Why Dmitrii Karamazov Did Not Kill His Father

When Dmitrii rushes into his father’s house, suspecting that Grushen’ka is there, he cannot control his anger even when he finds he has erred; he throws his father on the floor, kicks him two or three times with his heel in the face, and would probably have done much worse if his brothers Ivan and Alesha had not restrained him. “Madman! You’ve killed him!” cries Ivan. “Serves him right!” Mitia replies. “If I haven’t killed him I’ll come again and kill him. You can’t protect him.”

Thinking about killing the father is an irresistible attraction for the Karamazovs. Ivan even feels sorry that he had intervened. “Damn it, if I had not pulled Mitia away, perhaps he’d have murdered him.” For Ivan, both Mitia and Fedor are “reptiles” and “one reptile will devour the other.” Mitia and Fedor both offend the rational Ivan by their turbulent, sensual, self-destructive behavior. Father Zosima, Alesha’s mentor, can only bow down in silence before Mitia’s impending agony and urge Alesha never to lose sight of him. The murder seems inevitable, and Alesha is in despair. “My brothers are destroying themselves,” he says to Lise, “my father also. And they are destroying others with them. It’s the ‘primitive force of the Karamazovs,’ as Father Paisii called it the other day — ‘primitive, unbridled, crude.’ Does the Spirit of God move above that force?” («Даже носится ли Дух Божий вверху этой силы?»)

Alesha’s question recalls the second line in Genesis: “The Spirit of God moved above the face of the waters” — creating the cosmos out of chaos. In Russian, «Дух Божий носился над водою.» Is the Biblical parallel merely verbal, or will that same Spirit of God really move above the primitive Karamazov force, creating moral harmony out of chaos? This is what the novel is about.

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1. Quotations are from the Constance Garnett translation of The Brothers Karamazov in the Modern Library edition. These have been checked against the standard Russian edition of the novel in Ф. М. Достоевский, Собрание сочинений в десяти томах, 10 тт. (M., 1956-1958), IX-X.
2. Alesha is so concerned with his own crisis after the death of the elder that he forgets the injunction not to lose sight of Mitia. That is when the murder occurs.
Let us begin with the chaos. All that we know about Mitia Karazov's situation and character would lead us to predict that he will murder his father. He has every reason to do so. Abandoned by his father at an early age; deprived of his rightful inheritance from his mother; competing with his father for the girl he loves; knowing that his father has set aside 3000 rubles for Grushen'ka if she comes to the house; knowing too that his father is scheming to put Mitia into prison — these circumstances put him into a fury and lead to the attack which we have already seen. Mitia's character also makes the murder seem inevitable. He is often described as a child, uncontrolled, passionate, irresponsible, quick-tempered. And he has vowed to return to kill the father.

As if the fire of motivation could be stoked still higher, Dostoevskii sends Mitia off on a weird wild-goose chase in search of 3000 rubles. This is the sum that Mitia needs to pay back a debt to his fiancée, Katerina Ivanovna, cancelling his past and leaving him free to begin a new life elsewhere with his new love Grushen'ka. In return for 3000 rubles he offers prospective buyers his doubtful rights to his mother's estate at Chermashnia — the same estate which his father wishes to sell. Mitia begrudges the precious time lost in going to buyers — he is worried that meanwhile Grushen'ka may have slipped past him to visit his father. And his fury is all the greater when he returns unsuccessful. The three prospective buyers — Samsonov (Grushen'ka's ailing former "protector"), the drunkard Gorstkin (Liagavii), on whom Mitia wastes a whole night in the vain hope of catching him sober in the morning, and finally the silly chatterbox Madame Khokhlakova, who advises him finally that she has thousands of rubles for him in the gold mines of Siberia — these three absurd buyers form an increasing order of grotesque humiliation for Mitia. He returns infuriated and unsuccessful, only to find out that Grushen'ka has vanished. He leaps to the conclusion that she has taken advantage of his absence to run off to his father. Grabbing a brass pestle he runs off to commit murder. Character and circumstances, his wild-goose chase, and now the sight of his hated father leaning out of the window looking for Grushen'ka — these make the murder seem inevitable:

Mitia looked at him from the side without stirring. The old man's profile that he loathed so, his pendant Adam's apple, his hooked nose, his lips that smiled in greedy expectation, were all brightly lighted up by the slanting lamplight falling on the left from the room. A horrible fury of hatred suddenly surged up in Mitia's heart, "There he was, his rival, the man who had tormented him, had ruined his life!" It was a rush