BEHOLDEN BY LOVE
A STUDY IN THE APOPHASIS OF DOSTOEVSKY’S POESIS

Denis A. Zhernokleyev

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF
SLAVIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

Adviser: Caryl Emerson

November 2016
Abstract

Dostoevsky’s visual world is not only highly unstable but often grotesquely distorted. In this dissertation I offer a way of understanding this instability and distortion as part of the apophatic movement of Dostoevsky’s poetics. Since for Dostoevsky an image never fully corresponds to reality, all representation is inevitably an alteration. Distortion in Dostoevsky, therefore, is not its own kind of aesthetic but an intensification of that which is inherently true of any aesthetic experience. However, by pushing visual decomposition in his novels to the point of grotesqueness Dostoevsky does not merely seek to make a rhetorical point but to occasion an epiphany wherein the aesthetic is renounced in favor of a non-ethical religious perception.

In the first chapter I survey Dostoevsky’s pessimism as regards the epistemic realm, concluding that Dostoevsky understood vision to be fundamentally given to fascination and, as a result, capable of knowing truth only as distortion. Whenever this distorted inner truth is related to the other, it inevitably comes out as a malicious effort to enflame and thus control the other’s imagination. In the second chapter, I consider what Dostoevsky’s disillusionment with the epistemic realm entails for his idea of aesthetics. By explicating The Idiot I demonstrate how Dostoevsky arrives at the need to renounce aesthetic perception as a fatal enchantment of the soul. Renunciation of aesthetics, however, is not a resignation but an effort to harness the nihilism of the aesthetic vision in service of the apophatic movement. Apophaticism affirms truth as knowable only in its absence. By exacerbating that which aesthetic perception fails to see, Dostoevsky opens his poetics to the possibility of radically new vision. In the concluding chapter, therefore, I examine the nature of Dostoevsky’s apophaticism by arguing that it follows a distinctly Johannine blueprint. Through a reading of Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov, two of Dostoevsky’s most explicitly religious novels, I show that Dostoevsky
formulates his own principle of epistemic rebirth by weaving a Johannine theology of resurrection into his poetic structure.
# Table of Contents

Abstract i
Table of Contents iii
Acknowledgements iv

Introduction 1

**Chapter One**  Lust of the Eyes 18

- The Violence of Seduction 22
- The Spectacle of Stavrogin 36
- Ivan Karamazov and the Pineapple Compote 48

**Chapter Two**  Shattering the Mirror 63

- Holbein’s *Dead Christ* 65
- Nastasya Filippovna’s Suffering Face 78
- Rogozhin’s Silent Gaze 95

**Chapter Three**  The Empty Tomb 113

- The Irony of the Empty Tomb 115
- Lazarus 131
- Cana of Galilee 156

Conclusion 173

Bibliography 179
Acknowledgments

While this thesis, like all theses, is a fruit of solitary labor, it would have been unthinkable without the continuous support of my mentors, colleagues, family and friends. Their care, challenge and love provided me with new angles of vision when my own ability to see grew weary and dull.

If I have managed to find my own voice in the boundless polyphony of Dostoevsky scholarship, it is only because of my adviser Caryl Emerson’s indefatigable guidance. She often heard my ideas well before my own ears found them and her generosity of countless hours responding to drafts contributed much to the final shape of my argument.

And there were other indispensable guides along the way as well. It has, in fact, been a blessing to write my dissertation in such a caring and supportive department. I am grateful to Michael Wachtel for deepening my appreciation for the lyrical wisdom of the Russian language. Also, Olga Hasty’s seminar on Russian film provided a wonderful opportunity to explore the problem of vision in the Russian tradition. For countless illuminating conversations about Chekhov and Dostoevsky I am grateful to Ellen Chances. Last, the thesis would also be less without Ksana Blank’s vast knowledge of Dostoevsky, an invaluable resource throughout these years.

Outside the department I am grateful to Simone Marchesi for seminars on The Divine Comedy. Dante’s struggle with “curious gaze” in the Inferno and Purgatorio has proven a crucial background against which to understand the problem of perception in Dostoevsky. To George Lewis Parsenions of Princeton Theological Seminary I am grateful for countless instrumental conversations about the Gospel of John.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Robert Louis Jackson, whose extensive scholarship on Dostoevsky has inspired my reading of Dostoevsky for years. I can only dream to achieve the eloquence with which Professor Jackson engages the most complex questions in Dostoevsky. Meanwhile, I consider it a privilege to have shown and discussed drafts with Prof. Jackson.

Finally, if I have achieved any clarity in my writing, it is because of the ceaseless support of my close friend Bryan McCarthy. While writing his own thesis at Oxford, Bryan has always found time to read and comment on my writing. For this help, for all the conversations about the things that matter most in life, and for years of friendship I thank you.

Earlier versions of parts of the first chapter were originally presented at AATSEEL (2014) and at Princeton University Graduate Student Conference (2015) and of parts of the second chapter at ASEEES (2015), University of Pennsylvania Graduate Symposium (2016), Princeton and Columbia University Graduate Student Conference (2016), and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology (2016). A fragment of the second chapter has been developed into an article and submitted to The Slavic and East European Journal (2016).
Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes, and not turn back to the bodily splendors which he saw before. When he sees the beauty in bodies, he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows […] Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.

—Plotinus, *On Beauty*¹

If it were so, as conceited sagacity, proud of not being deceived, thinks, that we should believe nothing that we cannot see with our physical eyes, then we first and foremost ought to give up believing in love.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*²

Introduction

Tolstoy has long been recognized as a master of exquisite depiction, whose world is not merely intensely visual but is governed by a perfect sense of form. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, has been seen as the master of distortion, “a cruel talent” (Mikhailovsky) who subjected the reader’s imagination to deliberate torture. In what is perhaps the earliest comparison between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as regards the status of the image in their poetics, Vasily Rozanov observes that Tolstoy’s “intelligent” and “thoughtful” eye “pierced through to the very core, the very ‘soul’ of his object and thus was hypnotized by it, becoming entirely passive, powerless, defenseless in relation to it”. By contrast Dostoevsky “captured a person’s image [obraz], brought it into his own soul, and there he subjected it to ‘experimentation,’ he broke the image, twisted and distorted it according to the laws of his own soul.”¹ For Rozanov, the Tolstoyan novel is a poetic manifestation of the author’s complete surrender to the representational mode of imagination. Regardless of what technique Tolstoy might be using to capture the image, the assumption underlying his work is that the truth about reality is objectively present before the eyes and therefore can be directly perceived.² In Dostoevsky, however, the image is always unstable. Not only does the Dostoevskian novel shock the reader with its grotesqueness but like a quagmire it sucks the reader’s imagination in and continuously holds it in a “twisted” perspective of its author.

An effort to understand the nature and purpose of visual distortion in Dostoevsky’s poetics constitutes the single most fundamental problem of Dostoevsky scholarship. In his seminal work Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics Mikhail Bakhtin has explained the tendency of Dostoevsky’s aesthetics towards distortion and caricature by the author’s deliberate effort to shift his poetics from reliance on the image towards a sole reliance on discourse. For Bakhtin the image is inevitably objectifying, unalterable, and therefore overpowering, while the word, due to its malleability, is infinitely permissive. Hence Bakhtin argues that “Dostoevsky’s hero is not an objectified image but an autonomous discourse, pure voice; we do not see him, we hear him.” Everything that we see and know apart from the hero’s discourse is “nonessential and is swallowed up by discourse as its raw material, or else remains outside it as something that stimulates and provokes.” In fact, the entire structure of the Dostoevskian novel is “directed toward discovering and clarifying the hero’s discourse, and performs provoking and directing functions in relation to that discourse.”

It must be argued, however, that vision plays a far more important role in Dostoevsky than Bakhtin wants to admit. While explaining those parts of Dostoevsky’s novels that are full of talk, pure discourse fails to explain the numerous pivotal junctures in the novels that are characterized by intense visualization and prolonged silence. It is not an accident therefore that The Idiot, the novel that is not only full of imagery but that makes aesthetic perception its main problematic, is almost entirely overlooked by Bakhtin. Silence, which saturates many of the contemplative scenes in Dostoevsky, Bakhtin explains as having rhetorical function either as a pause within a dialogue or as an instance of intuitive non-verbalized speech [proniknoevennoe

---

3 Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 53-54.
slovo]. Bakhtin does not account for the instances of spiteful silence that break down the dialogue and thus negate and destroy the other or, on the contrary, the silence of love and joy that is simply present with the other without the need to converse.

In a landmark study of Dostoevsky’s aesthetics, Robert Louis Jackson has pushed back against Bakhtinian word-centered approach by demonstrating how the moral-aesthetic spectrum defined by the two extremes of obraz [image] and bezobrazie [lack of an image] more accurately captures Dostoevsky’s concern with reality. Obraz, Jackson maintains, “is the axis of beauty in the Russian language, it is ‘form,’ ‘shape,’ ‘image;’ it is also the iconographic image, or icon—the visible symbol of the beauty of God.” By contrast, bezobrazie is “a deformation of the aesthetic form,” literally “that which is ‘without image,’ shapeless, disfigured, ugly.” In moral terms, the spectrum begins with obraz as an instance of moral perfection, and ends with bezobrazie as disintegration through “cruelty, violence, and above all, sensuality.”

The religious idea of obraz as icon is entirely absent from Jackson’s understanding of Dostoevsky’s poetics, or more precisely it is included within the moral spectrum as only a variety of aesthetic experience, “a visible symbol” of divine beauty. Jackson understands Dostoevsky’s art to be only “basically religious” and though “the focal point of his vision is ultimately the image of Christ,” it is so as “an aesthetically conceived image” (DQF, XI). Naturally therefore Jackson understands Dostoevsky’s art to be devoted to a single goal — the quest for the aesthetically perfect form. The fact that we do not find such perfect form easily

---

4 Bakhtin, 10, 242, 249-250.
available in Dostoevsky Jackson explains by the authorial purpose to make access to perfect
form a hard earned prize. He says,

Dostoevsky’s art in the deepest sense disturbs: it is a perpetual and mocking challenge to
all philistine complacency, to all routine and inertia, to all binding orthodoxy or simplistic
visions of man and reality. But it disturbs in an even more radical sense: it threatens to
replace the universal and containing order — the given in Pushkin, Turgenev, or Tolstoy
— with a perpetuum mobile, with a permanent philosophical instability (DQF, 134,
emphasis original).

Unlike Bakhtinian pure discourse, which remains infinitely unstable in its dialogic reciprocity,
Jackson’s perpetuum mobile is only the threat of instability. By means of its constantly present
potential to unravel into the worst apocalyptic whirlwind of imagery, Dostoevskian poetics
creates a perfect eschatological tension, which upholds the soul in moral expectation of perfect
form, preserving through aesthetic vigilance its moral equipoise. Thus for Jackson distortion in
Dostoevsky gains a morally utilitarian purpose. The perfect form must remain radically
unattainable because “when the ideal, or tension toward the ideal, vanishes from man’s life […]
man loses his moral equilibrium” (DQF, 43). Preservation of this moral tranquility in the face of
apocalyptic vision is what constitutes for Jackson the ultimate aim of Dostoevsky’s art. Hence
Jackson’s argument that what makes Holbein’s painting Dead Christ in The Idiot an example of
bad art is the fact that “it deeply disturbs man’s moral and religious tranquility; it is the
embodiment of an aesthetics of despair” (DQF, 67). Lest aesthetic despair triumph in the novel,
it is counterbalanced by an aesthetically perfect image — Myshkin who is “a perfect, sculptured
embodiment of the good, the true, and the beautiful,” who demonstrates how “aesthetic reality
transfigures the person who comes in contact with it” (DQF, 51, 52-53). According to Jackson,
therefore, aesthetic perception, even if barely and briefly, triumphs in Dostoevsky’s poetics.

Jackson’s reading of Dostoevsky is further developed in the work of Gary Saul Morson.
While affirming that Dostoevsky’s poetics is governed by form, Morson argues that the
proliferation of distortion in the Dostoevskian novel cannot be understood as merely serving a pragmatic moral purpose. According to Morson bezobrazie constitutes for Dostoevsky an object of aesthetic interest and therefore must be seen as a peculiar kind of form — an “icon of chaos.” The idea that Dostoevsky’s poetics is governed by “the icon of chaos” Morson develops in an original study of Dostoevsky’s A Writer’s Diary, a collected motley of short works written for journalistic publication. By arguing that the Diary should be read “as an integral (if idiosyncratic) literary work rather than as an amorphous collection of unrelated pieces,” Morson shows how the outwardly fragmented Diary can be seen as the “product of aesthetic purpose,” a perfect representation of formlessness. As an artist of chaos, Dostoevsky is looking for the best possible medium that could capture his poetics of disharmony and finds it in “the new genre” of the Diary, a genre that is more suitable “for depiction of the formless” than the novel, which is still held together by some narrative (BG, 14).

As problematic as Morson’s “discovery” of “a new genre” in Dostoevsky might be, as is his willingness to include within this genre the whole of Dostoevsky’s poetics, the move is not without precedent. In a similar manner, noting the tendency of the Dostoevskian novel towards fragmentation, Bakhtin discovered the “polyphonic novel.” However, unlike Bakhtin, who believed that fragmentation and distortion in Dostoevsky is transitory and is ultimately canceled out by the harmony of polyphony, Morson insists that distortion in Dostoevsky endures and in this enduring, gains aesthetic stability and becomes a form. Hence Morson’s reading of Dostoevsky as an artist of chaos whose artistic purpose is to “define and express the laws of decomposition” (BG, 9).

---

While I disagree with Morson’s overarching argument, I agree with his insistence on taking seriously not only the abundance of distorted imagery in Dostoevsky but also its enduring nature. However, in the enduring quality of distortion in Dostoevsky I do not find a poetics of decomposition but a poetics of renunciation. While decomposition occupies an important place in the Dostoevskian poetics, it never constitutes its artistic purpose. On the contrary, decomposition and distortion in Dostoevsky’s poetics is called upon to expose the inherent instability of the very idea of an aesthetic form. In this sense Dostoevsky’s poetics is indeed iconic, only not in Morson’s sense of the image directly present before the eyes. It is iconic in the religious sense of a window which, by means of negating the eyes’ desire to objectively grasp an image, points beyond itself.

Thus I argue in this dissertation that Dostoevsky’s poetics is best understood as apophatic. The Greek word apophasis literally means “a denial.” However, despite the antithesis that is inherent to apophasis, it is not a mere negation, nor is it a rhetorical refutation. The point of apophasis is to escape the dialectic relationship altogether. By striving towards the missing and the invisible, apophasis affirms that which is present through absence and that which can be grasped only in its hiddenness.

We should not confuse apophasis with the ostranenie of the formalists. If ostranenie seeks to intensify the acuteness of mimetic perception through estrangement, apophasis swerves away from the impulse to encounter reality objectively. Hence the emphasis of apophasis on silence. Language is inherently imagic. To speak is to generate an image flow, to engage in the game of inciting the other’s imagination as well as in making one’s own imagination susceptible to fascination. By renouncing the mimetic game of imagination, apophatic silence puts itself beyond language. The boldness with which apophatic movement leaps beyond the aesthetic
realm reveals a conviction in the reality of the beyond and thus reveals the ultimate religious
essence of apophatic striving.

Dostoevsky’s apophaticism is grounded in the theology of Eastern Christianity, which is
a fundamentally mystical tradition. In Orthodox theology, the relationship between cataphasis —
affirmative statements about God — and apophasis is never a mere antinomy. Here is how
Valdimir Lossky, reflecting on the writings of a pivotal Christian mystic Denys the Areopagite,
defines apophatic theology:

It is necessary to renounce both sense and all the workings of reason, everything which
may be known by the senses or the understanding, both that which is and all that is not, in
order to be able to attain in perfect ignorance to union with Him who transcends all being
and all knowledge […] It is not simply a question of a process of dialectic but of
something else: a purification, a *katharsis* is necessary. One must abandon all that is
impure and even all that is pure. One must then scale the most sublime heights of sanctity
leaving behind one all the divine luminaries, all the heavenly sounds and words. It is only
thus that one may penetrate to the darkness wherein He who is beyond created things
makes his dwelling (emphasis original).  

