world, by knowledge that was of this world."

What we speak of as scientific knowledge, moreover, has its own limitations. Materialists and positivists believe that we can know only objective or empirical reality. On the contrary, argues Strakhov, the only thing an individual experiences directly is himself, his own existence, and psychic phenomena that are reactions to an external world to which he has no direct access. Even the ways in which we organize reality are in fact the results of a priori categories of time and space inhering in our own minds rather than in external reality. If that is so, and if, in the other direction, the self is unknowable, then Strakhov paints a bleak picture indeed of what human beings can hope to understand. But neither Strakhov nor Tolstoy or Dostoevsky actually accepted these limitations on knowledge as absolute. While Strakhov agreed with Schopenhauer that "the world is my representation," he did not mean by it that the world did not exist. Perceptions do reflect some kind of physical reality, and, most important, feelings, thoughts, and will must be grounded in transcendental principles that make them more than merely subjective.
What Strakhov has done in his monograph is to put a Kantian spin on early modern philosophy. Descartes was most concerned to establish the self as the point from which an objective scientific investigation of the world could proceed. To do so, he was willing to sacrifice the very possibility of self-knowledge by positing the self as the "pure subject" (chistyiy sub'ekt) of all objects. Inaccessible to dissection by human reason, after Kant the self becomes a potential safe haven for spiritual truths not verifiable by empirical science. This inner spiritual reality is often said to be known to the heart rather than the mind; as such, it is more the purview of poets than philosophers, and it was his belief in the greater profundity of the knowledge of the heart that made Strakhov feel inferior to his poet friends. Both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky benefited from Strakhov's dualism. Self-knowledge understood as knowledge of that supposedly unknowable subject which is the self is reconstituted in their works as inner knowledge of metaphysical reality, the true realm of the "miraculous." To anticipate what follows, Dostoevsky goes further than Tolstoy in depicting the "other world," as he sometimes calls it, whose objective existence cannot be proven.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky employs the ideas briefly sketched earlier to solve the problem of the possibility of religious belief in the modern world. All the characters in the novel are originally self-centered and unsure of the feelings or thoughts of others, which is presented as natural. All of them see external reality through the subjective lens of their own personalities, and each creates a version of the world corresponding to these visions. The clashes that arise among them stem from the incompatibility of these multiple subjective realities. Such is the case even for Alyosha, who makes the mistake (and cannot but make it) of assuming that all others share his own consistently good intentions. Once he has changed his opinion of Grushenka, for instance, he feels certain that she will give herself to her former lover rather than knife him. The reader, listening to Grushenka and observing her expressions, cannot be so sure.

The solution to the conflicts that arise from this natural self-centeredness lies not in an escape from the self, as might have been required in earlier Christianity, but in deeper self-understanding. In the notebooks to the novel, one of Zosima's maxims reads: "What is life?—To define oneself as much as possible. I am, I exist. To be like the Lord who says I am who is, but already in the whole plenitude of the whole universe." When characters reform in the novel, they affirm their own existence and, for the first time, the existence of others "in the whole plenitude of the whole universe."

This paradigm applies very neatly to Alyosha Karamazov. He is introduced to the reader as a man who naturally believes in miracles because his subjective point of view mandates this belief. He is as much a realist as is the atheist whose exclusive belief in the laws of nature predisposes him to discount any miracle. "In the realist, faith is not born from miracles, but
miracles from faith" (BK, 26). Alyosha's education results not in a repudiation of miracles but in a reassessment of the concept of the miraculous.

When Zosima's body begins to stink, Alyosha, already shaken by Ivan's argument about divine injustice or indifference, experiences this situation as a kind of reverse miracle: Why, he asks himself, did the body have to decay so rapidly and conspicuously? In other words, Alyosha, as the narrator tells us, remains true to his fundamentally religious temperament, but, provoked by Ivan, he rebels against God's world. What restores Alyosha's trust in God is the revelation of Grushenka's innate goodness. Like his brothers, Alyosha has created the world in his own image. With his passionate commitment to purity—what the narrator calls in one place his "wild, frenzied modesty and chastity" ("dikaia, istuplenaia stydlivost' i tselomudrennost'"; BK, 20)—Alyosha has denied his own corporeality and especially his sensuality. He projects onto the world a distorted image of humanity divided into saints like Zosima and sinners like Grushenka, whom he sees as a prisoner and advocate of the dumb and blind laws of carnal pleasure. In revenge for the humiliation of Zosima, Alyosha decides to submit himself exclusively to her and those laws. When he arrives at Grushenka's, however, he finds her in a state that cannot be explained with reference to them. In the final, fourth chapter of book 7, Alyosha's faith in humanity then not only revives but expands.

