Narrative Ethics and Trauma-Form in *The Brothers Karamazov*

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Abstract

This article argues that *The Brothers Karamazov* does not merely represent trauma as content but constructs a trauma-form: a repeatable narrative mechanism that produces ethical pressure by positioning the reader as a juror of damaged testimony. To make this claim operational, the essay offers four analytically separable formal processes, rupture, recurrence, testimonial gap, and juridical capture, and demonstrates how they function across key scenes including Ivan's "Rebellion" and "Grand Inquisitor" materials, Smerdyakov's confessional sequences, and Dmitri's trial. Drawing on trauma and testimony theory alongside narrative ethics, the paper shows how Dostoevsky's narration converts breakdown, contradiction, and withheld verification into conditions of judgment, recruiting readers into decision under uncertainty rather than offering stable evidentiary resolution. Moral injury is used here as a critical heuristic framework for the ethical damage produced when adjudication is demanded without reliable grounds. By shifting trauma studies from a vocabulary of inner states to a protocol for reading narrative address and evidentiary form, the article provides a transferable method for tracing how novels engineer responsibility through testimonial contamination and the pressures of public verdict.

Keywords: Dostoevsky; *The Brothers Karamazov*; moral injury; trauma-form; testimony; witnessing; narrative ethics; confession; theodicy; juridical narration; readerly responsibility

1. Introduction

This article argues that *The Brothers Karamazov* builds what I call a trauma-form: a narrative architecture that translates suffering into ruptures, compulsive returns, and testimonial gaps, imposing an ethical demand on witnesses inside the story and on readers outside it. The novel's late turn to explicit juridical address is structural, not ornamental. In the prosecutor's summation, the accused "stands before his judges," framed by "two abysses, gentlemen of the jury"

(Dostoevsky 1992, 611). The courtroom crystallizes the book's deeper formal logic: traumatic content is not merely represented; it is staged as a summons that recruits its audience into responsibility and judgment as a reading posture.

Methodologically, the essay proceeds by close reading. Its evidence is the novel's language, scene-construction, and orchestration of address. Theory is used locally as a hermeneutic instrument rather than a totalizing grid. The narrator anticipates a skeptical tribunal from the outset, asking "why should I, the reader, spend my time studying" the facts of Alyosha Fyodorovich's life? (Dostoevsky 1992, 17). The question scripts the reader as evaluator: what counts as "facts," what counts as "life," and what counts as a morally actionable account. The wager is that the novel does not merely contain ethical debate; it compels ethical positioning by making narration answerable to an imagined court of judgment.

Trauma studies clarifies why this pressure is formal before it is thematic. Cathy Caruth defines trauma not as a stable memory-object but as "the story of a wound that cries out," a belated address that registers a reality "not otherwise available" (Caruth 1996, 18). Dostoevsky's trauma-form operates through this delayed, addressive structure. Ivan's "Rebellion" is exemplary: he asks whether one would accept universal harmony if the price were a child's torture, imagining the builder of destiny forced to agree to build the edifice on the child's "unrequited tears" (Dostoevsky 1992, 208). This is an ethical claim inseparable from technique. Ivan does not offer a proposition that can be neatly refuted; he constructs a rhetorical scene that persists as residue the plot cannot metabolize. In Dominick LaCapra's terms, the novel repeatedly stages the oscillation between compulsive reenactment and the labor of differentiating past from present: "acting out is compulsively repetitive," while "working through involves repetition with significant difference" (LaCapra 2014, 188). Dostoevsky forces moral knowledge to appear in this unstable mode: not as doctrine, but as recurrence that demands judgment anew.

Because the novel's pressure is testimonial, it also requires a theory of witnessing in which listening is constitutive rather than optional. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that "testimony is not a monologue," since it "includes its hearer" and cannot "be subsumed by its familiarizing knowledge" (Felman and Laub 1992, 204). *Karamazov* repeatedly dramatizes this structure of co-implication. Ivan's refusal is staged not as private despair but as a juridical gesture addressed to another: "I just most respectfully return him the ticket" (Dostoevsky 1992, 208). The line withdraws consent while presuming moral

accounting beyond the self; it also forces the listener (Alyosha in-scene, the reader by extension) to confront what it means to hear suffering and remain intact. The novel's "testimonial gaps," then, are not failures of representation but engineered intervals in which responsibility, judgment, or refusal must be supplied.

The article works with four operational definitions, each tied to observable textual practice. Trauma-form names the conversion of traumatic material into recurring narrative pressure that resists closure and forces re-encounter, as in the edifice built on "unrequited tears" (Dostoevsky 1992, 208). Moral injury names the wound to agency produced by wished-for violence and compromised desire, articulated when Dmitri confesses, "I did not kill him… but I wanted to kill him" (Dostoevsky 1992, 391). Testimonial gap refers to strategic incompletion by which speech both reveals and displaces culpability, condensed in Ivan's premise that "there is no virtue if there is no immortality" (Dostoevsky 1992, 58); the claim functions as a relay between thought and deed where responsibility becomes difficult to locate. Juridical capture designates the novel's recurrent conversion of ethical life into the posture of judgment, including the paradox that true judgment is ethically forbidden as mastery: "you cannot be the judge of anyone" (Dostoevsky 1992, 272). Juridical capture thus names the novel's double bind: it forces readers into judging positions while indicting the fantasy of sovereign moral sentencing.

Theological history and moral psychology matter here as internal energies of the novel's ethical mechanics, not as external overlays. Zosima radicalizes responsibility by dissolving the boundary between individual culpability and communal implication: "each of us is guilty in everything before everyone" (Dostoevsky 1992, 245). This is not a pious generality but a structural directive for how suffering is to be received. The claim presses against rational calculation of blame, aligning with Joseph Frank's account of Dostoevsky's insistence on "the limitations of reason" when confronted with "moral-spiritual truth" (Frank 2009, 825). Taken together, Zosima and Ivan define the central tension: either suffering is metabolized into explanatory systems, or it fractures those systems and demands an ethics of response that exceeds justification.