Apophatic movement demands total renunciation, or as Lossky calls it purification. Not only the
object of perception must be rejected but the very desire to perceive reality objectively has to be
abandoned. Meanwhile, renunciation itself is never a form of divine knowledge, which is only
possible in a mystical union with God. God is never a culmination of theological language, at all
times remaining radically independent from all aesthetic constructs. Here is how Denys the
Areopagite makes this point:

---

8 See Vladimir Lossky’s “The Divine Darkness” in *Mystical Theology of the Orthodox Church*, trans. from the
French by members of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press,
1997), 27. For more on Denys the Areopagite see Andrew Louth’s “Denys Areopagite” in his *The Origins of the
Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 154-173; Denys
Turner’s “Cataphatic and the Apophatic in Denys the Areopagite” in his *The Darkness of God: Negativity in
Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19-49. For more on the apophatic significance
of silence see Turner’s “Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason” in *Silence and The Word: Negative
Theology and Incarnation*, ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004),
11-34.
When we make affirmations and negations about the things which are inferior to it we affirm and deny nothing about the Cause itself, which, being wholly apart from all things, is above all affirmation, as the supremacy of Him who, being in His simplicity freed from all things and beyond everything, is above all denial.9

The apophatic assumption that God is above all denial provides a crucial insight into why Dostoevsky subjects his poetics to distortion with such confidence. Apophatic theology is unafraid of distortion because in the nihilism of a distorted image it finds the moment where the aesthetic realm ends and the possibility of the religious begins.10 Thus in the grotesqueness of distortion in Dostoevsky we find an integral aspect of apophatic movement and merely some instance of nihilistic insolence.

The epitome of apophaticism in Dostoevsky’s poetics is a painting of Holbein the Younger Dead Christ, which is featured in The Idiot as the novel’s single most important structuring principle. The image is a gruesome life size portrayal of Christ’s decomposing body squeezed inside a narrow space of a marble tomb.11 The painting and the novel as an elaboration on the painting constitute a pivotal point of Dostoevsky’s poetics as it is here that Dostoevsky explicitly addresses the problem of distortion in his philosophy. By broaching the problem of aesthetic decomposition as an inherently Christological problem, Dostoevsky places the idea of decomposition within the theological relationship between the death and resurrection of Christ. Thus, within the drama of Christology, the nihilistic negativity of Holbein’s image becomes a pronouncement of that which is so emphatically absent in it namely the reality of resurrection.

9 Quoted in Lossky, Mystical Theology, 28.
10 See this point developed by Christos Yannaris in The Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite, edited by Andrew Louth, translated by Haralambos Vetis (London: T&T Clark, 2005). Especially see the chapters “Nihilism as a Presupposition of the Absence and Unknowability of God” (49-57) and “The ‘Nihilism’ of Theological Apophaticism” (73-81).
As overpowering as the gruesomeness of the Holbeinian image is, its Christological significance is not limited to the subject it depicts. After all, to make a point about resurrection, Dostoevsky did not need to resort to Holbein’s painting or to a painting at all. To understand the full apophatic significance of Holbein’s image for Dostoevsky’s poetics, we must understand its significance precisely as an image. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion provides a helpful explanation of the exclusive significance of an artistic image for the problem of religious phenomenology:

The question of painting does not pertain first or only to painters, much less only to aestheticians. It concerns visibility itself, and thus pertains to everything—to sensation in general […] The exceptional visibility of the painting has thus become a privileged case of the phenomenon, and therefore one possible route to a consideration of phenomenality in general.\(^\text{12}\)

An artistic image, including the novelistic image, is never strictly about that which it depicts but about “visibility itself.” The painting always speaks more powerfully about that which it could never have depicted — the phenomenon — than about the object it immediately represents. It is in this “failure” to depict the ultimate truth, Marion argues, that we find the true gift of the painting — the possibility of a revelation. In a theological sense, therefore, it can be said that a painting engages in the Christological event precisely as a “failure.” It is not that Holbein’s painting is somehow uniquely Christological but only that it makes the Christological significance of every image emphatically pronounced. Nor is Holbein’s image a unique instance of aesthetic decomposition. It is, rather, a manifestation of the truth that every artistic image in its “failure” to represent the wholeness of reality inherently belongs to the realm of distortion and decomposition.

As an artistic image in its own right, Holbein’s painting becomes the occasion for an intense experience of reality for the characters in the novel. When recollecting his experience of looking at Holbein’s painting, the dying Ippolit Terentyev, in a rhetorical question delivered during his “Necessary Explanation,” captures the core idea of Dostoevsky’s entire poetics: “How could [kakim obrazom] one believe, looking at such a corpse, that this sufferer would be resurrected?” Ippolit is literally asking: “by means of what alternative image” [kakim obrazom] can I see reality as belonging to Christ’s resurrection when my eyes are overpowered by an image of his decomposing body. With this question Ippolit finds himself precisely at that threshold where the apophatic movement of imagination begins. Ippolit’s own inability to leap over the abyss of nihilism to which the painting has brought him is a powerful illustration of the severity of the apophatic path.

For my argument in this dissertation Holbein’s image and The Idiot as the “Holbeinian” novel within the Dostoevsky’s oeuvre constitute a pivotal point. It is here that the apophatic purpose of distortion within Dostoevsky’s poetics is distilled to its purest essence. However, one must consider most Dostoevskian novels as “Holbeinesque” in nature. Not only is the idea of aesthetic decomposition constantly present in the fragmented structure of Dostoevsky’s own works, but in Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov it is raised in an explicitly Holbeinian manner through an image of a decomposing body. The goal of my dissertation, therefore, is to show how Dostoevsky’s poetics in its totality is united by the apophatic purpose.

While I do not examine Dostoevsky’s texts in chronological order, I nevertheless make it my goal to retrace a trajectory of evolution within Dostoevsky’s apophatic thinking. For the

apophatic purpose does not emerge in Dostoevsky poetics until *Crime and Punishment*, the novel wherein, I argue, Dostoevsky for the first time explicitly commits his poetics to a religious end.

Before *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky is still driven, though with increasingly intensifying doubt, by a Romantic positivism, which understands an artistic image to be a kind of mirror of reality helping the perceiver to understand his own shortcomings and thus to improve himself. In *Notes from Underground*, however, distortion reaches such a grotesque degree that it becomes clear that Dostoevsky has renounced all hopefulness about the artistic realm. The image of the underground man is nothing other than a Holbeinian corpse decaying in a grave, illustrating Dostoevsky’s conclusion that reality *perceived aesthetically* is beyond salvaging. The conviction with which Dostoevsky drives his *Notes* to its darkest conclusion begins to reveal the apophatic movement that will become a characteristic of Dostoevsky’s later poetics. If in *Notes from Underground* the idea of epistemological resurrection is only implicit as the single possible “solution” to the aesthetic impasse, in *Crime and Punishment* it is made explicit with Raskolnikov, who is described as Lazarus decomposing in a grave, awaiting his resurrection in the visual desert of the epilogue.

What constitutes Dostoevsky’s disillusionment with the aesthetic realm that required him to move away from seeing an image as something that serves a moral purpose and towards understanding the image as a distortion that must be renounced? By way of answering this question in the first chapter, I turn to a peculiar tendency of Dostoevskian novels to unfold in the manner of a feuilleton that is as a sequence of seemingly random but graphic images. The fundamental feuilletonistic tendency within Dostoevsky’s poetics was early recognized by Leonid Grossman, who explained it as an exigency of the novelistic genre that has to resort to
inferior feuilletonistic techniques in order to satisfy and sustain the curiosity of the reader.\textsuperscript{14} Bakhtin considered the feuilletonistic fragmentation in Dostoevsky’s poetics to be the emergence of a new genre — the polyphonic novel. He understood Dostoevsky’s novel to be undergoing a transition away from a monologic structure — a structure united by one authorial vision — and towards heterogeneity where plurality of perspectives (voices) becomes possible.\textsuperscript{15} Morson’s idea of “the icon of chaos” in many ways is rooted in the same positive, even optimistic idea of visual fragmentation in Dostoevsky’s poetics as something that allows for a flexible and dynamic new aesthetic construct.

I understand the feuilletonistic tendency of Dostoevsky’s poetics to be an expression of his pessimism as regards the epistemic condition. For Dostoevsky’s interest in the feuilleton is not formal but epistemological. Increasingly he is coming to the conclusion that our experience of reality, especially of each other’s reality, is fundamentally wrought by our givenness to fascination. Our communication with one another is nothing other than a constant exploitation of one another’s susceptibility to fascination. Hence the tendency of confession in Dostoevsky to always pour out as a reel of graphic images. A Dostoevskian confession does not seek to present an objective truth about one’s self, nor to justify oneself, but to overpower the other’s imagination with the most disgusting and therefore most irresistible self-image possible. The confession of the underground man is the most obvious instance of such confession but there are many other examples. I thus devote my first chapter to an analysis of the feuilletonistic confession in Dostoevsky, arguing that it is here that we find Dostoevsky’s default assumption about the epistemic condition. Establishing Dostoevsky’s basic idea of the epistemic condition

\textsuperscript{14} Leonid Grossman, \textit{Poetika Dostoevskogo} (Moskva: Akademiia nauk, 1925), 19.
prepares the stage for the analysis of Dostoevsky’s argument against aesthetics in the following chapter. After all our perception of an image is fundamentally conditioned by the general state of our epistemic condition.

In the second chapter, which is entirely devoted to *The Idiot*, I focus on Dostoevsky’s philosophy of the image. In this most graphic of Dostoevsky’s novels, the author addresses the problem of the image and distortion directly. The novel is structured around two images — a photograph of the heroine and Holbein’s painting *Dead Christ*. By putting these two images into an intricate relationship with each other, Dostoevsky frames the problem of aesthetic perception as a problem of interpersonal communication. Since we encounter the other first and foremost through sight, what is at stake in our imagination for Dostoevsky is nothing less than the reality of the other. Aesthetic perception, which directly identifies the reality of the other with the other’s image, inevitably objectifies the other and thus effectively relates to the other as a dead object. Hence the significance of Holbein’s image for the novel. The dead and decomposing body of Christ vividly links the problem of nihilism in aesthetic perception with the problem of a personal encounter. Holbein’s painting also grounds the entire discussion of the personal encounter in the Christological drama, where the only hope for a possible wholesome encounter with the other is tied to the hope of resurrection. Very much like Holbein’s painting, *The Idiot* is an image of decomposition. Its purpose becomes to exhaust the nihilistic potential of aesthetic perception and thus bring the visual world of Dostoevsky’s poetics to the brink of renunciation and the apophatic leap.

In my third and last chapter I turn to the final stage of the apophatic movement within Dostoevsky’s poetics — the idea of resurrection. My goal here is not to discuss the idea of resurrection abstractly but to analyze those instances when Dostoevsky explicitly brings in
resurrection as a response to aesthetic perception. I look at two such instances — in *Crime and Punishment* and in the “Cana of Galilee” chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

*Crime and Punishment* is often misunderstood as a novel preoccupied with morality. The graphic murder of the old pawnbroker is usually considered a consequence of Raskolnikov’s disastrous moral choices. What in fact is true is that the gruesome murder and the lapses of moral judgement that led up to it, are products of decomposition that result from Raskolnikov’s failed effort to aesthetically construe his own reality. We are inside the Holbeinian painting here, inside the hero’s tiny garret room no larger than a tomb, where Raskolnikov is forced to relate to himself as to a decomposing corpse. The unique significance of *Crime and Punishment* among Dostoevsky’s works is that it is here Dostoevsky for the first time pronounces a religious experience to be radically opposite to an aesthetic experience. Previously there had been an effort to interpret religious transformation in moral-aesthetic terms, as for example in *The Insulted and the Injured*, where the protagonist’s repentance for a wrongdoing generates transformation. In *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov emphatically does not repent. His regeneration is described as a resurrection, a mysterious religious rapture that momentarily redefines his ability to perceive reality. To underscore the idea of discontinuity between the aesthetic and religious visions, Dostoevsky places Raskolnikov’s miraculous experience in the epilogue, thus structurally removing his experience from the main body of the novel. The nature of the relationship between the novel and its epilogue has become a continuous debate within Dostoevsky scholarship. I contribute to this debate by showing how the epilogue can be understood as an instance of renunciation inherent to the apophatic movement of Dostoevsky’s poetics.
The idea that religious vision is radically dissimilar to aesthetic perception is developed further in Alyosha’s religious rapture in “Cana of Galilee.” Dostoevsky here addresses the problem of a possible confusion between aesthetic and religious experience through the susceptibility of religious experience to aestheticization. Obsessively devoted to his Elder Zosima, Alyosha has fallen into the temptation to construe his own religious experience. The path of renunciation for Alyosha must lie through the need to confront the decomposing body of Zosima. We have here yet another instance of Holbeinian contemplation, where the apophatic move becomes possible precisely through a renunciation of the aesthetic image.

*Crime and Punishment* and “Cana of Galilee” in *The Brothers Karamazov* are additionally united by the fact that both are based on a motif from the Gospel of John. *Crime and Punishment* is a dramatization of the story of Lazarus’s resurrection (ch. 11), while “Cana of Galilee” is a dramatization of Christ’s miracle at Cana of Galilee where water is turned into wine (ch. 2). Within the Johannine text both miracles constitute important junctures in John’s own apophatic teaching, a fact that allows me to discuss Dostoevsky’s apophaticism as fundamentally grounded in Johannine theology. With this I hope to address a deficiency in Dostoevsky scholarship, namely, the nature of Dostoevsky’s engagement with the Johannine tradition. While many scholars have pointed out Dostoevsky’s indebtedness to John, the understanding of the nature of this debt has not gone much beyond recognition of instances of intertextuality.¹⁶ This lack of understanding of the Johannine connection in Dostoevsky is part of the larger problem of the nature of Dostoevsky’s engagement with the biblical tradition. It is Grossman again who

---

initiated the pervasive tendency to understand biblical quotation in Dostoevsky as merely the random presence of citations in the motley of other literary fragments. He says,

[...] the Book of Job, the Revelation of St. John, the Gospel texts, the discourses of St. Simeon the New Theologian, everything that feeds the pages of his novels and contributes to one or another of his chapters, is combined here in a most original way with the newspaper, the anecdote, the parody, the street scene, with the grotesque, even with the pamphlet. He boldly casts into his crucibles ever newer elements, knowing and believing that in the blaze of his creative work these raw chunks of everyday life, the sensations of boulevard novels and the divinely inspired pages of Holy Writ, will melt down and fuse in a new compound, and take on the deep imprint of his personal style and tone.17

For Grossman Dostoevsky brings in the biblical tradition only in order to “melt it down” into a new aesthetic construct, which is the author’s own comprehensive vision. While rejecting the idea of a dominant authorial “melting pot,” Bakhtin quotes this passage from Grossman to explain his own idea of a polyphonic novel where all voices, including that of the sacred tradition, are on an equal footing.

Scholars have pushed against such a relativizing of the significance that biblical tradition holds for Dostoevsky. The most notable work in this tradition is by Nina Perlina, who in her study of The Brothers Karamazov argues that literary quotations in Dostoevsky form a hierarchical relationship where “incontestable authority” is ascribed to biblical words, which “stand above the novel’s poetic system, yet govern and organize it.”18 The problem with Perlina’s argument is that while it rightfully recognizes the authoritative role of the biblical tradition in Dostoevsky’s poetics, it fails to discriminate between the types of biblical quotation. She thus ends up postulating the amorphous idea of “the authoritative biblical word.”

