

Tech babble

AI meets Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor

By **Eric Naiman**



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A detail of "The Temptation of Christ" by Simon Bening, 1525-1530 | © incamerastock/Alamy

n thirty years of teaching at Berkeley, I have read thousands of undergraduate essays, but until recently I don't think any of my students had ever used the word "delve". As I read their compositions on *The Brothers*

I *Karamazov* this past fall, however, I saw that things had changed.

This essay delves into the theme of masculinity by focusing on two central figures, Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov.

Dostoevsky delves into the destructiveness of obsessive passions.

David McDuff's translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* delves into the moral and existential crises of 19th-century Russia.

This novel is more than a family saga; it delves into the existential and societal crises of 19th-century Russia.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky delves into the theme of economic insecurity, illustrating its profound impact on the human psyche and societal dynamics.

There were other suddenly prominent words. Dostoevsky is an *intricate* and *complex* writer, certainly, but I never knew he was so *multifaceted*.

The villain, of course, was ChatGPT, an easy-to-access AI system released in 2022. Of thirty-six students taking my upper-level class on Dostoevsky, eight made such extensive use of the technology that it was easy to spot. You don't need an AI detection program. As Justice Potter Stewart of the United States Supreme Court said

about something else, "I know it when I see it". Vladimir Nabokov defined that something else - pornography - as "the copulation of clichés", which gets ChatGPT's approach to literature about right.

ChatGPT essays now rarely make factual errors, as they had the previous semester, when Petya of *War and Peace*, miraculously protected from a Frenchman's bullet, could be found marrying his poor relation Sonya, and when Sonya, no longer sullen and resentful, devoted herself to Natasha's children. Now, while they rarely muddle the details of a plot, and while they continue to be grammatically perfect, these essays still say almost nothing. In many cases the key word in the title - hysteria, masculinity, time - could be replaced by any other. And there are giveaway vocabulary items. An insult to Penelope and even Madame Defarge, ChatGPT "weaves" and "unravels" a lot of fabrics. It loves to talk about "complexities", "intricacies" and "intricate webs". At least in essays about Dostoevsky, it has made the word "existential" extraordinarily promiscuous; in one six-page composition this adjective was obscenely and exhaustingly forced to mate with fourteen different nouns. ChatGPT loves to talk about novels being "set against a backdrop" of X. It is infatuated with "multifaceted" and nuts about "nuanced". It generates papers that are basically lists. And, strangely enough, it adores "delve". It has difficulty producing an essay on a novel without delving. In this year's iteration that is the word that jumps up and down and says: "Look at me, I am AI". (The phrase "digital fingerprint" is, unfortunately, no longer a tautology). Preferring to think positive, ChatGPT finds it much easier to praise writers and their work than to take issue with the values of a text.

University administrators are aware of the threat of ChatGPT, but also enthralled by the riches to be had through the co-operative development of AI with the private sector. At the start of the fall semester all Berkeley students and faculty received a message from several vice chancellors and vice provosts entitled "Academic Integrity and Emerging Tools of Technology". Oddly, the phrase "academic integrity" occurred

nowhere in the message itself, as from the first sentence on it was replaced by a different AI: “UC Berkeley is at the forefront of discovery and invention including emerging tools and technologies like artificial intelligence (AI).”

While the Vice Cs and Ps cautioned that students were responsible for their own ideas and might be liable to discipline for violating the Honor Code if they submitted work produced by AI as their own, the tenor of the entire document was one of awe and delight. “You may have experimented with AI tools such as ChatGPT in your personal life”, the authors of the message noted, thus implicitly equating AI with other pleasurable activities once considered transgressive, but generally to be encouraged because nearly all young people do them. (One student told me that “ChatGPT was the first thing I learned at Berkeley”, thanks to a password shared by a senior.) “We ask that you review your course syllabi and sites to understand if AI tools are permitted in your coursework”, they recommended, and they closed: “For generations, Berkeley students have led the way with original, transformative ideas and groundbreaking innovation, and we know that you will continue this proud tradition”. In summing up Berkeley’s illustrious past the administrators had obviously forgotten the words of the student leader Mario Savio, spoken sixty years ago in probably the most famous speech ever delivered on this campus: “There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part.” Taking stock of the queasiness and rage that was overcoming me as I looked at my mounting pile of AI compositions, I understood how nauseatingly insidious the work of the machine has become.