The essay develops four close-reading sections because these passages concentrate the trauma-form at points where narration becomes a venue for moral adjudication. First, Ivan's "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor" are read as traumatic scene-construction that recruits the reader through the figure of the child and the problem of consent, anchored by the "ticket" refusal (Dostoevsky 1992, 224). Second, Zosima's discourse on responsibility is read as a counter-

juridical ethics that intensifies guilt into collective implication, beginning from "guilty in everything before everyone" (Dostoevsky 1992, 245). Third, Dmitri's investigative and confessional scenes are read through moral injury as an ethics of compromised desire, because intention survives factual innocence: "I wanted to kill him" (Dostoevsky 1992, 627). Fourth, the trial speeches are read as the clearest instance of juridical capture, where readers are explicitly interpellated as judges facing "two abysses" (Dostoevsky 1992, 594). The aim is not to domesticate Dostoevsky's extremity but to show how the novel's form renders ethical life legible as a pressured practice of witnessing, one that turns reading into a kind of trial whose verdict is never safely final.

2. Theoretical Framework

Trauma studies, as used here, is less a vocabulary of interior states than a set of reading cues for how narrative encodes psychic and ethical disturbance. The critical object is form: ruptures in recounting, compulsive returns, the pressure of the "unsayable," and testimony displaced into anecdote, parable, or rhetorical spectacle. Caruth's foundational point is that trauma is apprehended belatedly, as an event not fully "known" in the moment of occurrence and therefore returned through repetition rather than stabilized representation (Caruth 1996, 92). In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan's "child" stories condense this logic by staging suffering as what exceeds explanatory containment and instead demands a witnessing relation. The abused child's scene does not culminate in meaning but in an unbearable remainder: "one little tear of even that one tormented child who beat her chest with her little fist and prayed to 'dear God 'in a stinking outhouse with her unredeemed tears!" (Dostoevsky 1992, 207). The trauma cue here is not only content but address. Description turns into summons, and comprehension starts to feel ethically insufficient.

Contemporary psychoanalysis, deployed strictly as a reading practice, sharpens attention to confession as an action performed in language: a speech act that stages a relation (speaker, addressee, implied judge) and discloses more than the speaker intends. The interpretive cues are confession, transference, and symptom, treated as prompts for tracking how speech binds characters into circuits of accusation, dependence, and self-exposure. LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" matters because it describes repetitive compulsion without turning the novel into a case history (LaCapra 2014, 21–22). In Smerdyakov's confrontation with Ivan, confession arrives as transferred indictment: responsibility is displaced outward even as it returns inward. Smerdyakov frames himself as instrument and Ivan as author of the deed:

“You killed him, you are the main killer, and I was just your minion, your faithful servant Licharda, and I performed the deed according to your word” (Dostoevsky 1992, 529). The force of the moment is not reducible to plot revelation; it is a reallocation of agency through address, as if the addressee must occupy analyst, confessor, and judge at once.

Moral psychology and the language of moral injury can then be used heuristically to name how the novel recruits evaluative feeling and turns judgment into an affective event. The point is not to impose diagnostic frameworks but to track how shame, self-condemnation, and perceived rupture become mechanisms of juridical capture, enlisting both characters and readers into verdict-like stances. Dmitri’s self-sentencing is exemplary because it produces guilt as narrative posture before any court can formalize it. The narrator notes that Dmitri “had already written his own sentence with pen and paper: ‘I punish myself and my life’” (Dostoevsky 1992, 348). For close reading, what matters is how this inscription manufactures quasi-legal subjectivity from within, a self made answerable beyond evidentiary certainty. “Moral injury” thus names the reader’s forced suspension between act and intention, deed and self-concept, law and conscience, without granting any term final sovereignty.

Narrative ethics and testimony theory, finally, refine what it means to listen responsibly inside a text that repeatedly dramatizes the limits of knowledge. Testimony is not merely the transmission of facts; it presupposes a listener and makes that listener implicated in what is said and what cannot yet be said. Felman and Laub emphasize that witnessing is constituted through relational pressure and repetition rather than the smooth delivery of information, and that testimony often returns to the scene as if compelled to “go again” (Felman and Laub 1992, 236). That dynamic is staged with particular clarity in the trial, where competing narratives strain toward closure while gaps persist as moral irritants. The defense counsel explicitly names the structural feature the essay tracks as “testimonial gap”: “Something seems to have been left unspoken here, gentlemen of the jury, and unfinished” (Dostoevsky 1992, 627). Incompletion becomes operative rather than accidental. The courtroom demands closure; the narrative keeps staging remainder, turning the reader into a secondary juror who must decide what to do with the unfinished.

Theological history supplies a further restraint by locating the novel’s idioms of theodicy and anti-theodicy within nineteenth-century Russian discourse, where “salvation,” “harmony,” and “suffering” were culturally saturated claims about social order and divine justice. Ivan’s rebellion is most legible as a historically intelligible refusal of justificatory systems: an idiom that speaks through European philosophical debate while remaining anchored in Russian

religious argument. His refusal is cast in the language of contract and return, as if metaphysics were a transaction he can ethically repudiate: "And therefore I hasten to return my ticket" (Dostoevsky 1992, 208). Frank's account of Dostoevsky's context helps clarify why such language carried cultural weight: Ivan's protest is shaped by a modern demand for moral intelligibility that Dostoevsky's religious imagination repeatedly contests (Frank 2009, 851). Methodologically, theological history prevents trauma and ethics from floating free as universal abstractions; it reattaches them to the novel's lived argumentative world.

These tools require safeguards, because the temptation to "explain" characters clinically or universalize suffering into theory is precisely what the novel, at its best, resists. The essay therefore treats theory as an instrument for describing textual operations rather than a master key. Dostoevsky ironizes interpretive certainty, especially where psychological explanation becomes overconfident and reversible: "psychology, gentlemen, though a profound thing, is still like a stick with two ends" (Dostoevsky 1992, 618). That warning becomes method. Claims remain tethered to scenes, syntax, and narrative sequencing, and remain historicized rather than diagnostic. In LaCapra's terms, the aim is to describe oscillation between compulsive repetition and partial working-through without converting the novel into a clinical archive (LaCapra 2014, 21–22). Read this way, "trauma-form" names not a pathology but an architecture of ethical pressure: a structure that repeatedly forces narration, character, and reader to confront what cannot be made cleanly legible.

