

BRIEF MENTIONS

VICTOR TERRAS

A Karamazov Companion: Commentary on the Genesis, Language, and Style of Dostoevsky's Novel

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981. Pp. 482.

Few American scholars are as qualified to write about Dostoevsky and nineteenth-century Russian literature as Victor Terras. After two brilliant books—one devoted to the young Dostoevsky and the other to Belinsky's aesthetics—he has now written an exhaustive commentary on Dostoevsky's last and greatest novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In every respect this third volume lives up to the high standards of the first two and represents a major advancement in the study of Russian literature.

Terras divides his book into two unequal parts. The preliminary materials, which occupy approximately the first 120 pages, deal with the broad topics of background, ideas, and narrative technique. These three are then divided into numerous subdivisions, which, in their totality, provide an extraordinary abundance of useful information on Dostoevsky and his novel.

The second part, and the heart of the book, is, of course, the commentary itself. For some 350 pages Terras scrupulously analyzes the entire work—book by book, chapter by chapter, and, in some cases, even line by line. Each comment is preceded by page references to both the Norton critical edition and Volumes 14 and 15 of the *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (*Complete Works*), which is now being published in the Soviet Union. The whole thing is a marvel of coordination, erudition, and painstaking scholarship.

Several features of the commentary are particularly noteworthy. In the first place, Terras makes it incontestably clear in numerous passages that a Christian world view is at the center of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and that familiarity with Christian writings—whether scriptural, apocryphal, or hagiographic—is an essential element in the novel's interpretation. Secondly, every effort is made to identify all literary references, both native and foreign.

Though much of this work has already been done by Dostoevsky's Soviet editors, Terras, armed with an impressive knowledge of Russian and West-European literature, adds significantly to their accomplishments. Relevant quotations from Pushkin, Nekrasov, Goethe, Schiller, and many others are very numerous and highly instructive. A third characteristic worth mentioning is the fact that, despite some charitable remarks about the Garnett-Matlaw translation, Terras shows that the English translators all too often miss an important nuance, overlook a meaningful allusion, or simply misunderstand and mistranslate. In every such instance the requisite correction or modification is made. Still another strength of his work is the great care Terras takes in explaining linguistic niceties to his readers. We learn, for example, of the thoroughly individualized diction of each of the major characters. We are also told when a passage is larded with solemn Church Slavic elocutions, journalistic jargon, coarse colloquialisms, or schoolboy slang. The final feature of Terras's commentary and the one for which the majority of his readers will probably be most grateful is the incredible wealth of information on virtually every aspect of Russian life and culture in the nineteenth century. There are extensive notes on the social classes (landowners, bourgeoisie, merchants, clergy, students, peasants), their speech habits, their customs, and their attitudes. The rituals and beliefs of the Russian Orthodox Church, the penal code, legal procedures, the education system, social and political trends—all are the subjects of illuminating commentary. Not even details of flora and fauna, food, and clothing escape Terras's notice.

Anyone who is interested in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky's oeuvre, or Russian literature in general, would be well advised to read *A Karamazov Companion*. It is an exceptionally valuable contribution to all three fields.

David Matual