Furthermore, echoing Bakhtin himself, Perlina understands the significance of the sacred

17 Grossman, Poetika Dostoevskogo, 175.
tradition for Dostoevsky primarily through the primacy of the word. Such a judgment is redolent of the Protestant idea of *sola scriptura*, a form of relationship to scripture that is altogether foreign to Eastern Christianity. Tatyana Kasatkina has developed Perlina’s argument in a direction more appropriate for Dostoevsky, by arguing that the biblical word in Dostoevsky must be understood “ontologically,” as something that not so much brings concrete meaning as something that endows the novel with the possibility of new reality.¹⁹

Not all biblical material is of equal significance to Dostoevsky. There is a clear preference for the Johannine tradition. In my last chapter I argue that Johannine theology is attractive to Dostoevsky for its phenomenological potential. John conceives of Christological drama as divine deliverance from epistemic blindness, caused by humanity falling into fascination with illusion. Christ’s resurrection, which is the central theological idea in the gospel, becomes the moment of liberation from the power of this fascination and the endowing of new vision that allows for a wholesome engagement with reality. Dostoevsky weaves Johannine text into his novels in order to commit his poetics to this Johannine theology of resurrection. As I will show in the third chapter, the raising of Lazarus and Cana of Galilee are borrowed by Dostoevsky strategically to ground the apophatic movement of his own poetic structure in the poetic structure of the Gospel of John.

Chapter One: Lust of The Eyes

For all the abundance of self-revelation in Dostoevsky, a genuine confession is essentially impossible in his world. Whenever truth comes out, it tends to do so as shocking gruesomeness, pathetic self-lacerating, provocation, ensnarement, or burlesque buffoonery. It is not that unadorned truth has no value for Dostoevskian characters, but that the ability to know and express the pristine truth about themselves is trumped by an even more powerful desire to affect the other. A confession, Dostoevsky wants to say, is inevitably an act of communication and therefore is subject to the same law of erotic desire for possession as is all human interaction.

Naturally, therefore, a confessing consciousness seeks to exploit others’ givenness to distraction, feeding their insatiable curiosity with images that are always more exciting than true. In an effort to ensnare the mind by its own curiosity, a confession in Dostoevsky tends to take literary form, more specifically the form of a feuilleton.

Dostoevsky’s interest in pamphlet literature is not unconnected here. In an anonymously penned feuilleton in 1861 he laments: “May eternally be damned my vocation — the vocation of a feuilletonist!”\(^1\) Forced to dabble in the inferior genre due to penury, Dostoevsky does not so much compose the feuilleton as try to transform it into something worthier: “Could it be that all a feuilleton can be is but a reel of titillating [zhivotrepeshushih] tidbits of city life?” (19:67). Dostoevsky’s anxiety about the feuilleton’s unworthiness reflects a broader intellectual preoccupation with the coarse genre becoming a product of mass consumption.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Published in the first issue of Vremia, a literary journal Dostoevsky founded with his brother Mikhail in 1861 under the title “Peterburgskie snovidenia stikhah i prose.” See Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh i tridtsati trekh knigakh (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972), Vol. 29:67-85. Henceforth referred to in the text with volume number, followed by page numbers.

\(^2\) On the origin of the feuilleton tradition see Boris V. Tomashevsky, “U istokov fel’etona” in Fel’eton: sbornik statei, edited by Yuri Tynianov and Boris Kazanskii (Leningrad: Akademii Nauk, 1917), 59-71. For a broad survey of the development of feuilleton tradition in Russia, including the 19th century debates surrounding the genre, see Evgenii Zhurbina, Teoriia i praktika khudozhestvenno-publitsisticheskikh zhannov (Moskva, Izd-vo Mysl, 1969).
literary journal *Otechestvennye Zapiski* explained the feuilleton’s popular appeal by the great diversity of its material. It was everything, “theater reviews, novellas, anecdotes, the chatter of drawing rooms — a true medley of miscellaneous things [vsiaka vsiachina], a table laid with every kind of glittering trinket [*stol so vsiakogo roda blestiaashimi veshitsami*].” The journal’s implied critique is that by showering the reader with an assorted collection of exciting material, the feuilleton appealed to the basest instincts of human imagination, thus turning literature into the crudest form of entertainment. A famous nineteenth-century literary critic, Vissarion Belinsky, questioned the genre further by pointing out that the feuilletonistic literature brought out the worst not only in the reader but also in the author. Thus, he described the feuilletonist as:

[…] a chatterer, apparently good-natured and sincere, but in truth often malicious and evil-tongued, someone who knows everything, sees everything, keeps quiet about a good deal but definitely manages to express everything, stings with epigrams and insinuations, and *amuses* with a lively and clever word as well as a childish joke.

For Belinsky the feuilletonist is not an innocent boulevard voyeur nonchalantly reporting accidental observations from a morning tour of the city. He is a manipulator who knows how to pick the most agitating information and how to arrange it into a seemingly random yet highly calculated, salaciously irresistible reel of images.

The problem of the feuilleton preoccupied Dostoevsky throughout his literary career, finding its ultimate expression in the feuilletonistic tendency of his own novels. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* Mikhail Bakhtin has offered what remains an enduring explanation of the feuilleton’s significance for Dostoevsky’s poetics. In the heterogeneity of the pamphlet as a
genre, Bakhtin saw the “living reflection of the contradictions of contemporary society,” where “the most diverse and incongruous material was laid out, extensively, side by side.”\footnote{Mikhail M. Bakhtin, \textit{Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics}, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 29-30.} From this coexistence of journalistic miscellany Bakhtin derives his idea of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel, which broke down a traditional monologic structure allowing for a harmony of multiple perspectives. This overly optimistic understanding of the feuilleton blinds Bakhtin to the highly premeditated character of the feuilleton’s stream of images, which are selected to convince with sudden seriousness, disarm with superficiality, shock with explicit violence, and relieve with timely humor, all the while pursuing the single goal of seducing and entertaining the reader’s curiosity. Leonid Grossman, whose classic study of Dostoevsky’s poetics Bakhtin mines for his insight into the importance of the feuilleton for the Dostoevskian novel, is more cautious in his assessment. He points out that Dostoevsky is aware of the “inferior artistic value of individual episodes, which are necessary for inciting and sustaining readers’ curiosity,” but that such unfortunate exigencies of the genre are “redeemed by the depth of the overall idea.”\footnote{Leonid Grossman, \textit{Poetika Dostoevskogo} (Moskva: Akademiia nauk, 1925), 19. Translation is mine.}

It is my argument in this chapter that Dostoevsky’s interest in the feuilleton, like his interest in literary confession, is not formalistic but epistemological. The very existence of both genres, and especially their relationship to each other, is important to Dostoevsky first and foremost as a manifestation of the fundamental nature of our perception of reality. In its unabashed appeal to curiosity, the feuilleton captures for Dostoevsky the soul’s inherent givenness to fascination and distraction. In the tendency of consciousness to express itself through a feuilletonistic reel of images, Dostoevsky uncovers the soul’s pernicious desire to deceive and dismantle the other, most maliciously so through the trusted medium of the
confession. Though confession can often be ruthless in its predatory desire for control over the other’s imagination, a desire to deceive the other is rarely born explicitly as a scheme. The confession of Prince Volkovsky in *The Insulted and the Injured* is arguably the only example of a thoroughly cynical self-revelation. In most other cases (General Ivolgin from *The Idiot* being the textbook exemplar), the confession turns to the feuilleton naturally and sometimes against the confessing person’s will. By depriving us of the ability to attribute the maliciousness of a particular confessional encounter to the vileness of a protagonist, Dostoevsky brings us to the inevitable conclusion that in a world where truth cannot be known a priori, not even in the intimacy of one’s own mind, all expression and communication, indeed reality itself, is inevitably distorted and inherently manipulative. Truth for Dostoevsky lies altogether outside the epistemic realm, and to be reached, pernicious language itself would need to be transcended.

By way of elucidating the tendency of the confession to fascinate us in this dangerous way, I propose in this chapter to analyze three well-known confessional episodes in Dostoevsky: the literary outpouring of the underground man in *Notes from the Underground*, Tikhon’s reading of Stavrogin’s confession in *The Demons*, and Ivan Karamazov’s “rebellion” in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In all three instances, the relationship between confession and feuilleton is made explicit. In *Notes from Underground*, the protagonist speaks in the words and images of Dostoevsky’s early feuilletons. However, if, in the *Petersburg Chronicle*, the phenomenon of the feuilleton is a relatively innocent spiritual disease, in *Notes from Underground* the feuilletonistic tendency of the soul manifests itself as violent communication. If in *Notes from Underground* the depravity of the confessional encounter partakes of the intimacy of an individual relationship between the protagonist and Liza, then in *The Demons*, the problem of the feuilletonistic confession is considered from the point of view of its universal—indeed, apocalyptic—
significance. Stavrogin explicitly composes his confession as a three-page pamphlet for wide publication in newspapers. Through a subtle literary analysis of the pamphlet, Tikhon exposes not only Stavrogin’s latent desire for control but sharply raises the question of the impossibility of a literary confession. In *Brothers Karamazov*, the problem of feuilletonistic seduction through confession is considered in the intimate setting of a brotherly relationship. As brotherly trust is exploited by Ivan, who is unable to keep his confession from unraveling into a ruthless stream of violent images, Dostoevsky offers his culminating reflection on the utter depravity of language.

**The Violence of Seduction**

*Notes from Underground* is the confession of an intelligent yet thoroughly spiteful man who sets out to test whether he can “be perfectly candid with himself and not be afraid of the whole truth.” The ambition is not a trivial one. For as the underground man learns from Heine, even Rousseau “most certainly told a pack of lies about himself in his confessions, and even did so intentionally, out of vanity” (NU, 37). While agreeing that Rousseau was disingenuous, the underground man rejects Heine’s premise that “faithful autobiographies are almost impossible, and that a man is sure to tell a pack of lies about himself” (NU, 37). Rousseau slandered himself for show, and therefore, if one were to keep the revelation private and adopt the confessional format as “merely a front” and “an empty form” required only to facilitate the writing process, all incentive to lie would be eliminated (NU, 37). It turns out, however, that truthfulness before oneself is just as precarious as truthfulness before the other. In the very opening line, the effect of being on display has already begun to govern the underground man’s narrative, “I am a sick

---

man...I am a wicked man. An unattractive man” (NU, 5). Bakhtin pointed out the significance of the ellipses after the first word, which suggests an abrupt dialogic turn-around in the underground man’s consciousness. As if frightened that the reader might get a mournful image of him, the protagonist rushes to replace it with a repulsive image and thus grants the other a real presence in his act of confessing. It is not surprising, therefore, that in its intense awareness of spectatorship, Notes from Underground not only resembles the Confessions of Rousseau, but even outperforms it.

Despite the similarity to the Rousseauan text, however, structurally, Notes from Underground differs from it in at least one important respect. Unlike Confessions, which intertwines diary-like self-reflection with biographical narratives, Notes from Underground falls into two parts. The first part is devoted to the protagonist’s rigorous self-analysis, whereas the second part is comprised of his avowedly random recollection of some shameful episodes in his personal history, especially his relationship with the young prostitute Liza. In a letter to his brother Mikhail on 13 April 1864 Dostoevsky compared the transition between the two parts to modulatio in music: “The first chapter appears to be chatter [boltovnia], but suddenly in the last two chapters this chatter is resolved in an unexpected catastrophe.” The catastrophe Dostoevsky refers to is the underground man’s violent sexual assault on Liza. Perhaps to intensify this final resolution Dostoevsky abandoned the intention of splitting the text into three parts. While more can be said about the relevance of musical analogies in Dostoevsky, here the reference to modulatio means that the second part is where the latent truth of the first part

---

8 M. M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 228.
10 PSS, Vol. 28/2:85.
manifests itself in full dramatic force. In other words, the Liza story is not merely an illustration, not only the most tragic incident from the debauched life of the underground man, but an allegorical and dramatic representation of the violent essence of “chatter” in the first part.

Liza’s silent presence in the second part can be seen as the embodiment of the imagined observer to whom the underground man has addressed his confession in the first part. As a sacrificial lamb she is brought in by Dostoevsky to allow the violence of the protagonist’s confessing consciousness to manifest itself in full force. Since the only description of Liza that we have is given to us by the protagonist himself, it is impossible to see her as a heroine in her own right and not as a distorted image born by the protagonist’s own diseased imagination. Even the temptingly positive references to her as the savior descending into the bowels of the underground to rescue the protagonist with her love must be included among the underground man’s fantasies. The only thing left to us to affirm with some degree of objectivity is that Liza is a victim of the underground man’s calculated act of seduction. She has mistaken his frankness for an act of generosity and believed it to be indicative of his love for her. This misguided hope for love and compassion draws her to his apartment, where her ability to resist seduction is trumped by an act of ruthless domination. It is precisely in the helpless surrender of Liza to the underground man that we discover the full hopelessness of the world of the underground. To wince from this hopelessness by turning Liza into a vestige of redemptive love in the story would be to fail to appreciate the full gravity of Dostoevsky’s sentencing of the epistemic reality in the “Notes.”

11 I here disagree with a common reading of Notes from Underground that believes Liza to be a vestige of redemption in the novel. For an example of such reading see Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 344-346.
We find a more accurate idea of Liza’s role in the novel when we consider the second part of *Notes from Underground* in the context of two of Dostoevsky’s early works, *The Petersburg Chronicle* and *White Nights*. Both works are directly evoked in *Notes from Underground*, suggesting that Dostoevsky is deliberately returning to some of his early ideas. Written in quick succession, both texts are in fact an effort to elucidate the identical idea of the dreamer. A mysterious creature who roams the streets at night, the dreamer is a boulevard voyeur, a lonely flâneur who saturates his mind with the most random images he absorbs from the streets or from the morning press. At night, in the dark corner of his room, he abandons himself to the kaleidoscopic whirlwind of his image-filled imagination, which carries him away from the tedium of urban existence. A seemingly innocent, even if a pathetic, creature, the dreamer turns predator when a lonely stranger makes herself available for a conversation. A private mix of entertaining and intensely morbid images, which has been carefully pre-arranged into the most seductive slide show, is now showered upon the unsuspecting listener with the disarming force of a genuine heart’s outpouring. In this victimization of his listener there is for the dreamer a sense of empowerment and a promise of emotional vitality. Nastenka, who becomes a victim of the dreamer in *White Nights* is a foreshadowing of Liza, while the underground man is the darkest and most sinister manifestation of the dreamer turned seducer. A quick foray into *The Petersburg Chronicle* and *White Nights* would illuminate the seriousness of the idea of seduction in Dostoevsky’s verdict against the confessing consciousness and help us set *Notes from Underground* in its critically important background.

*The Petersburg Chronicle* was published in 1847 in four separate installments, in which, the author, a feuilletonist, sets out to roam the streets of St. Petersburg in search of “the most
titillating [zhivotrepeshushikh] news.”\(^{12}\) The streets, however, yield nothing worthy to write about. Refusing to entertain his reader with trivial tidbits of city life such as “that the omnibuses are flourishing on Nevsky Prospect” the author, instead of composing traditional feuilletons, offers four studies in the phenomenology of boredom, which underlies the feuilletonistic genre. Would a bored city dweller find a funeral procession entertaining?

At that moment I ran into a funeral procession, and, in my capacity as a feuilletonist, I recalled that grippe and fever were then almost a contemporary issue in Petersburg. It was a magnificent funeral. The hero of the cortege, in an extravagant coffin, was somberly and decorously, feet foremost, on the way to the world’s most comfortable apartment…His decorations floated after him on a cushion (18:16).

While it is not clear whether throwing in this morbid image enables the author more easily to tease or mock the curiosity of his reader, it nevertheless is illustrative of how feuilletonistic material, desperate to break through urban tedium, inevitably resorts to the intensity of the grotesque. For a Petersburgian needs a stronger enticement than the city’s opera, parks, and façades can offer, all of which are utterly foreign and therefore incapable of amusing his “skeptical Russian soul.” Of course, there are always those in the city who will be satisfied with useless chatter, “Sometime I feel as if everyone is discussing some serious matters, matters that cause one to think. But if you ask yourself later what exactly was discussed, you won’t be able to say: was it a pair of gloves? farming? or ‘the longevity of women’s love’?” (18:22). Those unable to find their dose of distraction on the street must seek relief in introspection, in that painfully rewarding feeling of turning one’s own soul into an amusement park. “People talk and write themselves out, analyze themselves in front of the entire world, often with pain and suffering. A thousand new perspectives present themselves to such people” (18:27). In this

\(^{12}\) PSS, Vol. 28:15. Henceforth referred to in the text with volume number, followed by page numbers.
confessional euphoria, the soul’s feuilletonistic tendency merges with equally powerful impulse
to expose oneself to the world.