3. Ivan's "Rebellion" and the Child-Suffering Cluster

Ivan's "Rebellion," placed in Book V ("Pro and Contra"), marks the juncture where *The Brothers Karamazov* moves from familial intrigue into a naked contest over moral explanation; Dostoevsky, who never separates argument from scene, stages that passage as a crisis of proximity. Ivan begins by attacking the most soothing ethical posture, the one that professes love for "humanity" while recoiling from the unmanageable fact of persons: bodies, odors, hunger, and need. "It's still possible to love one's neighbor abstractly, and even occasionally from a distance, but hardly ever up close" (Dostoevsky 1992, 201). In context, this is not a detachable aphorism but the hinge that locks the scene into place. Ivan is about to force Alyosha, and the reader who has chosen to shadow Alyosha, into the "up close" that polite ethics prefers to evade.

"Rebellion," then, does not merely dispute theodicy: it demonstrates. It manufactures ethical discomfort. As Sadreddin Taheri reads *The Brothers*

Karamazov as a philosophical-theological drama that probes "God, freedom, and ethics" under the pressure of belief and doubt (Taheri 2012, 116), Ivan's speech operates as a device of nearness: a pressure that renders abstraction suspect, even cowardly, by stripping the listener's capacity to remain cleanly detached, especially when the world's intelligibility is measured against "the tears of that tortured child" (Taheri 2012, 120).

Mikhail Livshetz argues that Dostoevsky's ethical imagination reconfigures proximity as exposure, insisting that moral perception begins only when distance from suffering collapses (Livshetz 2015, 142–43). Ivan's rebellion thus becomes an ethics of vision: not a doctrine to accept or refute, but an enforced seeing. Alyosha, and the reader, are pressed toward pain without the insulating screen of generalities. Livshetz helps name what the scene performs: moral recognition engineered less by disputation than by sensory and emotional confrontation, a pressure that unsettles the self's boundaries.

From there the passage moves into what trauma studies would call displaced testimony: not a wound narrated by its bearer, but a dossier of wounds arriving through mediation and repetition, producing belated moral knowledge rather than stable information (Caruth 1996, 92). Ivan's cluster of stories about suffering children is built from reported scenes whose grim authority lies in their ordinariness, in the way cruelty is housed inside daily rights and routines. The story of the abused boy "Richard" begins in a bleak grammar of proprietorship and neglect: "by the time he was seven, they were already sending him out to tend the flocks in the cold and wet, with almost no clothes and almost nothing to eat," and "none of them stopped to think or repent of doing so; on the contrary, they considered themselves entirely within their rights" (Dostoevsky 1992, 203). The horror here is not only the child's exposure and hunger; it is the *lawful* cadence of entitlement, the untroubled conviction that neglect is a legitimate exercise of rights, so that violence can present itself as ordinary practice rather than moral rupture.

Evgenia V. Cherkasova sharpens this ethical contrast by setting Ivan's demolition of abstract love against Alyosha's restorative discipline of active love: where Ivan forces moral thought into proximity with concrete injury, Alyosha's counter-response seeks to convert that discomfort into lived responsibility, what Cherkasova calls the movement from "ethical discomfort into incarnate compassion" (Cherkasova 2008, 69).

From that vantage, Ivan's dossier is not an endpoint but a catalyst: it ruins innocence, forces recognition, and insists that morality, if it is to exist at all, must be embodied. Violence is systemic in Dostoevsky precisely because it is normalized, invisible to those who justify it as routine.

“Rebellion” therefore operates at once as theological protest and as a phenomenology of witnessing. It compels proximity to pain while refusing the relief of resolution. It turns reading into a moral event, a test of how near one can come to another’s suffering without retreating into abstraction.

Dostoevsky intensifies this pressure through sentence-level accumulation that mimics the compulsive insistence of traumatic material. Ivan’s narration repeatedly abandons reflective pacing for a blunt string of verbs that drags the listener toward a scene rather than allowing contemplation. When he recounts domestic cruelty, rhythm becomes physically coercive:

> “They beat her, flogged her, kicked her, not knowing why themselves, until her whole body was nothing but bruises; finally they attained the height of finesse: in the freezing cold, they locked her all night in the outhouse, because she wouldn't ask to get up and go in the middle of the night (as if a five-year-old child sleeping its sound angelic sleep could have learned to ask by that age)---for that they smeared her face with her excrement and made her eat the excrement, and it was her mother, her mother who made her! ” (Dostoevsky 1992, 205).

The list does more than supply detail; it performs rupture. Syntax itself becomes a mode of witnessing, enacting what LaCapra calls the oscillation between acting out and working through, a rhythmic pull that collapses comprehension into affective proximity (LaCapra 2014, 21–22).

This conversion of syntax into witness can be read alongside Cathy Caruth’s account of belated knowledge, where trauma “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” and therefore returns (Caruth 1996, 92). Ivan’s sentences do not explain; they recur. The reader’s attempt to interpret that recurrence becomes an act of secondary witnessing, what Felman and Laub describe as the listener’s participation in testimony’s “crisis of truth” (Felman and Laub 1992, 38).

The testimonial gap, most pointedly the structural absence of the child’s own intelligible account, functions as an ethical device rather than a merely evidentiary lack. Ivan stages the scandal of incomprehension in the language of sheer incapacity: “a small creature, who cannot even comprehend what is being done to her” (Dostoevsky 1992, 205). The child’s silence cannot be folded into moral pedagogy as an edifying lesson; it instead exposes the limits of interpretation itself, pressing the reader toward a shame-saturated awareness of spectatorship, what Deborah A. Martinsen terms a “grammar of exposure,” a rhetoric that implicates the witness in the scene’s visibility (Martinsen 2003,

122–24). Incomprehension thus marks the failure of knowledge as a redemptive category: the drive to "understand" risks becoming, in this economy, a desire for explanatory purchase that would domesticate what should remain ethically abrasive. Yuri Corrigan's account of Ivan's rebellion as a dramatization of psychic displacement ("soul loss") sharpens this dynamic by naming the way repetition does not simply insist but fractures, externalizing disintegration as a form of moral speech (Corrigan 2018, 393–95).