For all its ecstatic tone (which is meant to convey Alyosha's mood), the description of Alyosha's reconciliation with faith is very precise and psychologically detailed. First, he has a sensation of inner commotion and orderliness at the same time.

His soul was overflowing, but somehow vaguely, and no single sensation stood out, making itself felt too much; on the contrary, one followed another in a sort of slow and calm rotation. But there was sweetness in his heart, and, strangely, Alyosha was not surprised at that. (BK, 359)

Alyosha is having the experience, dubbed "sweet" and rare in Dostoevsky's world, of feeling himself altogether in one place. The "sensations" (oshchushchenita) do not move in and out, as they would in a moment of active involvement with the world, but circle slowly, not forming into actual perceptions. These sensations are wholly internal, yet they are reactions to external events, their internal assimilation. After them (and perhaps arising out of them) come thoughts:

Fragments of thoughts [mysli] flashed in his soul, catching fire like little stars and dying out at once to give way to others, yet there reigned in his soul something whole, firm, assuaging, and he was conscious of himself. (BK, 359)

Sensation by its nature is not self-conscious, but thought is, and so at this moment, the same "I" that feels sweet both emits thoughts and at the same
time is conscious of itself as something “whole.” As he recovers from the disorientating experiences of the previous day, during which he has doubted his connection to immortality, the “one and unchanging” part of Alyosha’s soul (to use Strakhov’s terminology) makes itself felt.

There follows Alyosha’s half-waking dream in which thought weaves sensation into fantasy and commentary on the text of the marriage at Cana that is being read over Zosima’s body in the background. Awakening from the dream, Alyosha runs outdoors to fall down on the earth (as he had done when his crisis began), but this time in ecstatic joy. Nature presents itself to him in the form of a great cathedral, with the sky its dome (nebesnyi kupol).

Over him the heavenly dome, full of quiet, shining stars, hung boundlessly. From the zenith to the horizon the still-dim Milky Way stretched its double strand. Night, fresh and quiet, almost unstirring, enveloped the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the church gleamed in the sapphire sky. The luxuriant autumn flowers in the flowerbeds near the house had fallen asleep until morning. The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars . . . Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth. (BK 362)

In the last sentence Alyosha is said to be “cut down” by the appearance of nature as a sacred cathedral. But the appearance is itself a product of his newly formed consciousness, and in this sense, it is as much a fantasy as the dream sequence that precedes it. It differs from the dream only because it presents itself to Alyosha as external reality. Alyosha’s own thoughts, which were said to have flashed like stars through his soul and therefore anticipate the starry sky that he sees, are responsible for this new interpretation. His mind actively if unself-consciously interprets and thereby shapes sensations stimulated in him by external reality; it turns them into perceptions, which in this case are more like symbols. Alyosha responds to the symbolism as if it came from outside.

Alyosha’s embrace of the earth is a physical expression of his embrace of the “whole plentitude of the whole universe” of which Dostoevsky had spoken in the notebooks to the novel. Once he has opened himself in this way, he experiences the sensation of being at a center point where all worlds meet and vibrating in tune with all of them. He is in a frenzy of forgiving and forgiveness, in a state where boundaries between himself and the world seem to be dissolved. At the same time as he flows outward, however, a reverse motion is occurring:

But with each moment he felt clearly and almost tangibly something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault [nebesnyi svoid] descend into his soul. Some sort of idea, as it were, was coming to reign in his mind—now for the whole of his life and unto ages of ages. He fell to the earth a weak youth and
rose up a fighter, steadfast for the rest of his life, and he knew it and felt it suddenly, at that very moment of his ecstasy. Never, never in his life would Alyosha forget this moment. “Someone visited my soul in that hour,” he would say afterwards, with firm belief in his words . . . (BK, 362–63)

As Alyosha moves out of the erotic frenzy of which (like David dancing naked before the ark) “he was not ashamed,” something from outside and above—it is “like” the heavenly arch, and therefore is not it—seems to him to possess his soul and organize it according to what he calls an “idea” that turns him from a weak boy into a warrior. As should be clear by now, Alyosha’s later version of what happened to him—“Someone visited me”—does not jibe in any simple way with the narrator’s account of the event as it unfolds. A complex interaction between Alyosha and “reality” takes place in which Dostoevsky intentionally leaves uncertain what comes from inside and what from outside. The “heavenly vault” itself is one case in point: it is a metaphor built on the unavoidable but scientifically false human perception of the sky as round and finite. In this sense, it comes not from reality but from Alyosha, who then feels something “like” it enter him in the form of moral principles.