The author’s sketches on the urban malady of boredom culminate with a discovery of a unique and sinister creature — a dreamer. What is a dreamer? “It is a Petersburg nightmare, sin personified, it is a tragedy, silent, mysterious, miserable, mad, with fierce terrors, all sorts of calamity, peripetias, inceptions, and denouements […]” (18:32). The dreamer is a creature almost inhuman, a strange being of neuter gender whose passion for a full and meaningful life had been stalled by inertia. A simmering desire, however, still fuels his imagination and the dreamer is soon given to “sorrow and joy, hell and paradise, seductive women, heroic accomplishments, with a noble undertaking, and or a titanic struggle, crimes and the most random horrors” (18:33). But it is not so much the images themselves that animate the dreamer’s soul as it is the euphoria resulting from the randomness and swiftness with which they pass through his imagination. “Often in the span of just a few hours he can live through the paradise of love or even an entire and grandiose life, enormous, unheard of, magical like a dream, and beautiful” (18:33). Too often frightened by real life, the dreamer can be hiding in his dark and often dirty corner, where he escapes reality by infinitely distracting himself with his own imagination. Yet should the dreamer in his imaginative frenzy step onto a street, everything becomes fantastic and the most trivial street is soon reworked into “a tale, a story, a novel […]” (18:34).

If in Petersburg Chronicle the dreamer’s illusion is purely his own tragedy, in White Nights the dreaming consciousness manifests itself as a weapon of communication. Self-deception here seamlessly becomes deception of the other and the tone of the whole work begins to sound a great deal like Notes from Underground. Subtitled “From the Reminiscences of a
Dreamer,” *White Nights* is a short story told in first person by a nameless narrator, the dreamer, who in a series of notes recollects his short-lived relationship with the young woman Nastenka.\(^\text{13}\) The story opens with the author, very much like the flâneur in the chronicles, anxiously sinking into the tedium of a Petersburg summer: “I had been tormented by a singular feeling of despondency. All of a sudden, I had started to imagine that everyone was abandoning me…I felt terrified of being left on my own, and I drifted about the city for three days on end in a state of profound misery [в глубокой тоске].”\(^\text{14}\) While roaming the streets one night he notices Nastenka, who spends her nights leaning against the canal railing awaiting news from her lover. The dreamer takes the occasion to introduce himself when he rescues her from a predatory gentleman who accosts Nastenka with dishonorable intentions. The irony of the dreamer fortuitously taking the place of a sexual predator soon becomes apparent, when a slip of his tongue reveals that his own intention might not be all that innocent. He blurts to Nastenka: “You’ll soon make me stop being shy […] and farewell to all my resources!” (WN, 10). When the word “resources” upsets Nastenka, the dreamer tries to rescue the situation by explaining the unfortunate word as an accident. “I’m sorry, it won’t happen again, it was a slip of the tongue […] How on earth am I supposed to be silver-tongued and say just the right things? In any case, it’s in your interest for everything to be open and above board…I don’t know how to keep quiet when my heart speaks within me” (WN, 10). Now that his disguise of innocence has been compromised, the seducer divulges his strategy. He will be completely candid with Nastenka, not only because his heart cannot resist speaking truth but because a full disclosure is somehow in Nastenka’s own interest.


The dreamer begins his emotional disrobing by first introducing Nastenka to the dark mystery of the dreamer. The description is an expanded version of the one we have in *Petersburg Chronicle* — a pathetic and sinister creature, which hides in a small dark corner where it abandons itself to “lavishly deceptive” fantasy. Having thus enticed Nastenka’s imagination, who all this time has been absorbing his morbid tale with “wide-eyed and open-mouthed astonishment,” the dreamer is prepared to begin his confession: “You want to know, Nastenka, what our hero did in his corner, or rather—I, because the hero of this whole business is me—my very own humble self” […]? (WN, 19). Unable to refuse the dreamer’s candor yet suspicious of the artfulness of his tale, Nastenka begs him to be less premeditative. “But one thing: you tell the story beautifully, but couldn’t you make it just a little less so? It’s as if you were reading from a book” (19). The dreamer is aware of the overly stylized nature of his confession but he cannot help it. Like a spirit “sealed in an earthenware jar” he has spent a millennium arranging the images in his consciousness and now, when “a thousand valves have opened” within his brain, he must “pour forth a river of words” lest he suffocates (WN, 19). Therefore, if Nastenka wants to hear the confession, she must stop resisting and surrender herself completely to the dreamer’s tale: “I beg you not to interrupt me, Nastenka, just listen, meekly *pokorno* and obediently *poslushno*; otherwise I won’t go on” (WN, 19). The threat to interrupt his confession demonstrates the dreamer’s confidence that Nastenka is now too deeply entangled in his story and is incapable of walking away. Emboldened, the dreamer intensifies his demands. She is not merely to sit through his confession but must contemplate him in his full spiritual exposure:

Yes, Nastenka, — the dreamer surrenders to the illusion and cannot but believe that a real and genuine passion is agitating his soul, that there is something vital and tangible in his *disembodied visions*! […] One glance at him will convince you! Would you believe it to look at him, sweet Nastenka, that he has never actually met the woman he has loved so much in his ecstatic daydreaming? (WN, 23).
To be fair to the dreamer, his seductive maneuvering is not pure calculation. It stems from a deeply confusing pattern of self-deception, where an infinite supply of disembodied images has produced in his soul an illusion of vitality. Subjecting Nastenka to his own angst is a desperate attempt to convince himself of his own illusion. However, as he finishes his confession, the inherent maliciousness of his self-revelation becomes apparent to him:

I lapsed into an emotional silence, having concluded my emotional outpourings; I remember feeling a terrible urge to laugh out loud, whatever the consequences, because I already sensed a malevolent imp [besenok] stirring within me, I had got a lump in my throat, my chin started trembling, and my eyes grew ever moister…I expected Nastenka, who had been listening to me with her intelligent eyes open wide, to burst out irressibly into her gay childlike laughter, and was regretting that I had gone so far; I shouldn’t have told her of what had been so long raging within my heart I could recite it like a book (WN, 24).

The grace of having the violence of his confession eradicated by the innocent, childish laughter of Nastenka is not granted to the dreamer. Instead, he is to hear Nastenka’s sharing of her own life. Nastenka’s story, however, is not a confession in its own right but a helpless response to the initially overpowering act of truth-sharing on the part of the dreamer, just like Liza’s visit to the underground man’s apartment is not an act of love but rather a helpless response of a seduced consciousness.

While in White Nights the dreamer’s appetite for violence grows gradually, in Notes from Underground the violent intention emerges already in the underground man’s first look at Liza. In a veiled reference to The Double Dostoevsky captures the protagonist glancing in the mirror inside the brothel as he prepares to walk into Liza’s room: “By chance I looked in a mirror. My agitated face seemed to me repulsive in the extreme: pale, wicked, mean, with disheveled hair. ‘Let it be; I’m glad of it,’ I thought, ‘I’m precisely glad that I’ll seem repulsive to her; I like it…’” (NU, 80). Exploiting Liza’s situation of a hired prostitute the underground man revels in the prospect of forcing her to contemplate his repulsive image. This is the same tortured version of
the “indecent exposure” that we find in the opening line of the first part, where, confident that the reader won’t turn away from the sight, the underground man announces that the self-image he is about to present is thoroughly “unattractive.” Thus the mirror incident establishes the allegorical link between the reader of the confession and the character of Liza. The same perverted pleasure that has propelled the underground man to inflict the image of himself onto the reader spurs him on towards Liza. The underground man’s desire for domination is not appeased by the sexual encounter. When after two hours in Liza’s room he wakes up feeling her piercing gaze on him, the hunger for more violence stirs up in him:

Suddenly I saw two open eyes beside me, peering at me curiously and obstinately […] It was somehow unnatural that these two eyes had only decided precisely now to begin peering at me […] now, all of a sudden there appeared before me the absurd, loathsome spiderish notion of debauchery, which, without love, crudely and shamelessly begins straight off with that which is the crown of true love. We looked at each other like that for a long time, but she did not lower her eyes before mine, nor did she change their expression, and in the end, for some reason, this made me feel eerie (NU, 81-82).

The desire for domination, which culminates in rape upon their second meeting, here emerges as desire to distract. The underground man begins to survey his mind for a sumptuous image that could help him harness Liza’s unsettling wide-open eyes. As the images gleaned off the street that very morning are streaming through his head, he eventually stumbles upon a perfect morbid sight, and as if involuntarily he begins to speak his mind:

Images of the whole past day began to pass confusedly through my memory, somehow of themselves, without my will. I suddenly recalled a scene I had witnessed that morning in the street, as I was trotting along, preoccupied, to work. “They were carrying a coffin out today and almost dropped it” (NU, 83).

This playful bit of morbidity, which secures attention by first shocking the mind with its gruesomeness and then immediately rescuing it from fear of contemplation by injecting into it the right dose of the comic, is a characteristic feature of the feuilletonistic literature in
Dostoevsky. This is precisely how the author of *The Petersburg Chronicle* throws in his funeral image. However, unlike *The Petersburg Chronicle*, where the feuilletonist simply tosses his image at the reader, the underground man unravels the sight slowly, allowing Liza’s imagination to get properly saturated with it. “A coffin?” she asks bewildered. “Yes, in the Haymarket; they were carrying it out of a basement.” “Out of a basement?” she asks still perplexed as to why she needs to know any of it. The underground man gradually intensifies the image by adding details: “Not a basement, but the basement floor…you know…down under…from a bad house…There was such filth all around…Eggshells, trash…stink…it was vile.” The embellished image overloads Liza’s imagination and she grows silent. Not to allow the silence persist for too long the underground man adds more detail: “A bad day for a burial!” “Why bad?” she helplessly asks. “Snow, slush…” The underground man fakes indifference by yawning. “Makes no difference,” she says with irritation. “No, it’s nasty…” the underground man insists and yawns again, “The gravediggers must have been swearing because the snow was making it wet. And there must have been water in the grave.” “Why water in the grave?” Liza finally asks with curiosity, at which point the underground man knows that he has succeeded and Liza’s mind can no longer resist his seduction (NU, 83). Inspired by his success, the seducer goes on to paint for Liza an apocalyptic vision of her own life, throwing at her one possible scenario after another. The images continue to pour with ruthless calculation: “With pictures,” he thinks to himself “I’ll get you with these pictures!” [Kartinkami, vot etimi-to kartinkami tebia nado!] (NU, 90). In the final hope to wrench herself away from the underground man, Liza insults him with the same accusation that Nastenka threw at the dreamer: “It’s as if you…as if it’s from a book” (NU, 91). The seducer, however, knows that Liza’s spitefulness is nothing but the last gasp of a conquered victim: “[…] this is the usual last device of a bashful and chaste-hearted person whose soul is
being rudely and importunately pried into, and who will not surrender till the last minute out of pride, and is afraid of showing any feeling before you” (NU, 91).

The second encounter between the two is a continuation of the first. When Liza silently walks into the underground man’s apartment, he is in the midst of a quarrel with his lackey Apollon over seven rubles of salary he owes him. Liza’s visit catches him off guard. As he stands before her dressed in his ragged old quilted dressing gown, he is overcome by the vengeful desire to punish her for daring to see him on her own terms. The confession that follows, intense and bordering on hysteria, is driven by both desire to regain control over Liza’s perception and by desire to punish her for escaping that control: “[…] I will never forgive you for having found me in this wretched dressing gown […] And those tears a moment ago, which, like an ashamed woman, I couldn’t hold back before you, I will never forgive you! And what I’m confessing to you now, I will also never forgive you” (NU, 112). Trapped in the perpetual cycle of spitefulness, the confession then needs to be vindicated by an even more intensely “indecent exposure.” As despicable as the underground man’s sexual aggression against Liza is, it is only a natural culmination of his insatiable desire for complete domination.

Despite the fact that his assault on Liza feels to him like an accident, deep inside the underground man knows that it followed a well-premeditated pattern: “This cruelty was so affected, so much from the head, so purposely contrived, so bookish, that I myself could not bear it even for a minute” (NU, 116). By “bookish,” the underground man means that his behavior is so detached that it lacks individual character and feels contrived, as if he had lifted it from some existing feuilleton, novel, or literary confession. All literature, like all language, is but a carefully selected stream of images, a premeditated seduction, which seeks to ensnare the reader’s mind. In fact, the underground man continues to philosophize, our lives have grown so dependent on
media that we have lost all awareness of life without it: “We don’t even know where the living [zhivoе] lives now, or what it is, or what it’s called! Leave us to ourselves, without a book, and we immediately get confused, lost — we won’t know what to join, what to hold to, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise” (NU, 119). The closing lines of the confession are addressed to the reader directly, where in the final bout of self-loathing the underground laments that his novel has failed:

[…] to tell long stories of how I defaulted on my life through moral corruption in a corner, through an insufficiency of milieu, through unaccustomed to what is alive, and through vainglorious spite in the underground — is not interesting, by God; a novel needs a hero, and here there are purposely collected all the features for an anti-hero, and, in the first place, all this will produce a most unpleasant impression, because we’ve all grown unaccustomed to life, we’re all lame, each of us more or less (NU, 118).

Seducer to the end, the underground man is neither genuinely sorry for what he is confessing, nor does he believe that his self-portrait can possibly fail to entice the reader’s curiosity. If anything, his concern with the artistic quality of his self-portrait reveals that he all along intended his confession for the public eye. Nor will he allow the reader a condescending condemnation of his life, for it is not a moral aberration but only a more daring manifestation of the truth about every person: “I have merely carried to an extreme in my life what you have not dared to carry even halfway” (NU, 119).

As unsettling as we might find the underground man’s postulating of himself as the final truth about humanity, it must be taken seriously. For he is not merely one character among others in the pantheon of Dostoevskian protagonists. He is the epitome of the mind’s epistemic fallenness, a manifestation of the inherent corruptibility of language, a tour de force in the coerciveness of artistic representation, and a dramatization of the inevitability of violence in all communication.
It is precisely the overlooking of this radical condemnation of the epistemic realm in *Notes from Underground* that is so perplexing about Bakhtin’s most influential reading of the underground man. Bakhtin writes:

The destruction of one’s own image in another’s eyes, the sullying of that image in another’s eyes as an ultimate desperate effort to free oneself from the power of the other’s consciousness and to break through to one’s self for the self alone — this, in fact, is the orientation of the underground man’s entire confession. For this reason he makes his discourse about himself deliberately ugly. He wants to kill in himself any desire to appear the hero in others’ eyes (and in his own): “I am no longer the hero to you now that I tried to appear before, but simply a nasty person, a scoundrel…”

Having defined the other’s vision as inherently objectifying and therefore deserving of dismantling, Bakhtin goes on to justify the underground man’s assault on the other’s perception as perpetrated in the name of freedom. By means of distorting his own image in the eyes of the spectator, the underground man escapes the confinement of the other’s perception to attain an epistemic freedom where the self can exist “for the self alone.” It is precisely to impede a conclusion of this sort that Dostoevsky includes into the underground man’s confession the story of Liza. Unless we are prepared to atone for the underground man’s seduction of Liza, something that Bakhtin in fact does by entirely overlooking her presence in the novel, as a deed committed in the name of epistemic freedom, we can find no reason for hope in *Notes from Underground*.

The intense hopelessness of the underground man’s confession was intended by Dostoevsky to signal the need for redemption from the flawed realm of language and consciousness. The portion that made this point in the text explicit was cut out by the censors. On this occasion Dostoevsky furiously wrote to his brother: “The censors are pigs; wherever I ridiculed everything and at times blasphemed for show [dlia vidu] — that was allowed by, but where I

---

derived from this the need for faith and Christ — this was prohibited.”