When Ivan turns from narration to direct address, "I'm tormenting you, Alyoshka, you don't look yourself. I'll stop if you wish" (Dostoevsky 1992, 205), philosophical disputation becomes affective ethics. He registers Alyosha's bodily and facial response as part of the argument's field, and this registration dramatizes what Felman and Laub describe as testimony's relational endurance: meaning is not simply transmitted; it is borne, carried across an interlocutory threshold that can buckle under the weight of what is said. Alyosha's reply, "Never mind, I want to suffer, too" (Dostoevsky 1992, 205), marks a passage from passive hearing to chosen witness. This is not temperamental masochism but an ethics of proximity: a refusal of the fantasy that compassion can remain clean, that one can adjudicate suffering without being touched by it.

R. M. Barineau captures the logic of this refusal by describing Ivan's rebellion as responsibility's triumph over coherence, a protest against converting suffering into theological currency (Barineau 1994, 377). Dostoevsky gives that protest its hardest edge in Ivan's price-setting sentence: "The whole world of knowledge is not worth the tears of that little child to 'dear God'" (Dostoevsky 1992, 205). The line blocks reconciliation by making "knowledge" itself ethically suspect when it arrives purchased at the cost of unredeemed pain. Formally, the passage intensifies its pressure through patterned reiteration: "Can you understand… can you understand… can you understand…" staging the hunger for justification and then breaking that hunger against the child's irreducible suffering, until the reader is left not with a solved problem but with a demanded posture: endurance without verdict, proximity without the consolations of harmony. Ivan speaks in repeated first-person insistence:

> "I want to see with my own eyes the hind lie down with the lion and the murdered man rise up and embrace his murderer. I want to be there when everyone suddenly finds out what it was all for" (Dostoevsky 1992, 206-207).

The recurrence of "I want" performs a hunger for closure, for the moment when contradiction is gathered into intelligible harmony. Yet the cadence turns against itself, because this wanting cannot metabolize a child's suffering without

moral recoil. Hope is engineered as rhythm only to be shattered by what it would have to justify.

Dennis Vanden Auweele reads this grammar of yearning as the paradox of Christian eschatology itself: longing for ultimate reconciliation that disintegrates when confronted with suffering that refuses redemption. According to Vanden Auweele, Dostoevsky turns the "I want" into a moral litmus test, exposing an ethical limit: the aspiration to cosmic harmony becomes compromised when it postpones pain into future meaning (Vanden Auweele 2016, 280). The repetition thus registers as prayer and protest at once, a grammatical enactment of the impossibility of justifying innocence by deferring it.

That collapse is sharpened by Ivan's refusal of developmental consolation, the familiar appeal that the child will "understand" later or that suffering will mature into wisdom. Ivan punctures futurity with a blunt counter-image: "there's this boy who didn't grow up but was torn apart by dogs at the age of eight" (Dostoevsky 1992, 207). The sentence functions as an ethical veto. It blocks the listener's escape into teleology and prevents the mind from smoothing the event into meaningful sequence. Traumatic recurrence here operates as moral sabotage: the anecdote returns not to inform but to disable narrative comfort.

Even before the novel reaches the courtroom, "Rebellion" assumes a juridical posture. Ivan's tone shifts into summons: "Listen: if everyone must suffer, in order to buy eternal harmony with their suffering, pray tell me what have children got to do with it?" (Dostoevsky 1992, 207). ""Listen" does not invite dialogue; it commands testimony and demands that the hearer answer for what they have heard. The question is framed like cross-examination, structured to admit no adequate answer. Under conditions of mediated anecdotes, absent voices, and damaged evidence, the text nevertheless compels adjudication. It recruits readers into jurorly evaluation not by supplying certainty, but by making the lack of certainty ethically intolerable. Ivan's rebellion is thus not merely a position in debate; it is a narrative operation that forces judgment to occur where judgment cannot be clean, final, or sovereign.

4. The "Grand Inquisitor" as Staged Testimony

Ivan's "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" is not a detachable set piece but a formally embedded reply to the affective dead end of "Rebellion." After the child-suffering dossier forces Alyosha into proximity with pain that cannot be morally priced, Ivan pivots into a different genre of pressure: a staged hearing in which theology is refashioned as juridical performance. He signals the pivot through metatheatrical framing, insisting that "it was customary in poetic works

to bring higher powers down to earth" (Dostoevsky 1992, 209). This is not an apology for fantasy. It is a method statement. The poem will test theodicy where it hurts, not in abstraction but in the procedures of recognition, accusation, and verdict. Ivan's revolt against justificatory meaning is rerouted into a scene where meaning is made institutionally, through monologue, audience management, and the courtroom logic of judgment. The legend does not merely express Ivan's theology; it stages the conditions under which theology becomes coercive, persuasive, and socially legible.

Olga Solovieva reads the "Grand Inquisitor" as a juridical drama that exposes a "theological will to power," translating divine authority into administrative violence (Solovieva 2016, 520–23). The Inquisitor's argument is not simply that the Church must govern; it is that governance can rationalize mercy itself, converting compassion into technique. This clarifies the continuity with "Rebellion." Where "Rebellion" collapses theodicy under the weight of innocent suffering, the legend interrogates the institutional afterlife of that collapse: what persists when theology survives as social mechanism rather than moral truth. The poem's form is its critique. It turns metaphysical debate into a machine for producing obedience.