To be fair, some students seem to be using ChatGPT not to write an entire essay, but to draw up an outline, to write the introduction, to “judge” and improve paragraphs, or just to see what their essay “should be like”. (This process is akin to the practice of reading a Wikipedia article that summarizes a novel or a story before

you read the real thing, because, as one student told me, “I don’t like to be surprised”.) The result, though, is nearly as deleterious, because the structure of the paper is that of a list, the ideas are banal and the AI language seeps in nonetheless. Eventually students who work with ChatGPT may become so adept at understanding what “good writing” looks like that they will not even need to use it: they themselves will become artificially intelligent. That won’t be an improvement, because an essay that sounds as though it were written by a computer is no better than an essay actually written by one.

Most of my students did not use AI, and I did receive some wonderful essays, including one on tears in Dostoevsky’s last novel that was so acutely perceptive and elegantly written that it nearly made me cry. But after mulling things over I realized why it was so galling that students were using ChatGPT to write essays about *The Brothers Karamazov* in particular. In that novel’s most famous scene Ivan Karamazov reads to his brother “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor”, in which Jesus returns to earth and is rebuked by the cardinal in charge of the Inquisition’s auto-da-fé for making religious belief too difficult to live by. Christ’s teachings have impressed upon men that they are essentially free, but this freedom has become burdensome for them. Like little children, too weak to take responsibility for their own lives, “these people are more certain than ever before that they are completely free, and at the same time they themselves have brought us their freedom and obediently laid it at our feet.” (Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.)

Promising to put Christ on the pyre the next day, the Inquisitor recalls that the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, daring Him to turn stones into bread, “so that mankind will run after you like sheep, grateful and obedient, though eternally trembling lest you withdraw your hand and your loaves cease for them”. Rejecting the three demonic temptations, which Ivan’s cardinal summarizes as “Miracle, Mystery and Authority”, Christ refuses to enslave, leaving men free to cope as best they can with life’s challenges. Jesus, according to

the cardinal, doesn't understand that mankind lives in a condition of precarity: people are weak and need the support of chains - the support of "intelligent" men, like the cardinal, who are always ready to think for them.

This, I realized as I read those artificially intelligent essays, was why I was becoming so upset that their authors had used AI to write about *this* book. For what does ChatGPT offer but Miracle, Mystery and Authority? The miracle of instantaneous generation - you type in a title and the essay shows up on your screen in seconds, not all at once, but line by line, emphasizing the fantastic mystery of the process, which nobody understands, and sounding so correct, possessing the authority that comes with making no mistakes. Users of ChatGPT don't need the "heavenly bread" of intellectual freedom and individual authenticity; instead they want the grade and the degree that will lead to various forms of material bread after graduation.

With a sense of despair I realized that this analogy came with its own dreadful irony. In justifying the grades I would give the students who had not written their own essays, I was going to have to initiate my own inquisition, asking them what they had done and confronting them with the evidence of likely mechanical assistance. Last spring I was a full-time teacher; from now on I am a part-time prosecutor.

Few of my students are religious, and I am no Christian. But had I used the example of ChatGPT when teaching Ivan's "Legend", it would have meant something to them, and it would have emphasized yet again how prescient Dostoevsky was, even for people who never go to church. So, when I next teach this novel, I will tell the class that every time they open their computers to write something, they have a choice: they can follow Jesus (or Czesław, or Nelson, or Ruth, or whatever name they want to substitute for the principle of human freedom) or they can spurn Him. *The Brothers Karamazov* preaches a doctrine of absolute individual

responsibility, and its plot shows how easy it is to become complicit in the evil committed by another. Readers of this novel should understand that every time they use ChatGPT they are burning Christ at the stake.

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