Dostoevsky never restored the censored cuts, leaving the readers of *Notes from Underground* to contemplate helplessly the seductive world of perpetual ridicule and blasphemous violence.

**The Spectacle of Stavrogin**

In *The Demons* the tendency of the confession towards the feuilletonistic reaches apocalyptic proportions. In the originally bowdlerized chapter (“At Tikhon’s”), the principle character Nikolai Stavrogin, in a private conversation with a local holy man, reveals his plan to publicize an autobiographical piece, in which he admits to seducing and driving to suicide an eleven-year-old girl. He described the hideous act in a three-page pamphlet, three hundred copies of which he had beforehand printed abroad. In addition to disseminating the pamphlet in his local provincial town, Stavrogin intends to have his confession published in newspapers all across Russia and translated for the foreign press. The excessive degree of publicity that Stavrogin seeks for his confession makes Tikhon question the sincerity of his act. Tikhon’s response takes the form of an astute literary critique of Stavrogin’s text, illuminating the fact that what Stavrogin is truly seeking with his confession is not genuine repentance but the spinning-out of his ugly deed into a spectacle.

Before looking more closely at Stavrogin’s conversation with Tikhon, it is worth making a few observations about Stavrogin’s enigmatic presence in the novel. Whether it is his playing a buffoon when dragging Gaganov by the nose or his noble gesture of publicly recognizing the mentally and physically disabled Marya Lebyadkina as his lawful wife, Stavrogin’s actions are

---

16 *PSS*, Vol. 28/2:73.
always calculated and aimed at the maximum dramatic effect.\footnote{Ray M. Davidson explores the dramatic as the key attribute of Stavrogin’s character in “The Devils: The Role of Stavrogin” in \textit{New Essays on Dostoyevsky}, ed. Malcolm V. Jones and Garth M. Terry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 95-114.} At the same time, there is in Stavrogin a “tendency to self-effacement,” which contradicts his dramatic self-asserting gestures.\footnote{Richard Peace, \textit{Dostoevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 180.} The truth is that Stavrogin is driven by the desire to capture everyone’s attention and, at the same time, hesitant to give in to this desire completely.

Partial insight into why the dramatic effect is important to Stavrogin is found in the meaning of his name. His first name Nikolai (conqueror of nations) and the patronymic Vsevolodovich (master of all) suggest Stavrogin’s affinity for power. His last name, which derives from \textit{stavros}, the Greek for a cross, suggests the significance of Christ’s suffering. The allusion to the cross here exposes a contradiction that lies at the heart of Stavrogin’s divided person. In the Christian imagination, the cross is, on the one hand, the place of Christ’s anguish and, on the other, a dramatic stage where divine power has manifested itself to the world. The drama of St. John’s Gospel, for example, culminates precisely in the idea that the cross is the place where the suffering Christ triumphantly draws the eyes of the world to himself: “They shall look on the one they have pierced” (19:37). In The Book of Revelation this Johannine idea takes on an apocalyptic cast: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, everyone who pierced him” (1:7). By turning himself into a spectacle, Stavrogin does not so much seek the role of the suffering one, though this is also on his mind, as much as the role of the one who dares to draw the eyes of the world: “But as far as I’m concerned, there’ll always be some people who know everything, who’ll look at me, and I at them. And the more of these
people there are, the better.” Stavrogin substitutes the idea of power as implied in the Christian notion of the “spectacle of power” with the Rousseauan idea of “indecent exposure.” Furthermore, it will be intended not as an act of repentance but as a revengeful throwing of an ugly self-image into the face of the curious crowd.

Stavrogin’s latent desire for power is underscored by Dostoevsky in a conversation that occurs the night before Stavrogin’s visit to Tikhon, a conversation that in fact serves as the impetus for the visit. In this brief scene Stavrogin engages in a heated exchange with the novel’s chief “devil,” Pyotr Verkhovensky. As his name suggests (“the one who lords over”), Verkhovensky is linked with Stavrogin by an intimate bond, which Dostoevsky made explicit in the first version of the novel but re-veiled when it was published in book form. In the original abandoned fragment Stavrogin admits to having regular visions of demons, which he knows are not real but only apparitions of the dark sides of his self, his own doubles, who appear before him to convince him of his own ideas. The conversation with Verkhovensky on the eve of the confession is just such a demonic visitation, something that Stavrogin recognizes by explicitly referring to Verkhovensky as his devil: “At last, devil, what do you want me for?” (D, 441).

Acknowledged for who he truly is, Verkhovensky unfolds before Stavrogin the apocalyptic fantasy of throwing the entire world into chaos, and, thus having dismantled all moral and social fabrics that hold it together, of laying the conquered world at the feet of a despot. Of course, the role of the despot is reserved for Stavrogin himself, who, in the grand finale of the apocalyptic drama, will appear before the helpless herd as its glorious savior. With the thoroughness of an expert dramatist, Verkhovensky calculates the dramatic suspense:

We’ll say he’s been “in hiding” […] Do you know what that little phrase means, “He’s in hiding”? But he will appear [javitsia], he will […] He exists, but no one’s ever seen him. Oh, what a fine legend we could put about! The main thing is — a new force is imminent. That’s what they need, that’s what they’re weeping for […] Listen, I’ll show you to no one, no one: that’s how it must be. He exists, but no one’s seen him; he’s in hiding. You know, it would be possible, even, to show him to one man, say, in a hundred thousand. And it would go all round the earth: “We’ve seen him, we’ve seen him.” […] you’re a handsome man, proud as a god, seeking nothing for yourself, with an aura of sacrifice, who’s “in hiding”. The main thing is the legend! You’ll conquer them; you’ll need only look, and you’ll conquer them. He’s bearing a new truth, but he’s “in hiding” (D, 447-448).

As insane as Verkhovensky’s apocalyptic drama might seem to the reader, Stavrogin does not attempt to rebuff it as ridiculous for he knows that the vision is born in the depth of his own soul. The last word, “What for?” [zachem?], thrown at Verkhovensky in “earnestness” and “severity,” captures Stavrogin helplessly resorting to the only inner objection to the dark proclivity of his own nature that he has been able to fathom: nihilistic indifference. This fundamental division within Stavrogin — on the one hand a desire for dramatically powerful revelation and on the other, utter indifference and nihilistic resignation — is the context in which we must evaluate his conversation with Tikhon the following morning.

The chapter “At Tikhon’s” describes Stavrogin’s visit to the old monk. It consists of two parts, one a verbatim reprinting of Stavrogin’s confession and the other Stavrogin’s conversation with Tikhon that immediately follows Tikhon’s reading of the pamphlet. As regards our understanding of Stavrogin’s motivation for writing the confession, it is not the content but Tikhon’s literary critique of the form and Stavrogin’s reaction to the critique that is most revealing. This is especially true given that we cannot be sure about the truthfulness of Stavrogin’s confession. He admits that he might have told a great many lies about himself (D, 476). Nevertheless it is worth mentioning one scene from the confession, since it establishes an important literary context of Stavrogin’s confession. In this episode Stavrogin frames the little
girl Matryosha for stealing a pocketknife and then allows her to be beaten for a transgression she did not commit. Stavrogin here borrows Rousseau’s famous admission in *Confessions*, in which the author admits to stealing a ribbon and allowing the blame to fall on the servant girl Marion. Rousseau singles out the Marion incident as the most shameful in his life, insisting that it is the sharing of this particular bit of his history that is most revealing about his life. Many readings of Rousseau’s motivation for telling the Marion story can be found, but the one offered by Paul de Man comes closest to the meaning that Dostoevsky invests in this scene when he reworks it into Stavrogin’s confession. De Man writes,

> What Rousseau *really* wanted is neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure which he actually gets […]. The more crime there is, the more theft, lie, slander, and stubborn persistence in each of them, the better. The more there is to expose, the more there is to be ashamed of; the more resistance to exposure, the more satisfying the scene […]. This desire is truly shameful, for it suggests that Marion was destroyed not for the sake of Rousseau’s saving face, nor for the sake of his desire for her, but merely in order to provide with a stage on which to parade his disgrace […].

Like Rousseau, Stavrogin allows the blame to fall on Matryosha — not because he desires to harm her, not even because he seeks voyeuristic pleasure from seeing her punished, but purely because the crime affords him an intensely pleasurable spectacle of his own ignominy: “It wasn’t the vileness itself I liked (here my reason was totally intact); I liked the ecstasy residing in a tortured awareness of how low I had sunk” (D, 462). It follows from this admission that the more despicable the crime, the more intense the pleasure of the spectacle. Seducing and driving of

---


Matryosha to suicide is Stavrogin’s ultimate “unforgivable” sin, one that affords him consummate pleasure of self-contemplation.

It is this private realization that a truly shameful crime makes for an irresistible spectacle that inspires Stavrogin to display his sin publicly. The possibility of ensnaring people in the pleasure of their own looking promises Stavrogin a perverted feeling of empowerment. Bringing his confession before Tikhon is by no means a diversion from this intention and, on the contrary, is the first trial of his pamphlet’s effectiveness. As Tikhon is reading the confession, Stavrogin hungrily anticipates the evidence of shock and revulsion on his face. When he realizes that his confession has failed to produce the desired effect, he exclaims with irritation: “I see no expression of disgust or shame in you…you can’t be very squeamish!” (D, 475). Precisely to deny Stavrogin the reward he is seeking, Tikhon refuses to talk about the crime, and instead focuses purely on the aesthetic aspect of the work: “Might it be possible to make some changes in this document? […] Maybe some of the style?” (D, 474). In a famous study of the confession Leonid Grossman explains Tikhon’s carping on style as the old archbishop’s hopeless aestheticism. Steeped in the rhetorical varnish of ancient theological texts, Tikhon failed to recognize in the poverty of Stavrogin’s language the genuine reflection of a criminal consciousness. According to Grossman, Dostoevsky intentionally deprived Stavrogin’s outpouring of style, so that it was not “a polished memoir page” but direct “speaking voice of a sinner.”

At the same time Grossman admits that Stavrogin’s lack of style is not due to lack of desire to impress the reader. The meticulous detail with which he describes his crime betrays scrupulous attention to the final picture and the effect it should produce on the reader’s imagination. Grossman completely misses the dramatic complexity of Stavrogin’s confession as

---

well as the irony of Tikhon’s approach. By overlooking the crime and focusing purely on the performative aspect of the confession, Tikhon seeks to expose the confession for what it truly is, a bit of journalistic sensation, a feuilletonistic sketch, which masks a malicious desire for influence.

Despite his aesthetic sensibility, Tikhon is not merely an aesthete but a religious mind, or, as Stavrogin in frustration puts it, a “psychologist.” By scrutinizing the manner of composition, Tikhon wants to reveal to Stavrogin the flawed workings of his own mind:

It’s as if you deliberately want to make yourself out worse than your heart would desire […] Some parts of your statement are brought into relief by the style; it’s as if you revel [liubuete’s ] in your own psychology and latch on to every trivial detail merely to astonish the reader with an insensitivity, you don’t really have (D, 475).

Tikhon’s diagnosis might seem contradictory, claiming that on the one hand Stavrogin’s confession is a deliberate lie, and on the other that it is in fact a deed against the desire of his own heart. What Tikhon captures for Stavrogin in this contradiction, however, is the very essence of the epistemic fallenness of language and imagination. In a world where desire to impress and control is more powerful than desire for truth, the dramatic momentum will always force the confessing consciousness to distort the self-image for the purpose of astonishing the other. In other words, Stavrogin is not in absolute control of his confession but his literary confession has gotten the better of him. And, as is the case with all deception in Dostoevsky, Stavrogin’s confession is born out of a self-deception. Tikhon points out that Stavrogin finds personal enjoyment in distorting and intensifying the ugliness of his own image.

With every new turn, Tikhon’s critique of Stavrogin’s confession is becoming more global. Tikhon steers it toward the final claim that Stavrogin’s failure is due not so much to his own ineptitude as to the fact that a literary confession is impossible in principle. Should he publish his pamphlet, the effect it will have on people will not turn out as he intended. Even the
basic strategy of shocking the audience to anger with the gruesomeness of his sin will not in the end be successful, because people will find a way to laugh and ridicule it: “The horror will be universal and, of course, more put on than genuine. People only fear what directly threatens their own interests […] The laughter will be widespread. And add the philosopher’s comment that in another’s woes there is always something gratifying [priiatnoe]” (D, 478). This veiled reference to Aristotle’s idea of tragic catharsis, with an emphasis on gratification, once again captures Tikhon’s assumption about epistemological reality in the fallen world. In the postlapsarian world, all spectacles, no matter how disastrous and appalling, in the end succeed only as objects of curiosity and pleasure. For maximum dramatic effect, Stavrogin should have taken the spectator’s proclivity for the curious more seriously by selecting a more effective crime than the one featured in his confession: “There are genuinely ugly [nekrasivye] crimes. Crimes, whatever they are, the more blood and horror, the more impressive they are, the more they are, so to speak, picturesque [kartinnee]. But there are crimes that are shameful and infamous beyond any horror, so to speak, [they are] too inelegant [ne iziashnye]” (D, 478-479). Stavrogin’s seducing of Matryosha belongs in the category of the “inelegant” crimes. It does not easily afford the mind the pleasure of contemplation. As a consequence, people will turn away from the crime and instead entertain themselves with the ridiculous, sanctimonious criminal who failed to keep quiet about his sin.

The purpose of Tikhon’s aesthetic critique is to bring Stavrogin to a realization of the pointlessness of his public exposure. Stavrogin botched his confession. Should he publish it, it won’t turn out to be the grand show he intended, but only a brief occasion of public entertainment. However, Tikhon is not dissuading Stavrogin from publicizing his pamphlet merely to spare him embarrassment; he is an authentic spiritual counselor and thus aims to turn
him toward a genuine confession. Tikhon’s advice is simple, Stavrogin must renounce his publication and overcome the pride of becoming a spectacle: “put aside these sheets of paper and your intention — then you’ll overcome everything. You’ll disgrace your own pride and your devil!” (D, 481). His next step should be to become a secret novice in obedience to a hermit. Only by hiding himself away from the eyes of the public and by surrendering his own soul into the hands of an ascetic would Stavrogin manage to overcome the desire for attention as well as break the spell of his own fascination with his own sin. Stavrogin does not heed Tikhon’s advice and soon commits suicide.

To be able to appreciate the truth of Tikhon’s words to Stavrogin, we must make a few observations about the way his confession features in the novel. *The Demons* was intended as a “pamphlet-novel,” or simply a massive feuilleton where burlesque, exaggeration, slander, humor, gossip, and documentable fact all merge into one seemingly random mesh of information. The spurious nature of the novel’s material and its clear bent toward sensationalism has caused scholars to wonder if the chronicler-narrator might have fallen under the spell of the novel’s chief “devil” Verkhovensky, or whether the narrator might be in on the demonic conspiracy to destroy the town and in fact is himself one of the novel’s demons.24 The idea that the novel itself might be part of the revolutionary scheme is suggested in the first part of the text when Lizaveta Nikolaevna decides to help the budding revolution by publishing “a very useful book,” clearly feuilletonistic in inspiration, that would collect in one volume the most interesting “facts for the whole year.” She describes her plan to Shatov, whom Verkhovensky recommended to her as a collaborator:

---

24 This is the argument of Adam Weiner in *By Authors Possessed: The Demonic Novel in Russia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 108, 117, 94–95.
Naturally, anything could be included; unusual incidents, fires, public subscriptions, all sorts of good and bad deeds, various pronouncements and speeches, perhaps reports about the flooding of rivers, even certain government decrees — but only things that characterized the period would be selected. Everything should express a particular point of view, a certain direction, a well-defined intention, an idea that illuminates the whole, the totality. Last of all, the book must be entertaining, even for casual reading, apart from its value as a reference work! It should be, so to speak, a picture of the spiritual, moral, and inner life of Russia for an entire year. (D, 135-136).