Dostoevsky's first decisive move is syntactic. The legend opens in paratactic crowd-speech, a chorus of short assertions that installs authority through echo rather than evidence: ' "It's he, it's really he, 'everyone repeats, 'it must be he, it can be no one but he " '(Dostoevsky 1992, 211). Recognition is manufactured by repetition. The unanimity is affective and therefore volatile, ready to be redirected by a stronger voice. The crowd's worship becomes the precondition for its reversal.

The Inquisitor's entrance converts worship into a legal relation, and the conversion occurs through performative speech, as if sentence precedes trial. He forecasts the crowd's tomorrow as a verdict already passed:

> "Tomorrow I shall condemn you and burn you at the stake as the most evil of heretics, and the very people who today kissed your feet, tomorrow, at a nod from me, will rush to heap the coals up around your stake" (Dostoevsky 1992, 212).

The prose reads like a timetable: condemn, burn, heretic, nod, and rush. Ivan's point is not only cynicism; it is narrativity. Authority operates by scripting the future in advance and presenting the script as proof of the crowd's moral unreliability.

Rhetorical questions become the Inquisitor's instrument of mastery, the simulation of dialogue designed to abolish reply: '"Have you the right to proclaim to us even one of the mysteries of that world from which you have come?'" (Dostoevsky 1992, 212). The question is not asked to be answered; it is asked to delimit what counts as "mystery," and thus what counts as admissible truth. Ernest Sandoz captures this as the political reduction of faith to technique, the conversion of transcendence into something administered rather than encountered (Sandoz 1964, 354). Tyranny, here, is not sustained by violence alone but by linguistic design: the power to make dissent speak only within the grammar of obedience.

The bread temptation is the legend's most naked statement of this anthropology of rule. The Inquisitor rereads Christ's wilderness trial as an operating principle: "Turn them into bread and mankind will run after you like sheep, grateful and obedient" (Dostoevsky 1992, 214). Hunger precedes freedom; provision legitimates suspension of conscience. What "Rebellion" rendered as exposure to suffering reappears as systematic diagnosis: human beings will trade moral autonomy for managed dependence, and power can treat that trade as mercy. John Alulis reads the Inquisitor's sermon as a test of the metaphysical foundation of liberalism, staging the tension between material provision and moral autonomy (Alulis 2009, 212–13). In Ivan's poem, security becomes the rival soteriology, a salvation offered by administration.

The triad "miracle, mystery, and authority" condenses the logic into a prosecutorial exhibit, three nouns presented as self-evident facts of rule: "These powers are miracle, mystery, and authority. You rejected the first, the second, and the third" (Dostoevsky 1992, 216). The parataxis matters. It mimics institutional simplicity, the kind of clarity crowds can memorize and leaders can weaponize. Frank's contextual account is useful here because the legend is not simply "anti-religious"; it stages a conflict between competing ecclesiologies and competing claims about what humans can bear (Frank 2009, 794). Salvation is translated into manageability.

The poem's most radical rhetorical withholding is Christ's refusal to argue. The Inquisitor commands silence and converts non-response into forced testimony: "Do not answer, be silent. After all, what could you say?" (Dostoevsky 1992, 212). The monologue becomes a trial-form: one voice narrates the other into guilt, and the audience is asked to treat the spectacle as proof. Felman and Laub's account of trial logic clarifies the structure: the verdict resolves a crisis of evidence (Felman and Laub 1992, 6). Ivan's legend

manufactures that crisis through silence and then offers institutional caretaking as the stabilizing verdict.

The closing gesture blocks any clean resolution by shifting from speech to contact. Christ responds not with counter-argument but with an embodied refusal of the Inquisitor's terms: "he approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips" (Dostoevsky 1992, 222). The kiss is not closure. It neither refutes the Inquisitor's anthropology nor repairs the history the poem has exposed. It alters the scene's moral grammar by substituting relation for adjudication without pretending that relation solves the political problem. Rowan Williams calls this "the kiss that confounds explanation," an act that speaks precisely by relinquishing the economy of argument (Williams 2008, 45–47). The legend ends, accordingly, as a juridical drama without a final ruling: it compels the reader to weigh freedom against bread, conscience against authority, and compassion against control, then refuses the comfort of synthesis, leaving meaning unsaid so it does not harden into domination.

5. Smerdyakov's Confessions and Testimonial Contamination

Smerdyakov's confessional scenes matter not because they simply "reveal" the mechanics of parricide, but because they reorder the novel's testimonial economy. Knowledge here is not illumination; it is leverage. It circulates by insinuation and reported speech, by the deliberate manufacture of ambiguity, until "truth" begins to look less like a conclusion than like a contagion. Dostoevsky turns confession into a field of force: speech that does not cleanse but binds, implicates, and redistributes culpability.

From the beginning, Smerdyakov is positioned as social stain and theological offense, the unwanted remainder who nevertheless learns the household from the inside, its private tempos and habits of concealment. Grigory's baptismal formula, "born of the devil's son and a righteous woman" (Dostoevsky 1992, 84), marks him as both kin and scandal, within the house yet never of it. The phrase does more than classify. It fixes a speaking position formed by exclusion and shame, and that position governs the later confessions: when Smerdyakov speaks, his testimony arrives already charged with the family's unresolved burdens of legitimacy, inheritance, and moral disgust.

Daria Babushkina's point is decisive here: Smerdyakov's confession is not penitential disclosure but testimonial manipulation, confessing as a mode of power that unsettles the hierarchy of truth and guilt, converting confession from redemption into domination (Babushkina 2011, 534). Dostoevsky turns Smerdyakov's voice into a moral experiment: what happens when "truth" is

spoken from a subject produced by exclusion, and when shame becomes rhetorical leverage? The confessional scene yields not catharsis but coercion.

This converges with Nataliya Kirillova and Elena Lisanyuk's claim that Smerdyakov's testimony registers the collapse of legal and ethical argumentation in *The Brothers Karamazov* (Kirillova and Lisanyuk 2019, 195). Confession cannot deliver clarity because the conditions of speech are already compromised. Every speaker is entangled in rivalry, guilt, self-exculpation, or spiritual vanity; authority is never innocent. In this climate, Smerdyakov's "truth" corrodes precisely because it implicates. It spreads liability across the household instead of locating responsibility in a single, stable act.