The heavenly vault makes an appearance in book 8 of Anna Karenina and also in Basic Concepts of Psychology. Strakhov cites it—using the term nebesnyi svod—as an example of the reality of universal perceptions whether or not they correspond to external reality (Oop, 38). Levin uses it to assert the validity of his “subjective” belief in a humanly meaningful universe:

Lying on his back he was now gazing at the high cloudless sky. “Don’t I know that that is infinite space, and not a rounded vault [kruglyi svod]? But however I may screw my eyes and strain my sight, I cannot help seeing it as not round and not limited, and despite my knowledge of limitless space I am indubitably right when I see a firm round vault [kotelyi goluboi svod], and more right than when I strain to see beyond it.” (AK, 724)

Dostoevsky’s use of the heavenly vault may be a hidden reference to one or both of the previous ones. Be this as it may, the metaphor figures in all three texts as part of a defense of the human from the degrading reductionism of science. The two poets carry this argument much further than the scientist-philosopher, but Strakhov lays the groundwork for their more ambitious visions when he modifies empirical psychology to move the nucleus of the psyche, the self, into the realm of metaphysical knowledge that is inaccessible to human reason. For both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, the individual psyche becomes a gateway to a transcendental reality otherwise inaccessible.

Despite these connections, however, and even if both Dostoevsky and Strakhov are quoting Tolstoy, the two poets have differing ideas of what we can actually know about the transcendental reality in which both need to believe. This is evident from a comparison of the respective epiphanies of
Alyosha and Levin. Levin discovers a truth that he feels he has always known. Fyodor’s words “produced in his soul the effect of an electric spark, suddenly transforming and welding into one a whole group of disjointed impotent separate ideas which had never ceased to occupy him. These ideas unbeknownst to himself were occupying him when he was talking about letting the land” (emphasis added). So internal but separate ideas that together make up a larger truth were waiting only for an external catalyst to make themselves known. When they do come together, Levin declares that he now “knows” what not only he, but all of humankind, have always known. “And I did not find this knowledge in any way, but it was given to me, given because I could not have taken it from anywhere.” Levin says, furthermore, that he has been living right while he thinks wrong. That, of course, is what saves him from the fate of Anna, who, because she lives wrong, does not have access to the knowledge that is hidden in her, too.

Unlike Levin, Alyosha feels that his new knowledge comes from outside: this is what he means when he says, “Someone visited me.” He has a sense that a formative moral idea enters him and turns him from a “weak youth” to a warrior. As I have shown previously, this sense is mistaken to the extent that Alyosha’s fortitude rests upon newly constituted inner foundations. Despite this fact, however, Alyosha’s perception that his new resolution comes from outside him is a valuable clue both to his state of mind and also to the relation of real and ideal according to Dostoevsky. As with Levin, another person’s words—in Alyosha’s case, the words and deeds of Grushenka—create the initial conditions for his epiphany. As with Levin, these words both unsettle his feelings and thoughts and precipitate significant knowledge. Before this knowledge can coalesce, however, Alyosha has another experience, a dream. He falls asleep as the biblical passage about the marriage at Cana is being read over the coffin of Zosima. He comments on this passage in his sleep, and then Zosima appears before him and summons him to the marriage feast. At this point, Alyosha’s dream state deepens and the physical laws of nature are suspended. To mark this shift from objective to subjective reality, Dostoevsky mentions that (in Alyosha’s perception) the room moves (komnata razdvigaetsia); and then to emphasize it, he repeats the information in the same paragraph (opiat’ razdvimulas’ komnata). When the physical laws that hold a room in place no longer obtain, the decree of death visited on every individual who has lived or lives is also lifted. Zosima does not rise from his coffin, which has disappeared. Alyosha simply recognizes him as one of the guests at the table. It is Zosima who calls Alyosha with words that suggest his resurrection: “Why have you buried yourself here where we can’t see you . . . come and join us” (“Zachem siuda skhoronilsia, chto ne vidat’ tebia . . . podim i ty k nam”; BK, 361). The effect is that Alyosha wakes from the dead to the living life of his dream.
The status of dreams in the novel and the appearance in them of transcendental, ideal reality becomes clearer if we compare Alyoshka's dream with the appearance of the devil to Ivan later in the novel. As is appropriate for an advocate of philosophical materialism, the devil insists that he is part of the physical world. Ivan, however, wants desperately to believe that the devil is a figment of his imagination. He is in fact dreamed up by Ivan and vanishes when Alyosha knocks on his window, but—most significantly—that does not mean that the devil is not real. Using analytic reason, Ivan has assumed the stance of an outside observer vis-à-vis not only external but also his own internal reality. He cuts himself off from transcendental reality through his rationalism and his egotism. When his imagination conjures up the devil, he wants to keep this stirring of spiritual life safely fictional, even though his devil is much closer to him personally than, say, the Grand Inquisitor in his safely distanced story of medieval times. Alyosha, by contrast, takes his dream literally, as a timeless visitation to him by Zosima and even Christ. This is what he means when he says that "someone visited him."