Shatov quickly recognizes the “useful” manipulative potential of the project: “In other words, something with a definite tendency, a selection of facts to support a specific tendency” (D, 136). When Lizaveta insists on complete impartiality of her feuilleton, Shatov points out that tendentiousness not only should be embraced but cannot be avoided: “There’s nothing wrong with having a tendency […] It’s impossible to avoid if there’s any selection to be made at all. The selection of facts will indicate how they are to be interpreted. It’s not at all a bad idea” (D, 136). In the end Lizaveta agrees as long as her feuilleton is a smashing success and is soon “found on everyone’s table” […] (D, 136).

It turns out that the idea to publish a massive feuilleton was not Lizaveta’s own but was suggested to her by Verkhovensky when the two met in Switzerland. Little did she suspect that by becoming a household table book, the volume was intended to replace the only traditional table book of all Russian homes, the Gospel. To displace the sacred narrative and make way for the feuilleton Verkhovensky orchestrates two “outrageous” [vozmutitel’noe] and “revolting” [bezobraznoe] acts of sacrilege. With the help of the scoundrel Lyamshin, he places a bundle of “suggestive and obscene photographs” into a bag of a book-peddler selling Gospels (D, 340). Inevitably, when the lady was taking the sacred books out of the bag, the pornographic images scattered all around the market floor, prompting laughter and indignation. The town was shocked further when the icon of the Virgin, placed in the wall of the local ancient church, was robbed of all its gifts and a mouse was found behind the broken glass. In this assault on symbols of the
religious imagination, Verkhovensky seeks to unhinge and discredit all sacred bonds and thus to make the public mind more vulnerable to its own distractive forces of fascination, which Liza’s massive feuilleton would harness and intensify.

Verkhovensky’s strategy of dismantling the town by inundating it with sensational information quickly yields results. Even the narrator of the novel, who himself stands to benefit from a curious reader, feels the need to observe that people’s criterion of what can constitute a morally acceptable spectacle seems to have dissipated. Thus he tells the story of a group of gaudy young people who, desperate for entertainment, decide to amuse themselves by going to look at a young boy’s suicide:

At once it was suggested that they go and have a look at the corpse. This proposal was approved: our ladies had never seen a suicide. I recall one of them said aloud that she was so bored by everything she couldn’t possibly be squeamish [tseremonit’sia] about any form of entertainment, as long as it was interesting [zanimatel’no] (D, 345).

At the scene of the suicide, the company’s behavior is utterly unceremonious: they make jokes, steal grapes from the dinner plate of the deceased boy, and try to pour some wine from the unfinished bottle of Château d’Yquem. Only after having seen enough [nagliadelis’i], do the debauchers leave the scene. The young people’s utter lack of sympathy or even mere disgust with the morbid sight underscores the profound potency of curiosity, which can suspend even the natural feeling of compassion. For the soul ruptured in fascination, the boundary between the contemplation of violence and the violence of contemplating quickly evaporates as imagination gets carried away in its insatiable demand for more of the violent spectacle. The narrator describes a similar phenomenon in one of the novel’s final scenes, where the crowd gathers to contemplate a massive town fire:

Spectators crowded around the fire itself, having come from all parts of town. Some helped to put it out, others stood around gazing at the sight. A large conflagration at night always produces an exciting and exhilarating impression; this explains the attraction of
fireworks. But there you have fire displayed in graceful, controlled forms and, what with the absence of danger, it creates a pleasant, playful impression, like a glass of champagne. But a real fire is something different; the horror and vague feeling of personal danger, added to the thrilling effect of a night fire, produce in the spectator (not, of course, in those whose houses have gone up in flames) a certain shock to the system and as it were a challenge to the destructive instincts which, alas, lie buried within each and every soul, even that of the meekest and most domestic civil servant...This grim sensation is almost always intoxicating. (D, 582).

The intoxicating power of fascination not only suspends the natural feeling of compassion but suspends and renders impotent an even more basic instinct of survival, that is, fear. This echoes Tikhon’s earlier reference to Aristotle’s tragic catharsis. Unlike Aristotle’s Poetics, where cathartic pleasure from the contemplation of a tragic sight carries no moral culpability, in The Demons the fearless contemplation of violence leads to the perpetration of violence. When Lizaveta shows up at the fire to have a look at the three corpses discovered in one of the burned buildings, the crowd, mistakenly believing her to be culpable in the murder, tramples her to death. Physical violence as a consequence of epistemic destruction — which is what this gossip accomplishes — is precisely Verkhovensky’s calculation: “we’ll proclaim destruction [...] we’ll spread fires...we’ll spread legends” (D, 446).

Stavrogin intended his confession to harness the forces of fascination unleashed in the novel and steal the show. However, as Tikhon predicted, his confession became just another bit of city news, while his life and his true motives remained unexplained to the reader of the pamphlet-novel. The frustrating enigmatic nature of Stavrogin’s presence in the novel, which was denied all satisfying dramatic release, was surely intended by Dostoevsky. To this end Dostoevsky comments in the notebooks to the novel: “The tone of the novel is in this [...] the character of the prince is to remain unelucidated.”25 Dostoevsky used the enigma of Stavrogin as

a continuous thread that sustains the reader’s curiosity through the mesh of the novel’s haphazard material. By the end of the novel the author is ready to dispose of Stavrogin as a curious item that has fulfilled its purpose. In the final scene, which describes Stavrogin’s suicide, the language is markedly pathetic: “Varvara Petrovna rushed up the stairs; Dasha followed her; but as soon as she entered the loft, she screamed and fell in a faint. The citizen of the canton of Uri was hanging behind a little door” [vesel tut zhe za dvertsei] (D, 756). Stavrogin is not referred to by name and the diminutive for the door (dvertsa) deliberately undercuts the severity and dignity of the image of his hanging body. Again, Dostoevsky has turned the scene into a comfortable occasion for one final moment of playfully morbid entertainment.

Ivan Karamazov and the Pineapple Compote

It might be difficult to think of Ivan Karamazov’s poem “The Grand Inquisitor” as his confession. In its dramatic power and artistic quality, the piece stands firmly on its own. However, it is essential to remember that the poem is in fact the culminating point of Ivan’s conversation with his younger brother Alyosha. In a long tirade that precedes the poem in the chapter “Rebellion,” Ivan pours out before Alyosha his grievance against God for permitting so much evil in the world. The graphic intensity of the images with which Ivan showers Alyosha is so extreme that Dostoevsky’s editors raised objections. In a letter to Liubimov on 25 May 1879, Dostoevsky felt the need to explain the excessively “distressing colors” (gustye kraski) in Ivan’s theodicy:

[…] it is not I who am speaking in distressing colors, exaggerations, and hyperboles (although there is no exaggeration concerning the reality), but a character of my novel, Ivan Karamazov. This is his language, his style, his pathos, and not mine. He is a gloomily irritable person who keeps silent about a good deal. He would not have spoken out for anything in the world if not for the accidental sympathy for his brother Aleksey that suddenly flares up. Besides, he is a very young man. How else could he speak out on
what he had kept silent for so long without this particular transport of feeling, without foaming at the mouth. He had strained his heart to the utmost so as not to break forth. But I precisely wanted his character to stand out, and that the reader notice this particular passion, this affront [naskok], this literary punctuated [literaturno obryvistyj] approach (emphasis original).

Dostoevsky here begs Liubimov not to confuse the voice of the character with that of the author. All the reasons for the graphic intensity of Ivan’s language pertain exclusively to Ivan’s character and the purpose it fulfills in the novel. Nevertheless, having thus distanced himself from Ivan, Dostoevsky goes on to defend his protagonist. Although the excessive rhetorical embellishment of Ivan’s speech might seem unwarranted, Dostoevsky believes it to be justified by the starkness of the reality that Ivan is describing. This includes the scenes of violent abuse of children that especially bothered Liubimov, in particular the episode where a general unleashes a pack of dogs that tear apart a young boy in front of his mother’s eyes, as well as a fragment that describes parents punishing their five-year-old daughter for nighttime incontinence by smearing her face with her excrement and forcing her to eat it. To Lubimov’s objection that the excessive description of children’s suffering was not only gratuitous but indecent, Dostoevsky responds by saying that exhaustiveness in the description of violent scenes is not only necessary for his artistic task but speaks to the meticulousness of Ivan’s observations and, therefore, to the intensity of his compassion:

[…] if a twenty-three-year-old notices such minor details, that means he took them to heart. It means that he turned them over in his mind, that he was an advocate of children, and no matter how heartless he is presented there later, compassion and the most sincere love of children remain in him still (30/2:45-46, emphasis original).

The “later heartlessness” that Dostoevsky refers to here is Ivan’s implicit involvement in the murder of his father. This unexpected linking of the violence in Ivan’s language in the

---

conversation with Alyosha to the murder of Feodor Pavlovich suggests that Dostoevsky saw both events as belonging within a single continuum. Hence Dostoevsky feels the need to explain the nature of Ivan’s involvement in the parricide:

This Ivan then obliquely [kosvenno] commits the crime, but not out of calculation, not because he is greedy for inheritance, but, so to speak, out of principle, in the name of an idea, with which then he was not able to cope [sovladat’]; and he gives himself up precisely because, it may be, that once, at some time, his heart, dwelling on the suffering of children, did not overlook such a seemingly insignificant circumstance (30/2:45-46).

In the final scenes of the novel, when Ivan gives himself up to the authorities as the true murderer of his father, we should see not a criminal, Dostoevsky insists, but a Sophoclean tragic figure. Blindfolded by his own obsession with truth and justice, Ivan fails to recognize that in a world where justice is impossible in principle, the resoluteness of his demand to his father could be resolved in nothing other than the execution of the “disgusting person.” It follows then from Dostoevsky’s logic that Ivan’s assault on Alyosha’s religious imagination, with its overpowering gratuitousness of violent imagery, should be seen not as a brutish desire to destroy his brother but as a consequence of Ivan losing control over his own imagination and therefore of his language.

Of course, the problem of violence in Ivan’s language cannot be dismissed merely as a result of his rhetorical overzealousness, just as his role in the murder of his father cannot be explained merely as a tragic consequence of his demand for justice. Upon his own admission, a desire for his father’s death has long lived in his heart. It helps to remember that the letter to Liubimov is Dostoevsky’s defense of his work. To justify his artistic decision and perhaps feeling genuine sympathy for his protagonist, Dostoevsky exploits the complexity of Ivan’s

---

character to emphasize one aspect of it and drastically minimize the other. Ivan’s actual portrait in the novel is far more nuanced and far less compassionate. To illuminate the often overlooked malicious tendency of Ivan’s conversation with Alyosha, it is worth taking his rhetorical strategy in the conversation with Alyosha seriously, by paying attention not so much to what Ivan is saying as to how he does so — and what effect his words are seeking to produce.

Among the first things we learn about Ivan is that he is a talented publicist. As a student putting himself through the university he was already peddling to newspaper editors ten-line reports about street incidents under the byline “Eyewitness” (BK, 20). Compiled with “intrigue and piquancy,” the articles earned Ivan a reputation of a master feuilletonist. Soon he was also publishing well-received book reviews on various specialist subjects and even became known in literary circles. Only recently, however, Ivan’s literary ambition had brought him the success he was seeking, when one of the leading newspapers published his “very unusual article” on ecclesiastical courts, a much debated topic at the time. Though Ivan had no expertise in the subject, his daring tone and “the unexpected conclusion” earned him applause among the atheists, secularists, and even clergy. Eventually, however, “some perceptive minds” concluded that the article was “simply a brazen attempt at mockery” (BK, 21).

Ivan’s dabbling in literature could be considered a minor point if it were not the case that his feuilletonistic expertise plays a crucial role in his conversation with Alyosha. What seems to begin as friendly brotherly banter quickly unravels as a masterful game of an expert feuilletonist who knows exactly how to exploit the curiosity of his listener. In fact, Ivan’s strategy of ensnaring Alyosha’s imagination begins well before the two brothers have their talk. In passing, Dostoevsky mentions the astounding fact that Ivan has now been living at his father’s house for whole three months, yet the two brothers, who have not seen each other since childhood, have
not yet spoken a word to each other. Ivan has been the one avoiding contact, leaving Alyosha in the dark as to the reason for his aloofness. At first, Alyosha thought that maybe it was due to the difference in age and in education. Then, noticing Ivan’s deep thoughtfulness, Alyosha concluded that his brother was too preoccupied “with something profound within himself” and that for this reason he simply had no time for him. Finally, Alyosha “also wondered whether the learned atheist might feel disdain [prezrenie] for him, a foolish novice. He knew for certain that his brother was an atheist” (BK, 39). What seemed to Alyosha to be Ivan’s lack of interest in him, however, was a well-thought-through tactic and when the two brothers finally meet, Ivan begins by explaining his behavior:

I’ve seen how you looked at me these last three months; there was a kind of perpetual anticipation [bezpreryvnoe ozhidanie] in your eyes, and that’s what I couldn’t bear; that’s why I avoided you. But in the end I learned to respect you; “The boy is firm in his conviction [tverdo stoit],” I said to myself. Mind you, I may laugh at it now, but I’m talking seriously. Well, you are firm in your faith, aren’t you? I like people who stand by their beliefs, whatever those beliefs are, even if they are little scallywags like you. In the end your expectant eyes [ozhidaiushi vzgliad] no longer irritated me; on the contrary, in the end I even got to like your expectant eyes […] (BK, 287).

An astute reader of Alyosha’s expectant eyes, Ivan understood precisely what in him so intrigued and bothered his little brother. It was his atheism: “Why have you been looking at me so expectantly for the past three months? To ask me, ‘Do you believe or don’t you believe at all?’ [Kako verueshi ali vovse ne verueshi?] That’s what your glances [vzgliady] of these three months have been leading up to, Aleksei Fyodorovich, haven’t they?” (BK, 209). In this double twist of irony, Ivan deliberately renders Alyosha’s silent question in Church Slavonic alluding to the ancient sacrament of ordination (hirotonia), where the question “Kako verueshi?” was expected to prompt a recitation of the creed. However, instead of being put on trial, Ivan is about to subject Alyosha, a novice, to the ultimate trial of his faith. The irony is further underscored by a marked use of Alyosha’s patronymic, a reference to Feodor Pavlovich — the embodiment and
progenitor of human fallenness in the novel. By subjecting Alyosha to the might of his atheistic position, Ivan will seek to wrestle Alyosha away from his elder, Father Zosima, and return him back to where he belongs, the quagmire of sensuality and debauchery that is the Karamazov bloodline: “You’re very dear to me, and I don’t want to lose you and I shall not let your Zosima take possession of you” (BK, 305).

The conversation, however, does not begin with the expected syllogistic unraveling of Ivan’s atheistic position. On the contrary, Ivan stumps Alyosha by declaring that perhaps he too believes in God: “Yesterday at dinner at the old man’s I said that [that there was no God] deliberately to provoke you [draznil], and I could see your eyes flashing […] Now, try to imagine that I too, perhaps, accept God […] You didn’t expect that, did you, eh?” (BK, 293). “Perhaps” is the key word here. Ivan does not believe in God and postulates God’s existence only in the spirit of Voltaire, of whose famous blasphemous dictum Ivan takes care to remind Alyosha: “If there were no God he would have to be invented.”28 Ivan invents God opportunistically, to make possible the strategy of his confession to Alyosha: “I have to explain to you as quickly as possible what is the essential me, that is, what sort of person I am, what I believe in and what I hope for […] And so I declare that I accept God purely and simply” (BK, 294). Now that God’s existence has been posited, Ivan can proceed to reject God’s world: “In the final analysis I reject this God-created universe, and although I know it exists, I reject it out of hand. It is not God that I don’t accept — understand that — it’s His creation, His world that I reject and that I cannot agree to accept” (BK, 295).