In the confession sequence with Ivan, Smerdyakov's primary tactic is to invert the expected hierarchy of speaker and addressee, forcing Ivan into the position of a defendant who cannot control the terms of questioning. The shift is audible in Smerdyakov's faux-casual, evidentiary pacing: he openly frames the encounter as a test, confessing that he "decided to test" Ivan in order to learn whether Ivan "too, wanted the same thing as [his] brother" (Dostoevsky 1992, 522). What looks like conversation is structured like cross-examination, with "intelligence" refunctioned as incriminating strategy. When Smerdyakov insists that Ivan "didn't want to talk straight out, being a most intelligent man" (Dostoevsky 1992, 522), the line is not descriptive but coercive: it recodes Ivan's carefulness as proof of concealment, so that restraint itself becomes a symptom of guilt. The trap tightens when Smerdyakov names Ivan's desire directly, claiming that "maybe you yourself were even wishing very much for your parent's death" (Dostoevsky 1992, 521), a formulation that turns motive into an accusation Ivan cannot disprove without re-entering the very discourse Smerdyakov controls. Contemporary psychoanalysis is useful here as a strictly local tool: the exchange is structured by transference. Smerdyakov addresses Ivan not as a former master but as an anxious subject who must be made to feel seen and therefore capturable. LaCapra's insistence that working-through is "an open, self-questioning process that never attains closure" clarifies why the scene cannot stabilize into "truth-telling" (LaCapra 2014, xxiii): it suspends Ivan between denial and recognition, explanation and shame, and turns suspension into method.

Smerdyakov's confessions operate as much at the level of grammar as of meaning. They do evasion. Their syntax thins out responsibility while preserving the sting of accusation. "By your consent then you silently allowed me that business" (Dostoevsky 1992, 533), retrofits silence into authorization and authorization into guilt. Absence becomes evidence. Omission becomes proof.

The listener discovers, too late, that he has been written into the act. Lynn Ellen Patyk names this mechanism by identifying Smerdyakov as a practitioner of "the dark side of dialogue," conversation converted from communication into coercion (Patyk 2021, 41–44). The faux-confessional texture, its qualifiers, passive turns, and recursive justifications, converts grammar into moral strategy: action slides into "permission," permission into "consent," and consent is smuggled into silence, as though failure to intervene were indistinguishable from commissioning the crime. Dostoevsky's larger claim is bleakly formal. Language itself can function as violence. The crisis lies not only in what is done but in what is made sayable, and in the rhetorical systems that launder guilt by distributing it.

A second contaminating move is Smerdyakov's conversion of confession into a contract of shared culpability. He does not merely admit to killing; he stages killing as execution of another's will, relocating authorship onto Ivan while retaining the deed. "Just only with you, sir; together with you, sir, and Dmitri Fyodorovich is as innocent as could be" (Dostoevsky 1992, 530), offers exoneration only by expanding guilt. Truth arrives as barter: the addressee receives knowledge only by accepting contamination. Ivan becomes custodian of a fact that injures precisely because it cannot be ethically neutral.

The "fit" sequence intensifies the same logic by exposing confession as symptom and performance rather than transparent self-disclosure. "Of course I was shamming, sir. It was all a sham" (Dostoevsky 1992, 531), strips the episode of romance while demonstrating how bodily display can be converted into alibi and opportunity. The point is not whether Smerdyakov "really" suffers; it is how ambiguity of suffering pollutes the evidentiary field. If symptom can be staged, credibility becomes precarious; if credibility is precarious, responsibility becomes a function of rhetorical force rather than stable proof.

Smerdyakov's most sophisticated contamination lies in his quasi-forensic narration of evidence, where he anticipates the court's logic and scripts the interpretation that will convict Dmitri. His account of the envelope converts a material detail into a story of character and class:

> "Now Dmitri Fyodorovich is quite another thing: he knew about the envelope only from hearsay, he never saw it, and so supposing, for example, he took it from under the mattress, he'd open it right away to find out if that same money was really there. And he'd throw the envelope down, having no time by then to consider that he was leaving evidence behind, because he's an unaccustomed thief, sir, and before that never stole anything obviously" (Dostoevsky 1992, 535).

The conditional mode ("he'd") performs neutrality but functions as coercion: forced probability disguised as inference, socially persuasive because it aligns with stereotypes of noble impulsiveness and criminal incompetence. Smerdyakov does not simply recount events; he manufactures the interpretive habit by which events will be understood, making testimony itself a secondary crime against truth.

The moral injury produced by these confessions is not restricted to Ivan's "ideas." Smerdyakov weaponizes resemblance, insisting that Ivan's self-image is morally contiguous with Fyodor Pavlovich's: "You're like Fyodor Pavlovich most of all, it's you of all his children who came out resembling him most, having the same soul as him, sir" (Dostoevsky 1992, 537). The line injures because it forces culpability to appear as kinship before it becomes argument, as resemblance that is felt prior to intention. Shame, disgust, and defensive rage operate like verdicts before deliberation can begin. The reader, too, is pulled into jurorly evaluation under deliberately blurred criteria: is guilt an act, a desire, a silence, a resemblance, or a narrative effect?

The sequence ends by tightening that blur into coercive address. Smerdyakov dares Ivan to enact the violence he fantasizes about, turning the listener's rage into further "evidence" of moral incapacity: "Well, so kill me, sir. Kill me now" (Dostoevsky 1992, 537). Testimony theory clarifies the ethical trap: speaking appoints a listener who cannot remain untouched by what is heard. As Felman and Laub put it, "To bear witness is to hear the solitude of a responsibility, and to bear the responsibility, precisely, of that solitude" (Felman and Laub 1992, 3). Smerdyakov exploits that appointment. He makes Ivan responsible for interpretive labor that cannot cleanse itself into certainty. Confession, here, does not stabilize truth; it diffuses culpability across speech acts, omissions, and insinuations, producing moral injury through the very demand to decide what counts as evidence.