Just how real is this other, deathless world? Dostoevsky seems to suggest that it can actually appear to us in our dreams and fantasies. Alyosha's dream seems to transpose him to another world not apparent in our waking life because a priori rules of time and space block our access to it. In dreams, these rules are suspended, and Alyosha's final epiphany takes place at the crossroads of "numberless" worlds that momentarily intersect within him. The confidence that Dostoevsky has in the "reality" of Alyosha's vision is expressed in his use of the Russian word kupol—dome—for the sky as it appears to Alyosha when he steps out into nature (BK, 362). A few lines later "something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault [nebesnyi stol]" is said to descend into Alyosha's soul. A kupol in Russian is not the inside of the dome of a cathedral but its outside: Dostoevsky's choice of words suggests that at this epiphanic moment Alyosha momentarily sees the other, transcendental world whole and from the outside.

Back in Anna Karenina, Levin has no dream, and his epiphany runs a different course from Alyosha's. Fyodor's words ignite a chain of interwoven thoughts and reminiscences, but during this process Levin remains entirely within himself. His inspired idea organizes "a whole swarm of various, impotent, separate thoughts that had always preoccupied him." It comes not from the Bible but from traditional peasant wisdom, which, Levin maintains, is both universal and natural. Whereas Alyosha finds his ideals in a book—and later writes a book himself—Levin finds the truth only when Fedor's words release "unclear but significant thoughts" that before had been "locked up" in his soul but now, "all streaming toward a single goal, began to whirl in his head, blinding him with their light" (AK, 719). When he has finished spinning out the consequences of his return to truth, he
stops thinking and listens “to mysterious voices joyfully and earnestly discussing something among themselves” (AK, 724).

Elsewhere in the novel, Levin, too, makes contact with another world. This happens not when he is contemplating but during fundamental life experiences: courtship and marriage, the death of his brother, and the birth of his son. Birth and death are “miracles” that elevate the ordinary life above mechanical process and infuse it with the sacred. In the words of the poet Fet commenting on the connection between Nikolai’s death and Mitya’s birth, birth and death are “two holes [from the material] into the spiritual world, into Nirvana.” They are “two visible and eternally mysterious windows.”18 In Mir kak tseloe (The World as One Whole), published in 1872, Strakhov argued that birth and death, the main events of organic (as opposed to mechanical) life, cannot be understood scientifically.

Here [in birth and death] everything is incomprehensible, everything is mysterious and science does not see even a path by which it might arrive at a resolution to the questions that present themselves . . . Investigations show that these miracles . . . are taking place now, here, before our very eyes. From this point of view, it is very just to say Divine creation does not cease even for a minute, that the great secret of the creation of the world is taking place before us up to this very moment.19

These are the central mysteries that elevate ordinary life above the merely mechanical and, of course, give a sacred dimension to the family. Although Tolstoy nowhere acknowledges this, the “family idea” in Anna Karenina may derive its theoretical validity from The World as One Whole, which he very much admired.20 If this is so, then Strakhov is one important source of the pantheism that is still present in Anna Karenina, albeit in a different and much diminished form than in War and Peace.

