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English 109 (World Literature: The Modern Period), Spring 2017
Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*
MWF 2-2:50, 199 Esslinger

English 109 is the third quarter of a year-long survey of World Literature. In the third quarter we read works from the modern period. What does it mean to be a modern? The word “modern” is commonly used to mean “new,” and most often it refers to our own era. It is a well-established practice for historians to use the word “modern” to refer to a particular set of attitudes expounded most influentially by the thinkers of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, especially in France. These ideas include secular attitudes that had gained momentum in the European Renaissance as well as an emerging confidence, in the late eighteenth and in nineteenth century, in industrial technology and science. The achievements of Europe’s Enlightenment were impressive, but they sent shock waves throughout much of the world, including Dostoevsky’s Russia, an enormous country suspended between tradition and a turbulent modernity, between the Far East and the West. In Dostoevsky himself, we witness the struggle between traditional and modern values, between religious faith and modern skepticism.

We will focus our attention this quarter on one of the greatest works of world literature, Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. We’ll be asking, with Dostoevsky: does the widely reported death of God -- as Dostoevsky’s character Ivan Karamazov contends -- mean that “everything is permitted,” i.e. that anything goes and ethics is out the window? What’s the relation between belief in God and ethics? Does belief in God promote ethics, or violence? If God doesn’t exist, am I still “my brother’s keeper,” as the Bible (Genesis 4.9) insists? Is there a way to think about God outside of the question of “belief” that so tormented Dostoevsky? We’ll consider Dostoevsky’s religious ideas in the light of his vision of the messianic role of the Russian people and of his bitter critique of European culture and civilization, attitudes that have recently been revived by Vladimir Putin in today’s Russia.

Every student in the class is required to come to my office hours at least once during the quarter. Please see me about setting up an appointment.

Texts

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, edited with a revised translation by Susan McReynolds Oddo; Norton Critical Edition, Second Edition (Norton, 2011)

Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Duquesne UP, 1985)

Assignments

I. April 3: introduction; Russian names; “From the Author”; Chapter I; April 5: *BK* 11-34; April 7: *BK* 35-56; Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Chapter 8 (“Responsibility for the Other”)

II. April 10: *BK* 56-77; April 12: *BK* 77-98; April 14: 99-124

III. April 17: *BK* 124-141; April 19: *BK* 145-163; April 21: *BK* 163-183; **first in-class writing assignment**

IV. April 24: *BK* 185-213; April 26: *BK* 213-230 (“the Grand Inquisitor”); April 28: *BK* 230-243

V. May 1: *BK* 245-280; May 3: *BK* 283-309 [screening of a cinematic version of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part 1]; May 5: *BK* 309-334 [screening of a cinematic version of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part 2]

VI. May 8: *BK* 334-355; May 10: *BK* 355-378; May 12: *BK* 379-400

VII: May 15: *BK* 400-422; May 17: *BK* 422-432; May 19: *BK* 435-454; **second in-class writing assignment**

VIII: May 22: *BK* 454-474; May 24: *BK* 475-494; May 26: *BK* 494-515

IX: May 29: *BK* 515-547; May 31: *BK* 547-568; June 2: *BK* 568-589; Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 113-122 (Chapter Ten, “The Hardness of Philosophy and the Consolation of Religion”)

X. June 5: *BK* 589-610; June 7: *BK* 610-630; June 9: *BK* 631-646 (Epilogue); **third in-class writing assignment**

Requirements:

Students must keep up with the reading assignments, regularly attend class, and participate in class discussions. **More than two unexcused absences will result in a lowering of your grade by five points per missed class.**

Written work will consist of three in-class writing assignments (identification and explication of passages from the reading).

Your grades for the course will be based on the following criteria:

class participation: **10%**

in-class written assignments: **90%** (30% each)