6. Dmitri's Trial and Courtroom Narration

Dmitri's trial is the novel's most concentrated demonstration of how juridical narration converts damaged testimony into public certainty. The courtroom does not simply "discover" truth; it manufactures it by enlarging some voices, trimming others, and translating affect into plausibility. Procedure becomes dramaturgy. A social verdict is composed in real time, in full view, out of emphasis, interruption, and tone.

Dostoevsky makes that manufacture visible by turning courtroom reportage into evidentiary matter. When a witness's composure collapses, the narration

records not clarification but escalation: "Hysterics began again, she collapsed, sobbing and screaming. She was taken away" (Dostoevsky 1992, 588). The breakdown is not incidental to proof; it functions as proof. The trial's narrative economy pivots from corroboration to impression, from what can be established to what can be made to feel convincing in a room trained to treat feeling as insight.

This is the trial's grim alchemy. The law does not merely weigh facts; it scripts legibility. Bodies are interpreted. Voices are ranked. Collapse becomes persuasive, restraint becomes suspicious, and ambiguity is pressured into a story that can circulate without shame. "Truth," in such a space, is whatever can be stabilized into a coherent account under institutional authority. The spectacle is not an accidental corruption of justice; it is one of its operating conditions. Erica Drennan intensifies, almost hardens, this sense of the trial as justice performed rather than justice discovered. For her, the legal proceedings in *The Brothers Karamazov* enact a logic of juridical boundary-making in which "justice" is not an immaculate ideal hovering above contingency, but a meaning bargained into being, negotiated in public, and then treated as though it were self-originating. The courtroom does not merely adjudicate. It manufactures.

What seems incidental, even trivial, proves preparatory. Pyotr Miusov's civil lawsuit over monastery land, ostensibly a peripheral dispute, functions as a rehearsal: it displays how the law's binary oppositions, "mine" versus "yours," innocence versus guilt, operate as reductive constructs, later redeployed to settle social norms and to quiet, by force of form, the mind's moral ambivalence (Drennan 2024, 43–45). The categories promise clarity; their deeper work is closure.

Dmitri's trial therefore is not a self-contained set piece, not merely Dostoevsky's indulgence in courtroom spectacle. It is the culmination of a sustained inquiry into how procedure codifies affect into authority, how private turbulence is translated into public certainty, and how breakdown, messy, human, irreducible, can be refined into the raw material of conviction. In Dostoevsky, the verdict is never simply found. It is made. That culmination is structurally prepared by a procedural admission that testimony is elective, and therefore ethically precarious. The presiding judge's routine reminder to Ivan contains a quiet confession about the fragility of judicial knowledge: "he was not under oath, that he could give evidence or withhold it, but that, of course, all testimony should be given in good conscience" (Dostoevsky 1992, 582).

The paradox is installed at the trial's center. The court must deliver a verdict while conceding that the flow of information is governed by private conscience,

will, and calculation. In this sense the trial formalizes what testimony theory identifies as constitutive: testimony is demanded precisely when the facts "are not clear" and when "supporting elements of evidence are called into question" (Felman and Laub 1992, 5). Dostoevsky renders that condition as scene-texture: what is withheld, theatrically offered, or strategically framed can outweigh what is securely known. The narrative then shows how quickly procedure yields to affective capture, especially when documents are staged as emotional detonators rather than stable records. When Katerina's letter is read aloud, the narrator emphasizes reception over verification: "I seem to recall the clerk reading the letter aloud precisely at that moment, and it made a tremendous impression" (Dostoevsky 1992, 586). The hedge "I seem to recall" becomes a miniature model of the trial's epistemic weakness: memory substitutes for record, and impression substitutes for proof. The letter matters not only for what it says but for what it does, how it seizes the room and converts sensation into pseudo-corroboration.

That conversion is refined through prosecutorial narration presented as a technology of controlled affect. Ippolit Kirillovich is described as adopting "a strictly historical method of accounting," a "strict framework in order to restrain [his] own impatient zeal" (Dostoevsky 1992, 608). The "history" is not neutral reconstruction; it is a crafted channel designed to present passion as reason and to bind volatile material into linear inevitability. Within that channel, witness staging becomes plot construction, and conjecture slides into persuasive script. When the prosecution reconstructs Smerdyakov's supposed position behind the partition, it relies on an imagined sequence of bodily signs: "lying there behind the partition, he would most likely start groaning, in order to show himself truly sick, thereby waking them up throughout the night" (Dostoevsky 1992, 604). "Most likely" marks speculation, but the sentence quickly converts probability into narrative authority. Legibility becomes substitute for certainty.

At the rhetorical climax, the prosecutor's performance openly privileges moral urgency over the discipline of doubt. He promises eagerness to retract if the defense produces a new "fact," but immediately reasserts the prosecution's stance as an imperative of justice itself: "But now justice cries out, and we insist, we cannot renounce anything" (Dostoevsky 1992, 614). The claim rests not on fresh corroboration but on an ethical cry. Conscience is repurposed to pressure deliberation to be swift. This is juridical capture at its clearest: the language that ought to slow judgment becomes the instrument that accelerates it, interpellating jurors as moral agents who must not hesitate on fissured ground.

Dostoevsky then widens focalization to the courtroom's ambient social psychology, showing how judgment forms through murmured commentary that

treats persuasion as a spectator sport. Credibility accrues through performative confidence and status perception:

> "He's also afraid of the defense attorney."
> "Yes, what will Mr. Fetyukovich say?" (Dostoevsky 1992, 616).

The remarks are minor, but they expose the mechanism: trust is allocated by tracking who appears dominant, who appears frightened, and who can master the room's mood. The defense attempts to break that mechanism by exposing the prosecution's narrative as fiction-making, imaginative convenience dressed as proof. Fetyukovich names the robbery assumption as plot: "Is it not a fantastic, is it not a novelistic suggestion?" and draws the ethical consequence with pointed outrage: "with such novels we are prepared to ruin a human life!" (Dostoevsky 1992, 622). The move is meta-narrative critique. Jurors are asked to recognize that they are being offered plots rather than proofs, and that the pleasure of coherence can function as an invisible bribe. Yet the defense's own need to frame the prosecution as "novelistic" confirms the deeper bind: the jurors cannot escape narrative. They can only choose between competing narrative forms, each with its own affective scaffolding.