The “family idea” (like the “idea of the people” in War and Peace) has nothing to do with the mind at all. In the passage from The World as One Whole, Strakhov places limits on what human reason can discern, and this idea would have been very attractive to Tolstoy. Wherever Strakhov stepped beyond those limits, Tolstoy would take him to task for doing so. In Basic Concepts of Psychology, in a chapter entitled “The Real Life of the Soul” (“Real’naia zhiza’ dushi”), Strakhov tries to prove the objective status of psychic life, whether awake or asleep, by deducing a priori objective categories of truth (istina), goodness (blago), and freedom (slobodnaia deiatel’nost’) that underlie thought, feeling, and will, respectively.

Our thoughts have to comprise real knowledge; our feelings have to relate to our real good, they have to be part of our real happiness; our desires have to be possible to realize, destined for realization and [destined to] be translated into real actions. Under these conditions our inner world takes on the significance of full reality and loses its illusory character; life turns from a dream into real life. (Oop, 73)
Did Dostoevsky or Tolstoy Believe in Miracles?

Although Tolstoy agreed that it was necessary to anchor the life of the psyche, and especially moral life, in transcendental truths, he regarded Strakhov's way of doing this, by logical deduction, as the weakest part of his book (T-Pss, 62:45). For Tolstoy as for Dostoevsky, you can't get to metaphysical reality via deduction. Logic must be suppressed, or at least subordinated to feeling before we have access to higher truths. The "truth" (istina) or "sense" (smysl) that Levin discovers comes to him in the form of the "voices" of what Boris Eikhenbaum has called "moral instincts." These voices originate in the conscience, which is presented as harmonious and dialectical rather than logical, and Levin contemplates it directly after he stops thinking. "Levin had already ceased thinking and only as it were hearkened to mysterious voices that were joyously and earnestly discussing something among themselves" (AK, 724). The voices are "mysterious" (tainstvennyye) because they are not accessible to the mind. In Anna Karenina, voices from the other world may speak moral truths in our souls, and the birth and death of each individual may have something otherworldly about it, but no direct images of it ever appear, even in dreams. Tolstoy indicates the uncertain status of Levin's experience with the words "as it were" (kak by): neither Levin nor Tolstoy's reader can be sure that Levin "really" hears those voices.

We are now in a position to judge the relative position of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky on "spiritualist phenomena" in Anna Karenina and The Brothers Karamazov. In his battle with the spiritualists, Strakhov insisted upon a clear separation between matter and spirit. He considered spiritualism itself to be improper because it countenanced the "miraculous" suspension of the laws of space and time in the realm of matter where these are immutable. In Anna Karenina and subsequently, Tolstoy accepted Strakhov's dualism and therefore limited the "miraculous" to the sphere of ethics. Another world may in fact exist, and it may elevate the ordinary to the level of the sacred, but it expresses itself in us only through the voice of the conscience. While Levin remains alone after his epiphany, he sees the world around him in symbolic terms. This assimilation of objective to subjective reality comes to an abrupt halt when he rejoins his family and guests in a return to active life. The insinuation, as Levin himself formulates it for himself later on, is that self-consciousness and conscience do not transform the world, although they give individuals some measure of self-control and dignity within it. Levin will have to be content with that and hence content with his own limited knowledge and moral fallibility.

Dostoevsky, too, limits "spiritualist phenomena" to psychology and ethics. In The Brothers Karamazov, however, subjective reality intrudes upon the objective world so powerfully as to transform it into various hybrids that mix the two. "Spiritualist phenomena" enter the world through the human psyche, through dreams, fantasies, and visions. They have no
physical, natural existence that can be validated by a scientific commission such as the one set up in 1875 by D. I. Mendeleyev to study spiritualism, but they are nonetheless real. It is through these phenomena, good and evil, that moral progress (or regress) takes place, and the human world actually changes to reflect their presence. Alyosha's dream of the marriage of Cana is such a visitation. His embrace of the earth and his vision of it as a sacred temple is an imposition on external reality of a psychological disposition conditioned by his vision. Through men like Alyosha, who fell down a "weak youth" and rose up a "fighter, steadfast for the rest of his life," the world acquires a spiritual dimension. Alyosha not only becomes the compiler and arranger of a saint's life, but the end of the book finds him busy implanting sacred memories in the boys who represent Russia's next generation.

