LETTERS

From the Editor:

Slavic Review publishes letters to the editor with educational or research merit. Where the letter concerns a publication in *Slavic Review,* the author of the publication will be offered an opportunity to respond. Space limitations dictate that comment regarding a book review should be limited to one paragraph; comment on an article should not exceed 750 to 1,000 words. The editor encourages writers to refrain from ad hominem discourse.

D.P.K.

To the Editor:

Carol Flath's article, "The *Passion* of Dmitrii Karamazov" (*Slavic Review* 58, no. 3), seems to me to drive a thesis so hard that she oversimplifies, distorts, and impoverishes *The Brothers Karamazov.*

Her thesis, influenced by George Fedotov, is that Dmitrii is an authentic Russian saint due to his voluntary acceptance of suffering for a murder he did not commit. As a saint he takes on the sins of his brothers and suffers for them, exonerating them. This *imitatio Christi* is clear in Dmitrii's dream of the babe and elsewhere.

Much of Flath's material is not original. See Alexander Golubov's essay, "Religious Imagery in the Structure of *The Brothers Karamazov,*" in Richard Freeborn, R. R. Milner-Gulland, and Charles A. Ward, eds., *Russian and Slavic Literature* (1976), and the brilliant study by Diane Oenning Thompson, *The Brothers Karamazov and the Poetics of Memory* (1991); Thompson even has a section entitled, "Mitya's Imitatio Christi" (275–80). Neither of these works is cited by Flath.

Flath's originality consists in pushing her thesis to an extreme. Will Dmitrii choose the heroic saintly destiny of crucifixion in Siberia for 20 years (probably without Grushen'ka) or the unheroic destiny of escaping to America with Grushen'ka? Dostoevskii himself leaves this open. Alesha—whom Flath calls the novel's "truth gauge"—advises Dmitrii to escape to America since he committed no sin and had no share in the killing of his father. For offering such advice Alesha is denounced by Flath as a *tempter* (allied with the Devil?). "If my interpretation is correct," says Flath, "it is inconceivable that Dmitrii should accede to the pressure to flee to America; instead he must go into Siberian exile" (595). Flath is certain that she knows better than Alesha or Dostoevskii what Dmitrii would do.

In her zeal to transform Dmitrii into a Siberian Christ figure, Flath misunderstands the meaning of imitatio Christi. (I rely on the exposition by Diane Oenning Thompson.) It does not mean that Dmitrii's sufferings and his innocence transform him into a Christ figure with the power to "exonerate" mankind. Imitatio Christi means to live as best one can according to Christ's teachings and example. When Dmitrii takes on responsibility for his violent temper and becomes a "new man," he is still imperfect. He has not finally expiated his sins but must continue working at them, in the spirit of Zosima's "active love." Flath misses this distinction between following Christ's teachings and becoming Christ.

This confusion is responsible for many distortions in her article. First, as a saint, in a state of "divine grace," Dmitrii is said to take on the burden of his brother's sins, exonerating them, that is, freeing them of the responsibility for those sins. I see no exoneration—Dmitrii never uses this word. Ivan is punished by going insane; Smerdiakov, by hanging himself; Alesha has nothing to be exonerated for. Nor does Zosima "exonerate" the Mysterious Stranger for murdering a girl—the murderer pays the price by public confession and death.

Flath has to contend with the awkward fact that for a Christ figure Dmitrii is very imperfect. He acknowledges his own baseness. This does not daunt Flath: "Dmitrii's baseness is a lie that masks true holiness and provides a more compelling metaphor for a state of

divine grace than is possible in any direct depiction" (588). She finds the baseness almost always excusable—Snegirev, for example, deserved being publicly humiliated by Dmitrii. Still, Flath has a difficult task whitewashing Dmitrii's violence, which she admits is "irrefutable" (593): he beats up and threatens to kill his father and smashes old Grigorii on the head. That doesn't sound like Christ. Flath resolves this problem to her own satisfaction by assuring us that Dmitrii will be redeemed by his sufferings in Siberia.

The most bizarre distortion occurs in connection with Katerina Ivanovna, whom Flath describes as "an agent of the devil whose task is to *tempt a righteous man to evil*" (592, Flath's italics). By giving Dmitrii 3,000 rubles, Katia tempts him to waste this money on an orgy at Mokroe, thus providing an incentive for him to kill his father. (How did Katia know in advance that he would be obsessed with the need to pay her back?)

For Flath, the backbone of the novel is Dmitrii's sufferings and—despite the greatest provocations—his moral triumph in not killing his father. She also finds the key to Dmitrii's story in the incident with Katia. There are therefore two fundamental strands in this novel: not killing the father and Dmitrii's obsession with paying back his debt to Katia. One would suppose that these two strands are closely linked. I sought to explain this linkage in my article, "Why Dmitrii Karamazov Did Not Kill His Father," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 209–24. Flath states that she is "diametrically opposed" (592*n*24) to my interpretation. I have no quarrel with that; great works of literature are open to many interpretations. The problem is that Flath, having rejected my interpretation, offers no interpretation to replace it. She says merely that "divine grace" (595) enabled Dmitrii to overcome the temptation to kill his father. That is, a miracle occurred to explain the most crucial point in the novel. Yet this whole massive novel celebrates freedom—not miracles. Flath's explanation does not explain anything and diminishes Dostoevskii's great art.

Flath finds nothing good to say about Katia—this "agent of the devil." Yet why does Dmitrii exclaim, near the end of the novel—when he presumably sees moral issues clearly: "What is it I want? I want Katia!" And there is the powerful scene of mutual forgiveness between them.

Finally, we are told that Katia "sows hatred and discord wherever she goes and will not admit love and grace to her heart" (595*n*34). How then would Flath explain Katia's passionate love for Ivan at the end?

In brief, this article offers only a scholarly fantasy of Dmitrii as Christ and Katia as the devil, with various distortions resulting from this strained interpretation.

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Professor Flath replies:

Literary scholarship and criticism must proceed from a stance of awe and respect before the power of the works of art that are their subject and reason for being. The best interpretations of literature take into account both the generic characteristics of the work at hand and its content. It is a fundamental message of Fedor Dostoevskii's best works that human language is inadequate to convey the truth, and that when people begin to tell stories they lie. In this novel, Dostoevskii's Truth—the mystery of Christian wholeness and grace—is communicated metaphorically. My purpose in "The *Passion* of Dmitrii Karamazov" has been to show how the gap between words and action lies at the heart of both genre and message; in order to understand *The Brothers Karamazov,* one must see beyond the lies that encrust Dmitrii's plot to the truth beneath.

The hagiographic roots of Alesha's plot (and of course the story of Zosima) are obvious and have been the subject of much serious study—annotated at length in my article. In any consideration of the relation of words to action, Dmitrii's story must be the focus, for it is his actions that are "told." I have moved beyond a simplistic listing of the textual links between Dmitrii's story and the Gospel texts to reveal the depths of this hagiographic pattern. Drawing on numerous scholarly sources, most particularly Jostein Børtnes's wonderful *Visions of Glory* (1988), I argue that Dmitrii Karamazov's story is a metaphoric "passion" (*strast'* or *muchenie*), as opposed to the metonymic "life" (*vita* or *zhitie*) exemplified by Alesha Karamazov and Zosima. Dmitrii's passion follows the pattern of suffering and re-