The section closes, fittingly, with an appeal that makes the juror's ethical burden explicit while refusing closure. Fetyukovich's warning is urgent and structurally tragic because it demands restraint in a system built to deliver a verdict:

> "Gentlemen of the jury, beware of a judicial error! What, what is implausible in all that I have just presented and portrayed to you? Find the error in my account, find what is impossible, absurd. But if there is at least a shadow of possibility, a shadow of plausibility in my conjectures---withhold your sentence. " (Dostoevsky 1992, 630).

Dmitri's trial dramatizes juridical capture by forcing readers and jurors alike to adjudicate under conditions of compromised testimony, contagious affect, and strategically crafted plausibility. Structural repair remains withheld. The court cannot restore the damaged testimonial field; it can only convert that damage into a final pronouncement. Dostoevsky's bleak achievement is to make that conversion feel both necessary and morally dangerous at the same time.

7. Conclusion

The arc traced across "Rebellion," the "Grand Inquisitor," Smerdyakov's confessions, and Dmitri's trial shows that *The Brothers Karamazov* does not treat judgment as purely legal or purely philosophical. It stages judgment as a social thing that converts suffering into story and story into certainty, often by substituting spectacle for verification. Dostoevsky makes that substitution explicit in the trial's aftertaste, where the courtroom is assessed not by what it proved but by what it delivered: "spectators were left satisfied: the spectacle had been a rich one" (Dostoevsky 1992, 588). Testimony becomes consumable, affect becomes persuasive, and the public leaves "satisfied" even when the evidentiary field remains structurally compromised. The novel's trauma-form is inseparable from this juridical thematics: ethical decision-making is repeatedly forced to occur under conditions where the procedures of truth are themselves vulnerable to rhetorical capture.

The trial dramatizes with unusual candor that the desire for closure intensifies where knowledge is weakest. At the moment of verdict, the narrative registers not clarity but a collective expectation of mitigation that functions as a substitute for certainty: "almost everyone was certain at least of extenuation" (Dostoevsky 1992, 640). The phrasing names an affective compromise. Extenuation becomes the public's solution to ambiguity, a way to make judgment feel humane without confronting the contamination that produced the case. The reader, positioned as a parallel juror, is pulled into the same compromise: a life is decided while the testimonial record remains incomplete. Dostoevsky's formal achievement is to make that tension inescapable and to refuse the fantasy that a "correct" verdict could repair the damaged ecology of evidence. Yet the novel also refuses the notion that damaged testimony yields only paralysis or cynicism. If legal closure cannot repair what the trial exposes, the ending turns toward a different mode of ethical continuity: communal memory as a practice of responsibility. Alyosha's address to the boys transforms the aftermath of death into an obligation to keep witness alive in ordinary life, and he frames this obligation not as sentiment but as discipline: "let us never forget how good we once felt here, all together" (Dostoevsky 1992, 657). The emphasis is not on dissolving pain into meaning, but on sustaining a shared attunement that can be returned to, rehearsed, and reactivated. Against juridical capture, the novel proposes not innocence but endurance: a commitment to ethical solidarity held against the institutional habit of converting human life into a solved case.

The final cadence sharpens this alternative by replacing verdict language with a vow-like chant that binds future conduct to present remembrance. The

boys 'refrain, "Hurrah for Karamazov!" (Dostoevsky 1992, 659), is not merely celebratory; it ritualizes continuity. Where the trial pushes toward finality, the chorus pushes toward persistence. Trauma-form does not resolve into catharsis; it resolves into an open-ended contract grounded in repetition, return, and mutual address rather than institutional closure. This closing movement also clarifies what the novel is doing with theodicy and anti-theodicy. Ivan's rebellion and the "Grand Inquisitor" do not simply stage theological debate; they stage competing moral anthropologies under modern conditions of mass persuasion, suffering, and institutional authority. Frank's formulation crystallizes the provocation the text keeps testing: "It is impossible to love people the way they are" (Frank 2009, 706). Dostoevsky refuses to let "love" remain abstract, while also refusing to let institutional management masquerade as compassion. The question is not only whether harmony is possible, but what coercions and sacrifices are smuggled into the social production of harmony.

If the trial is the novel's most explicit site of juridical capture, Zosima's relational ethics offers the strongest counter-image for how responsibility might circulate without becoming coercive or self-exculpating. His account of moral interconnection reads like a theory of testimonial ecology: "for all is like an ocean, all flows and connects; touch it in one place and it echoes at the other end of the world" (Dostoevsky 1992, 271). Read back through Smerdyakov's contaminating confessions and the trial's affective engineering, the sentence reframes the stakes. The damage done by coerced testimony and rhetorical spectacle is not confined to a defendant or a verdict; it reverberates through households, institutions, and the reader's own habits of interpretation. The novel grants no structural repair, and it does not pretend that interpretation can cleanse the record. It leaves the reader where it has been positioning the reader all along: compelled to judge, compelled to witness, and compelled to recognize that ethical life begins precisely where evidence is damaged and the demand to respond persists anyway.

As a whole, these scenes show trauma-form as a set of repeatable narrative operations rather than a theme: rupture in recounting, recurrence that refuses integration, testimonial gaps that force inference, and juridical capture that converts ethical life into verdict-pressure. By tracking these mechanics across theological argument, confessional exchange, and courtroom spectacle, this essay offers a method for reading how novels engineer responsibility when evidence is damaged and judgment is still demanded. For narrative theory, the contribution is to specify how "readerly ethics" can be formalized as a structure of address and evidentiary contamination, not merely as a moral response to

content. For Dostoevsky scholarship, it reframes *The Brothers Karamazov* as a narrative machine that stages adjudication as an ethical ordeal, binding the reader's interpretive habits to the novel's larger critique of closure, persuasion, and the social manufacture of certainty.

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