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THE BURDEN OF SHOULDERING IDENTITY: A MICRO-ESSAY IN DOSTOEVSKY

Introductory words

We shall begin in media res, as it were, namely, from a small detail, indeed one that has consistently proved to be too small to see, although found right in the epicenter of The Brothers Karamazov, in “The Grand Inquisitor,” the heart of hearts of Dostoevsky’s legacy. At one level, the entire essay may be perceived as an annotation to this detail, in an attempt to understand its meaning and the service it does to the novel, although it may seem like attaching an overcoat to a button, rather than the other way around. But at another, and in fact many other levels, this would basically open up a full-fledged inquiry into Dostoevsky’s artistic and ideological world, leading to Dostoevsky’s uniform and holistic appropriation. For, as we make our way in deciphering the significance of that detail, we are to deal with numerous matters tangential to an extensive set of problems in Dostoevsky studies. In the to-and-fro of deliberation, we cannot but face many other themes. To achieve our objective and destination, we shall have to not only alternate telescope and microscope but also advance backward and move ahead rewinding, so at the end of the road, when all should come to completion, we will have become only ready to start.

Part One: ATTENTION TO DETAIL

1. A semiotic challenge

In order to begin, let us imagine ourselves in the epicenter of The Brothers Karamazov, in the chapter “The Grand Inquisitor,” right after Ivan Karamazov’s reading of The Legend to Alesha has been completed, when the text of the novel features an evanescent appearance of a detail, never to appear again in the novel’s text. This detail has been systematically overlooked by researchers, despite perpetual and relentless ransacking and interpreting of the novel, and in the rare cases when it was noticed, it was never made sense of. This is all the more significant given that The Brothers Karamazov, unlike many novels of genius, is still a “functioning novel,” so to speak, being read in different quarters: not only by a professional audience but also by the public at large. It is this detail that will take center stage and engage our attention
here and now, as we make an attempt to tease out its significance by way of a hypothesis that the present investigation is poised to advance. Let us now then, with no further delay, get down to business, turning to the narrator, whom Dostoevsky “hired” as fit to be entrusted with his greatest creation, and hear him draw the following verbal snapshot:

Ivan turned suddenly and went his way without looking back. It was just as brother Dmitri had left Alyosha the day before, though the parting had been very different. The strange resemblance flashed like an arrow through Alyosha’s mind in the distress and dejection of that moment. He waited a little, looking after his brother. He suddenly noticed that Ivan swayed as he walked and that his right shoulder looked lower than his left. He had never noticed it before. But all at once he turned too, and almost ran to the monastery.¹

That it is a piece of imaginative literature, and moreover, that it is Dostoevsky’s imaginative literature, gives sufficient warning and warrant alike to take the detail not as a slip of the pen, or a meaningless trifle, but something that is deliberately posted to be made part of the artistic game by considering and understanding. So, a trifle — yes, but meaningless? By no means! But what is the meaning of it, then — this now becomes the question. In order to communicate better, it will be henceforth referred to as the “shoulder detail or feature,” though with no particular stake in the term.

While the physical characterization of Ivan Karamazov is on principle left aside as secondary, if not irrelevant, to his strictly ideological function in the novel, now, as if out of the blue, such a corporeal detail to deal with! This detail is obviously minor and even minute, but Dostoevsky clearly introduces it at a major junction and in an emphatic way, which undoubtedly suggests that it somehow is important. Moreover, the detail seems connected with Ivan Karamazov’s major ideological claim, as vented in The Legend, putting some gray in his portrait — gray, incidentally, being the color philosophy uses to draw its pictures, as Hegel has it. Significance may also be seen in the fact of not only when but also to whom this shoulder feature appears, for the relation between Alesha and Ivan constitutes a major ideological dynamic and source of tension in the novel. Moreover, the mentioned detail is arguably the only information as to the physical status of the character of Ivan Karamazov, and therefore even on this score it cannot be accidental, especially if we bear in mind that Ivan Karamazov may be considered among those of Dostoevsky’s