Alyosha is not psychologically transformed by his experience; rather, one might say that he is psychologically confirmed. Even after his divine visitation, he still may be said to have too rosy and therefore subjective a view of the human condition. Reality as it appears in the novel is something different from what Alyosha imagines it to be during this privileged moment. Carnality and egotism are still present in sexual love along with the erotic desire to sacrifice the self that Alyosha witnesses in Grushenka and experiences himself in his ecstasy. The real miracle of human life that we readers are meant to extract from the scene with Grushenka is that the potential for good as well as pure egotism coexist in the soul and that we are free to choose the good even when the laws of nature give us no reason for doing so. But Alyosha is more, not less, convincing as a character because he is not all wise. Through Alyosha, Dostoevsky sets out to fulfill two of his most cherished goals. Having failed (by his own lights) in The Idiot, he tries once again to create a man who is both truly good and convincingly human. This good man will move from a naive understanding of the miraculous to a valid one. His faith will be psychologically grounded and comprehensible but not simply subjective. Rather than argue for the existence of religious principles, Dostoevsky will embody them in Alyosha (and other characters in the book). The strength of his argument will depend on the degree to which we accept these characters as psychologically plausible. If we do, and if we take their self-understanding as plausible as well, then Dostoevsky will have succeeded in planting seeds of religious belief in the modern world. In the future, moreover, these seeds will transform not just individuals but the world.

Notes

An earlier version of this chapter appeared in Russian in 2000 in a Festschrift for L. D. Gromova-Opulskaya. See "Psikhologiya vevy v 'Anne Kare-
Did Dostoevsky or Tolstoy Believe in Miracles?

ninoi' i v 'Braťiakh Karamazovykh,' in Mir filologii Posviashchaetsia Lidii Dmitrievne Gromovoi-Opolskoi (Moskow: Nasledie, 2000), 235–45.

1. Two sisters, Katherine and Margaret Fox, from Hydesdale, New York, near Rochester, became world famous when they claimed in 1848 to have communicated with the spirit of a man murdered in their house. They later confessed that they themselves had made the tapping sounds that supposedly came from the dead man, but this confession did not stop the movement they had started.


3. His journal articles against Butlerov and Vagner were eventually republished in a collection entitled O techenykh istinakh (St. Petersburg, 1887).


7. F. M. Dostoevskii, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem, 30 vols. (Leningrad, 1972–88), 22:32–37 [hereafter cited parenthetically in text as Ps with volume and page number]. Here and elsewhere in the essay, translations from the Russian are my own. Citations of The Brothers Karamazov are from the Pevear-Volokhonsky translation (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), and translations of Anna Karenina are from AK, but I modify both where necessary to bring out special features in the Russian text.


12. The monograph was reprinted in 1886 as part of book called *Ob osnovnykh poniatiiakh psikhologii i fiziologii* (St. Petersburg: Tipografia brat’ev Panteleevykh) [hereafter cited as Oop with page number]. Page references to the monograph are from this edition, which is the one preserved with Tolstoy’s marginalia at the Iasnaia Poliana library.


14. See, for instance, his concessions to Dostoevsky in the early 1860s (*Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 86 [1973]: 561–62) and his many expressions of admiration for Tolstoy’s poetic gifts. One example of this would be an exclamation in an 1873 letter to Tolstoy: “[H]ow joyful for me is the thought that you, the kindest of all poets, confess faith in good as the essence of human life. I imagine that for you this thought has a warmth and light completely incomprehensible to blind men such as I” (N. N. Strakhov, *Perepiska L. N. Tolstogo s N. N. Strakhovym 1870–1894*, vol. 2, ed. and intro. B. L. Modzalevskii [St. Petersburg: Izdanie obshchestva Tolstovskogo muzeia, 1914], 23–24).


16. As Liza Knapp points out, the name Feodor comes from the Greek “Theodorus” meaning “gift of god,” and it is the peasant Fyodor who ignites the train of thought in Levin’s mind. See Knapp, “Tue-lal! Tue-le!”: Death Sentences, Words, and Inner Monologue in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and ‘Three More Deaths,’” *Tolstoy Studies Journal* 11 (1999): 12.

17. On the eve of beginning *The Brothers Karamazov*, in his *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky published a little story, “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” which depends on just such a reversal as occurs to Alyosha between waking reality and dreams. In both instances, the ontological status of the dreams is left deliberately vague.


20. See his letters of November 12 and 17, 1872 (T-Pss 61:345–49) and of late 1875 (T-Pss 62:235).
Did Dostoevsky or Tolstoy Believe in Miracles?