Ivan expresses his position in the most succinct way and stops in anticipation as if at the top of a hill. Part of him hopes that Alyosha will not push him to say more, while another part

---

cannot wait to plunge down the hill into the abyss of his own imagination. Sure enough, Alyosha cannot withstand the force of his own curiosity and opens Pandora's box: “Are you going to explain to me why you do not accept the world?” With a degree of genuine sadness, yet with irresistible excitement, Ivan agrees to say more. But he feels the need to start off with an apology for what he is about to do to Alyosha: “My little brother, I don’t want to corrupt you or undermine your faith; perhaps I want to redeem myself through you, Ivan smiled suddenly just like a shy little boy. Alyosha had never seen him smile like that before” [BK, 296]. Ivan feels guilty for what he is doing to Alyosha, yet is incapable of stopping himself. This is that inability of Ivan to control himself that Dostoevsky identifies in the letter to Liubimov as the reason that leads to the novel’s tragedy. Like the dreamer in *White Nights* who cannot stop from inundating Nastenka’s imagination with his disembodied visions, Ivan cannot restrain himself from exposing Alyosha to a collection of his graphic violent images.

Ivan opens his expanded confession with a seemingly ordinary phrase, which reveals how he reads a text. It is not a minor point, given that Dostoevsky underscores it a number of times: “I read something somewhere [chital vot kak-to i gde-to] about a certain saint” (BK, 296). Ivan is a voracious reader but he is also a highly eclectic and patchy reader. This reading habit is part of his professional hazard, for a feuilletonist reads with an eye always open for the most sumptuous image that could possibly be scraped up from its context and later effectively used in a feuilleton. A perfect image allows the feuilletonist to secure the readers’ attention immediately, while a stream of such handpicked images allows the author to sustain and intensify the duration of the reader’s fascination. With this in mind, Ivan goes straight to the point. His collection of images is not going to deal with suffering in general but with the most unjust and therefore the most irresistible suffering of children: “I wanted to start by talking about the suffering of mankind in
general, but instead we’d better stick to the suffering of children. That will reduce the scale of my argument tenfold, so it will be better to stick to children […] Do you love little children [detok], Alyosha?” (BK, 297-298). As images of suffering children begin to flow, Ivan is worked into a frenzy. Alarmed by his brother’s emotional state, Alyosha expresses concern “You’re talking strangely […] as if you were in the grip of some madness” (BK, 298). But Ivan, “as if he had not heard his brother,” storms ahead:

These Turks, incidentally, took a sadistic pleasure in torturing children, starting with cutting them out of their mothers’ wombs with a dagger, and going so far as to throw babes-in-arms into the air and impale them on the points of their bayonets before their mothers’ very eyes. Doing it before the mothers’ eyes was what gave it particular piquancy [glavmuuii sladost’]. But here is a little image [kartinka] that that has especially fascinated me; Picture the scene [predstav’]; an infant in the arms of its trembling mother, surrounded by Turks. They have thought up an amusing thing [veselaia shtuchka]: they caress the child, laugh to make it laugh; they succeed, the child laughs. At just that moment a Turk aims his pistol at the child, six inches from its face. The child chuckles gleefully, holds out its little hands to grab the pistol, and suddenly the evil joker discharges the pistol full in its face and blows its little head to pieces…Artistic, isn’t it? [Khudozhestvenno, ne pravda li?] By the way, they say Turks have a very sweet tooth (BK, 299).

Although the exquisite detail with which Ivan describes the scene betrays his own admiration for the artistic quality of Turks’ sadism, he is not here merely lost in the frenzy of his own fascination. With the alertness of an expert seducer, Ivan is controlling the effect his image ought to exert on Alyosha’s imagination. He carefully guides Alyosha’s concentration [“Picture the scene!” predstav ’]. Ivan’s tactic here resembles that of the underground man in the first conversation with Liza, who similarly forces Liza’s perception to dwell on the image by gradually yet speedily intensifying it with one new graphic detail after another. The ironic reference at the end of the fragment to the Turkish penchant for confection is meant to illuminate the exquisite sweetness [sladost’] that eventually tranquillizes the mind, so it no longer winces from the contemplation of gruesome violence. This theme will reemerge at the end of the novel.
Meanwhile, Ivan’s playfulness with the morbid image for a brief second disturbs Alyosha, who interrupts him with a question: “Ivan, what’s the point of all this?” Ivan takes a pause from his image-mongering, but not so much to answer Alyosha’s question as to reveal how he has arrived at his way of “arguing”:

You want to know what point I’m making, do you? You see, I’m a collector of certain little facts [sobiratel’ nekotorykh faktikov] that appeal to me, and, would you believe it, I note down and save peculiar little anecdotes [anekdotiki] from newspapers and stories, wherever I find them, and I already have a good collection. The Turks of course feature in the collection, but they’re all foreigners. I have some little things from this part of the world too [rodnye shtuchki], and they’re even better than the Turkish ones (BK, 299).

Here is another description of how a feuilletonist reads. He scavenges for the most shocking, scandalous, and entertaining information. Ivan’s constant use of diminutives, as in “little facts” [faktiki], “little anecdotes” [anekdotiki], and “little things” [shtuchki], not only seeks to downplay the moral significance of his malicious practice by imbuing it with triviality, but also demonstrates Ivan’s ultimate distrust of his own publicistic practice. Nevertheless, Ivan’s journalistic background continues to saturate his theodicean tirade. He recalls a French pamphlet in his collection:

I have one delightful little pamphlet [prelestnaia broshurka] translated from French, which describes the execution in Geneva, as recently as five years ago, of a criminal, a murderer […] That pamphlet was translated into Russian by some aristocratic Russian Lutheran philanthropists and was distributed free with newspapers and other publications for the edification of the Russian people. The reason why the Richard thing [shtuka s Risharom] is so good [khorosha] that it’s typical of that country (BK, 300).

The mentioning of the Lutheran philanthropist, who exploits the emotional potential of an execution scene in order to manipulate parishioners into donating money to the church, is both another ironic sneer at everything religious, and Ivan’s subtle justification of his own practice. As entertaining as the “the Richard thing” might be, however, Ivan insists that Russians have plenty of their own “edifying” material. Take for example a fragment from Nekrasov’s poem
where a peasant lashes a defenseless old horse on her weeping “gentle eyes.” Ivan goes on to reproduce for Alyosha in embellished prose the fragment from Nekrasov’s cycle of poems “O pogode” [“About the Weather”] published in the literary journal Sovremennik as a series of “street impressions” [ulichnye vpechatleniiia] by a flâneur made on his morning walks. The lashing of the horse reminds Ivan of another story in his collection, one about the lashing of a little girl: “An educated, cultured couple beat their own daughter with a birch, a little girl of seven — I took detailed notes of this” (BK, 302). The retelling of this story of child abuse returns Ivan to his frenzied state — and more pictures from his collection begin springing into his mind: “Pretty little pictures [kartinki prelestnye], aren’t they? …But I have even better ones of children, I’ve lots more of Russian children, Alyosha” (BK, 303). Eventually the gratuitous violence of Ivan’s images begins to overwhelm Alyosha and Ivan offers to stop: “I’m making you suffer, Alyosha, you seem distressed. I’ll stop if you like.” Alyosha, perhaps out of honesty but also out of horror and fear of cowardice, refuses to extricate himself from Ivan’s playful despair: “It is all right. I’m happy to suffer too” (BK, 304).

Ivan cannot resist sharing with Alyosha one final picture: “Just one more example, just for curiosity’s sake [iz liubopystva]. It’s very typical. I just read about it in some antiquarian collection, The Archive or Ancient Times, I forget which; I’ll have to check” (BK, 304). This final picture, which Ivan extracted somewhere in the annals of Medieval history, tells another story of public execution. A general unleashes a pack of borzoi hounds to devour an eight-year-old serf boy before his mother’s eyes for hurting his dog’s paw with a stone: “Before his mother’s very eyes, the child was hunted down and torn to pieces by the dogs! Well…what should they have done with him? Shoot him? Should he have been shot to gratify our moral

outrage?” “Yes, shoot him!” Alyosha mutters in response. This response exhilarates Ivan: “Bravo! [...] If you say that, it means...What a fine monk you are! So there’s a proper little demon residing in your heart after all, Alyoshka Karamazov!” (BK, 305). Ivan revels in the success of his seduction. The marked use of Alyosha’s last name seals the fact that no matter what new name Alyosha might take at tonsure, he fundamentally remains a Karamazov.

Ivan’s motivation for ruthlessly exploiting Alyosha’s curiosity is not simple to understand. On one level he has done it out of sheer pleasure. Zosima has pointed out to Ivan the peculiar tendency of his soul to cynically abandon itself to intellectual amusement for the sake of distraction:

The martyr too may sometimes entertain himself [забавляется] with his despair [отчаянием], out of desperation you understand. As things stand, you also out of despair entertain yourself [забавляетесь] with your journal articles and discussions at social gatherings; having lost faith in your own dialectics, you have turned at heart into bitter cynic… (BK, 89).

There is, however, also a deeper purpose behind Ivan’s seduction of Alyosha. By forcing Alyosha to dwell on one violent image after another, Ivan seeks to engender in his soul the same vicious cycle of self-entertaining despair, which has been raging in his own. In this fatal enchantment by violence, Alyosha is to experience the hopelessness of the human condition, its inescapable Karamazovism. As the narrator of Notes from the House of the Dead discovers, it is precisely in the natural attunement of the soul to violence that the true depravity of the human condition manifests itself, as the irresistible and tranquillizing sweetness of contemplation:

“Blood and power intoxicate, coarseness and debauchery follow, the most abnormal phenomena begin to appeal to the mind and feelings, become sweet [сладки] to them.”[^30] It is to this sweetness

that Ivan alludes to when he mentions Turks’ liking for confections and for sadistic scenes. Later in the novel Liza Khokhlakova speaks of the same experience of sweetness when she confesses to Alyosha that she frequently dreams of crucifying a little child and then enjoying looking at his suffering: “He’s hanging there, — groaning, and I’m sitting opposite enjoying some pineapple compote” (BK, 733). Robert Louis Jackson points out that this experience of sweetness in the contemplation of gruesomeness in Dostoevsky should not be interpreted as an aberration of human experience but as the quintessence of the “natural” state; this is a Dostoevskian rendition of Terence’s dictum: “Homo sum et nihil humanum.”31 For Ivan, however, the despair of the human is not merely true of every person, it is the final truth about humanity. In a world where the human is ultimately flawed, literature can be significant only as perpetuation of despair. And the feuilleton, in its direct and unabashed catering to human curiosity, is the most obvious manifestation of truth about all literature.

The conversation between Ivan and Alyosha does not end with the suffering of little children. Alyosha suddenly recalls the One who “can forgive everyone for everything, because He Himself shed His innocent blood for everyone and for everything” (BK, 308). The fact that Alyosha remembered his Christ so late in the game surprises Ivan, because he is used to “this card being played first in any argument.” To trump Alyosha’s card Ivan now must include in his outburst one final image, his own rendition of Pontius Pilate’s Ecce Homo:

I wrote a kind of a poem […] if you can bear with me for a little longer, I’ll let you hear it. In all my life I’ve never written so much as two verses. But I dreamed up this tale and I can still remember it. I dreamed it up in a moment of inspiration. You’ll be my first reader, that is, my first listener. Why indeed should an author neglect a single listener? (BK, 309).

31 Ibid., 45.
The poem of “The Grand Inquisitor” concludes Ivan’s literary sequence. Ivan’s intentionally renders Christ speechless before the grandiloquence of the inquisitor. Paradoxically, however, it is in Christ’s silence that Alyosha discovers a source of resistance against Ivan’s literariness. “Your poem is in praise of Jesus, not in disparagement…as you claim,” while “Your inquisitor is only an empty fantasy” (BK, 326). For Alyosha (and Dostoevsky), against Ivan’s own intention, Christ’s silence denies ultimate validity and authority to the reality born of language and imagination. Curiosity and despair are all too human but they are not the final truth about humanity.

**Conclusion**

The examples of the underground man, Stavrogin and Ivan Karamazov are by no means the only possible illustrations of a feuilletonistic confession in Dostoevsky. A similar observation could be made virtually of every confessional encounter in Dostoevsky’s novels. Therefore, to attribute the feuilletonistic rapaciousness of confession to the exclusive vileness of individual protagonists would be to miss the seriousness of the problem that Dostoevsky identifies. In the inherent tendency of all truth telling toward feuilletonistic expression Dostoevsky discerns the tragedy of the epistemic realm, wherein perception’s fundamental givenness to fascination not only perpetuates distortion but turns all communication into an unending circle of violence.

Dostoevsky’s reflection on the epistemological significance of the feuilleton evolves gradually through the author’s entire oeuvre. Already in his early novel *The Double* Dostoevsky diagnoses the tendency of self-perception to prey on the instability of consciousness by arranging its fragmentation into an infinitely distracting and mocking flow of self-apparitions. In *Notes from Underground* the feuilletonistic tendency of self-perception is linked with the problem of
communication, where the mind’s tendency to prey on itself breaks out as an effort to control the mind of the other. Reality as feuilletonistic quagmire constitutes the epistemological ground of Dostoevsky’s poetics. In *The Demons* we see this reality unfold on an apocalyptic scale with Stavrogin playing the role of the universal seducer. In *The Brothers Karamazov* the feuilletonistic seduction transpires in the midst of a brotherly encounter, a bond most sacred to Dostoevsky. As we witness Ivan prove to be a Cain to his brother Abel, we are referred by Dostoevsky to the biblical account of the fall. The postlapsarian world has now been defined by Dostoevsky as utterly fallen into perpetual feuilletonistic distraction.

Dostoevsky’s condemnation of the feuilleton as the quintessence of seduction and manipulation raises important question about the relevance of this medium for his poetics. After all, Bakhtin justifiably identifies in the Dostoevskian novel strong features of feuilletonistic fragmentation. In fact, the final Dostoevskian novels are explicitly written as massive pamphlet-novels. However, to identify a feuilletonistic tendency and attribute to it a positive, constructive purpose are two different matters. In a study of *A Writer’s Diary*, the collected motley of Dostoevsky’s short works written for journal publication, Gary Saul Morson has offered a middle-ground solution by arguing that Dostoevsky is drawn to the feuilleton not so much for the promise of harmony but because he finds in the decomposing nature of the feuilleton freedom to experiment with artistic possibilities. “Suspicious of art, he explores its frontiers” by attempting to tell “a coherent story” about the unreliability of language and narrative.\(^{32}\) The underlining assumption of Morson’s argument, however, is that Dostoevsky’s interest in the feuilleton, similar to his interest in literature more broadly, is formalistic in nature. When considered epistemologically, however, the Dostoevskian pamphlet-novel does not so much seek to explore

the “utopian” potential of genre but, in the words of Robert Lord, paints “a gigantic canvas of ontological fragmentation, the diagnosis of a widespread disease for which there seemed to be no cure.”

Dostoevsky’s poetics is not the poetics of *decomposition* but the poetics of *renunciation*. Even if, as Morson argues, Dostoevsky subjects his reader to the “hermeneutic of perplexity,” this is not the goal in itself but an effort to bring the reader to the realization that hope lies beyond the objectifying needs of perception, in the transcendence of silent contemplation.

---

Chapter Two: Shattering the Mirror

In the first chapter, I surveyed the evolution of Dostoevsky’s pessimism as regards the epistemic realm. Since he understands the human mind and soul to be fundamentally given to fascination, all relationship to reality for Dostoevsky is mediated and therefore defined by the tendency of consciousness to inundate itself with a constant flow of visual stimuli. Hence all communication in Dostoevsky, including self-communication, has a tendency to pour out, not as objective truth about the self but as a feuilletonistic reel of infinitely fragmented graphic images intended to distract and overwhelm the spectator. In this feuilletonistic nature of perception Dostoevsky discovers two basic truths about ourselves. First, our fundamental mode of relating to the world is visual. Even the highly rationalistic arguments of Ivan Karamazov must in the end be communicated by means of pictures [kartinki]. Second, despite being visual creatures, our ability to adequately account for reality through images is deeply flawed. Every image that our imagination conjures up is already a distortion and a caricature. It is this constant even if unconscious awareness of being trapped inside a phantasmagoric reality that explains why most instances of communication in Dostoevsky are desperately ironic. The Dostoevskian underground characters, who turn their feuilletonistic consciousness into a spiteful attack on the world, are not in themselves a reason for the perception’s proclivity for visual distraction, but only exacerbate this condition. Thus we come to the core question of Dostoevsky’s poetics: what is so wrong with imagination that it cannot directly perceive reality as objectively present before the eyes, without turning it into a flow of distorted visual fragments? In this chapter I propose an answer to this question by analyzing The Idiot, the novel in which Dostoevsky tackles the problem of aesthetic vision most directly.
Unlike any of the other Dostoevskian novels, *The Idiot* is strikingly visual, featuring pictures and descriptive stories as crucial elements of the narrative. The tendency of the scholarship on *The Idiot* therefore has been to focus on the significance of these specific images, especially of Holbein’s painting *Dead Christ*. Despite their importance, however, the images in themselves do not constitute Dostoevsky’s main interest. Instead, his interest is *aesthetic perception*. Analyzing the act of contemplating a concrete image allows Dostoevsky access to the heart of *mimesis*, the process of mental representation by means of which the mind conjures up an image. In the end there is only one kind of image that has absolute value for Dostoevsky. It is the face of the other. Hence the central image in Part I is a photo-portrait of the heroine Nastasya Filippovna, through which Dostoevsky raises his main problem — the aestheticization of the personal encounter. When by the end of Part I the problem of aesthetic vision becomes more complex, Dostoevsky moves from the photograph to Holbein’s painting, which not only allows for a more expansive study of mimesis but, significantly for Dostoevsky, places the entire problem in its theological context.

It is my argument in this chapter that in *The Idiot* Dostoevsky offers a dramatization of the mimetic process, seeking to expose its tragic potential for a personal encounter. In the tendency of vision to find a suffering face irresistible, Dostoevsky uncovers the most devastating form of aesthetic fascination. He insists that in compassion, the erotic desire to insulate the mystical reality of the other in the image immediately and objectively present before the eyes is just as reductive as it is in the devouring appetite of lust. In the novel the dark aesthetic dialectic

---

between compassion and possession is explored through a relationship between two key characters, Prince Myshkin and Porfyon Rogozhin, doubles who struggle with each other over access to the object of their obsession, Nastasya Filippovna. As the third element of the core mimetic triangle that structures the novel, Nastasya Filippovna’s life is presented as a trajectory of gradual aestheticization. In the final scene, therefore, where we find Nastasya Filippovna reduced to a lifeless image, we do not merely have a culmination of the plot, which is entirely of secondary significance in the novel, but a tragic culmination of aesthetic vision triumphant in its desire to possess the object of its perception.

The structure of my argument is threefold. In the first part I analyze the monologue of Ippolit Terentyev, by means of which Dostoevsky introduces into the novel his most theoretical critique of aesthetic vision. Ippolit’s monologue culminates with a scrutiny of Holbein’s painting, thus providing the novel with a theoretical base through which to understand the problem of mimesis. In the second part I analyze the evolution of Myshkin’s compassionate gaze by arguing that the perception with which Myshkin looks at Nastasya Filippovna is thoroughly mimetic. In the third part I analyze the aesthetic bond, a mimetic flow of images, that links Myshkin’s compassionate gaze with the lustful gaze of Rogozhin. My argument is that Rogozhin’s lustful perception is an expression of the same desire that animates Myshkin’s compassion.

**Holbein’s Dead Christ**

It is fitting to anticipate Ippolit’s analysis of the Holbein’s painting with a brief revisiting of Plato’s argument against mimesis in *The Republic*, for Dostoevsky brings Ippolit into the novel to make essentially Plato’s case. In Book X of *The Republic* Plato condemns the artist for
representing in his paintings “not what is, as it is” — that is, the truth — but only “what appears [to phainomenon], as it appears.”² The painting is “an imitation of a phantom [phantasmatos]” and not the imitation of truth (598b), where the artist has captured “only a small bit [smikron ti]” of his subject, “a mere image [eidolon]” (598b). Twice removed from the realm of truth, the painting captures truth only partially and therefore, as far as Plato is concerned, does not capture the truth at all. However, the failure of the image to capture the full truth is not the main point of Plato’s critique. He is far more concerned with the fact that the image still captures something — it captures the untruth. The eidolon [mere image], from which we derive our word “idolatry,” is not merely some botched form that could be stored away in the scrapyard of the imagination but a vehicle of idolatrous reality, wherein the untruth of the imagination can be lived as truth. In Dostoevsky, the Platonic idea that by means of imagination nothingness gains a body and thus becomes a kind of something constitutes the essence of the demonic, a plague that infects all Dostoevskian nihilists. It is wrong therefore to dismiss demonic possession in Dostoevsky as merely an exotic ailment of such mentally overexerted characters as Stavrogin or Ivan Karamazov. These characters only make acutely obvious the demonic essence of all aesthetic existence. Even suicide, which is often the end of the Dostoevskian demoniac, cannot be dismissed as merely a peculiar kind of tragedy. As Ippolit argues in The Idiot, suicide is a moral stance, a dramatic refusal to be continuously annihilated and humiliated by the terror of having to live a life that is only an appearance.

The annihilating power of aesthetic vision in The Idiot is epitomized for the reader in a painting by the sixteenth century Swiss artist, Holbein the Younger, The Dead Christ. Dostoevsky saw the painting in Basel in August of 1867, while already working on the first part

of the novel. Though we do not have a firsthand account of Dostoevsky’s thoughts on the painting, we know that the image had such an important effect on him that a few months later he was seeking a way to incorporate it into the novel.\(^3\) It emerges in chapter four of the second part, where a full size copy of the painting hangs above the door of a guestroom in Rogozhin’s house. Upon his visit to Rogozhin, Myshkin sees the picture and immediately recognizes it as “an excellent copy” of the painting he once saw in Basel. The picture disturbs him. When Rogozhin provocatively confesses that looking at the picture gives him pleasure, Myshkin responds in shock: “At this painting! Really, looking at this picture a person might lose his faith.”\(^4\)

The gruesomely disturbing image offers an unsparring portrayal of Christ’s body in the grip of \textit{rigor mortis}. On the brink of decomposition, a life-size cadaver stretches before the eyes of the viewer inside the narrow, perfectly rectangular chamber of a tomb. The cold severity of the stone, veiled with a thin layer of white shroud, disinterestedly yet firmly holds the dead body. For the utmost realistic effect Holbein modeled the corpse after the body of a drowned man pulled out of the Rhine. With scientific exactness he transferred every detail: the head gruesomely twisted backwards, the mouth breathlessly gaping and half-opened eyes glistening with lifeless, glassy shine. The reference to Christ is made unmistakably obvious with the large spear and nail wounds. Whether Holbein intended the painting as a predella for an altarpiece or to be displayed by itself, there can be no doubt that its shocking and repulsive realism was deliberate.\(^5\)

---

3 I find highly misleading the practice of attributing to Dostoevsky the thoughts about the painting that belong to his wife, Anna Grigorievna. For a discussion of Anna Grigorievna’s reminiscences about the Basel trip see Joseph Frank’s \textit{Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 221.


In what is the novel’s single most important monologue, Ippolit Terentyev — an eighteen-year-old nihilist dying from consumption — wrestles with the painting’s meaning. He discerns that the image brings together the problem of Christology and the problem of aesthetic contemplation and posits them as essentially one problem: “Christ suffered not figuratively [ne obrazno] but in a real way…His body on the cross, therefore, was subjected absolutely to the law of nature. How could [kakim obrazom] one believe, looking at such a corpse, that this sufferer would be resurrected?” (408-09). Robert Louis Jackson has pointed out the literal significance of Ippolit’s rhetorical question: kakim obrazom [by means of what image] one can continue believing, when confronted with Holbein’s depiction of Christ’s decomposing body.\(^6\) The mimetic vision of the painter could only reproduce what is immediately present before the eyes, the obvious truth of a dead body. Can the eyes of faith transcend the obvious? Is there seeing that in its very act of looking inaugurates the reality of resurrection, or is the spectator condemned to the aesthetic reality of the decomposing body? Though rhetorical in nature, Ippolit’s question captures the crucial distinction between religious and aesthetic contemplation, a distinction without which the purpose of the novel is impossible to grasp. It emerges from Ippolit’s question that the transcendent vision of faith is not merely the highest form of aesthetic contemplation, not even merely an alternative to aesthetic vision, but radically dissimilar to it. For the purpose of religious vision is precisely to overcome the mimetic law of aesthetic contemplation and thus liberate the soul from the dictate of the immediate and the obvious. Ippolit will conclude, however, that since the religious vision fails to deliver transcendence, all reality is condemned to aesthetic mediation.

---


A peripheral character in the novel’s plot, Ippolit is a device, added late to the novel’s plan, by means of which Dostoevsky intervenes into the flow of the narrative to give it a definitive trajectory. In a study of the novel’s structure Robin F. Miller observed that Ippolit enters the novel at the moment when Myshkin’s ability to hold the narrative together almost entirely dissipates. If in parts I and II Myshkin occupies the dominant position, with narratives either by or about him, in part III he is no longer a source of unified vision, while his noble intentions increasingly bring disastrous results. A knight in shining armor in the first part, in the third Myshkin is rapidly losing his confidence:

You must take what I say even now as coming from a sick man […] There are certain ideas, there are certain lofty ideas, about which I must not begin to talk, because I should certainly make everyone laugh […] My gestures are not appropriate; I have no sense of measure; my words don’t correspond with my thoughts, but only degrade them (342-43).

The disintegration of Myshkin’s role in the novel echoes the decomposition of Christ’s body in Holbein’s painting. Making explicit this implied connection between Myshkin and the painting is one purpose that Ippolit fulfills in the novel.

It is impossible to appreciate the full gravity of Ippolit’s case against Myshkin without making a few observations about Schiller, with whose aesthetic philosophy Ippolit is indirectly polemicizing. Schiller’s silent presence in the novel becomes evident with the theme of nature, which enters the narrative in Part II when Dostoevsky relocates the action of the novel from the filthy streets of St. Petersburg to the garden alleys of Pavlovsk. This change of scenery is by no means trivial. In the novel, the Pavlovsk park plays the role of a pseudo-ideal realm. Here in the

---

7 Miller, Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator and Reader, 200-201.
shadows of neatly planted pine trees gently enveloping the perfect forms of Greek statues, the
soul of a weary city dweller was expected to find rest and moral transformation through aesthetic
experience. In his essay “Naive and Sentimental Poetry” Schiller explains the moral
significance of the aesthetic emersion in an ideal landscape:

But when you are consoled at the lost happiness of nature then let her perfection be your
heart’s example. If you march out toward her from your artificial environment she will
stand before you in her great calm, in her naive beauty, in her childlike innocence and
simplicity—then linger at this image, cultivate this emotion; this is worthy of your
sublimest humanity […] Let her surround you like an enchanting idyll in which you can
always find yourself safe from the waywardness of art, and in which you accumulate
courage and new confidence for the race, and which lights anew in your heart the flame
of the ideal which is so easily extinguished in the storms of life.

Schiller here summarizes the ideological assumptions that underlie such Romantic projects as the
Pavlovsk park or Goethe’s Ilmpark in Weimar. The purpose of an aesthetically restored Garden
of Eden was to afford the soul a possibility to linger in contemplation of nature’s “great calm and
naive beauty” and thus return it to emotional childlike innocence, the state of sublime humanity.
The underlining assumption of Schiller’s aesthetic philosophy is that direct contemplation of a
perfectly beautiful image of nature has the ability to morally transform a person.

Fundamental to Schiller’s trust in the aesthetic experience is his belief in the ultimate
goodness of nature, to which the soul can safely entrust itself in “free contemplation.” He says,

But no sooner has free contemplation set him at a distance from the blind assault of
natural forces—no sooner does he discover in the flood of appearances something
abiding in his own being—then the savage bulk of nature about him begins to speak quite

9 In a piece “The Land and the children” in The Writer’s Diary for 1876 Dostoevsky summarizes the French
obsession with the Romantic garden in a mocking formula: “In the garden humanity will be rejuvenated and the
garden will straighten it out — here is the formula!” [Chelovechestvo v Sadu obnovitsia i Sadom vypryamitsia —
10 Friedrich Schiller, “Naive and Sentimental Poetry” in Two Essays, trans. by Julius A. Elias (New York: Frederick
11 For more on the Romantic Garden, especially as the problems pertains to the gardens of St. Petersburg, see
Dmitry S. Likhachev, “Sady Romantizma” in Poeziia sadov: k semantike sadovo-parkovykh stilei (Leningrad:
Nauka, 1982), 189-300.
another language to his heart; and the relative grandeur outside him is the mirror in which he perceives the absolute grandeur within himself. Fearlessly and with a terrible delight he now approaches these ghastly visions of his imagination and deliberately deploys the whole force of this faculty in order to represent the sensuously infinite, so that even if it should fail in this attempt he will experience all the more vividly the superiority of his ideas over the highest of which sensuousness is capable.  

As if into a mirror, the man should peer into the idyllic landscape of nature, where in “the flood of appearances” induced by nature, his imagination won’t fail to recognize the truth about itself. The tranquilizing equilibrium will abate the wild “ghastly visions” tormenting the mind and perfect form, in fact beauty itself, will descend into his soul. For beauty is nothing other than “the work of free contemplation.” Here Schiller’s celebration of nature breaks out into a hymn: “The insect swarms with joyous life in the sunbeam; and it is assuredly not the cry of desire, which we hear in the melodious warbling of the song-bird. Undeniably there is freedom in these movements” (AE, 133). It is worth remembering this joyously swarming insect, for it will continue to bother both Ippolit and Myshkin and will appear in the final scene, joyously buzzing over the dead body of Nastasya Filippovna.

In his attack on the naturalism of Schiller’s aesthetics, Ippolit is not so much concerned with Schiller as with Myshkin, whose intimate relationship with the Pavlovsk park catches Ippolit’s eye. It was Myshkin who insisted that Ippolit come to Pavlovsk and allow the trees to alleviate his “agitations” and “bad dreams” (387). When Ippolit observed that such trust in nature’s healing powers made Myshkin sound like a materialist, Myshkin with characteristic straightforwardness admitted that he had always been a materialist. Of course, Myshkin is not a materialist in any ideological sense. His obsessive love of the material world is explained both by

---


his inability to fully inhabit the physical world and by his naively idealistic understanding of what constitutes natural reality. It is the illusion of a naturally perfect realm that makes the Pavlovsk park so attractive to Myshkin. Conveniently located on the brink of the park, his summer residence allows him to escape into the wooded alleys as soon as his ability to deal with unseemly reality becomes unbearable:

The prince was very glad to be left alone at last; he went down from the terrace, crossed the road, and entered the park […] he suddenly wanted terribly to leave all this here and go back where he came from, to some far-off, forsaken place, to go at once and even without saying good-bye to anyone. He had the feeling that if he remained here just a few more days, he would certainly be drawn into this world irretrievably, and this world would henceforth be his lot (306-307).

Beginning as an idyllic escape from reality, for Myshkin the park turns into a place of temptation and desperate struggle, making painfully obvious his inability to reconcile the ideal and the real. By way of contrasting Myshkin’s Romantic antecedence, Dostoevsky here evokes Christ’s agony in the garden of Gethsemane, where on the eve of the crucifixion, in an all-night vigil, Christ victoriously battles the temptation to refuse the cup of suffering.¹⁴ In The Gospel of John this synoptic tradition of Christ rejecting deliverance from suffering, is underscored as the point where Christ conclusively accepts His salvific mission of death and resurrection.¹⁵ Unlike Christ, who, through resurrection, steps into reality as a victor conquering the disintegrating force of nature through resurrection, Myshkin returns to reality out of helplessness and desperation. He decides that “to flee was ‘impossible,’ that it would be almost pusillanimous, that such tasks stood before him that he now did not even have any right not to resolve them, or at least not to give all his strength to their resolution […] He was utterly unhappy at that moment” (307). As

Myshkin’s impotence to effect change in the real world becomes more and more pronounced, the Holbeinian essence of his Christlikeness grows more obvious.

The Johannine background of Myshkin’s agony in the park is worth expanding a bit further, for it forms the backdrop against which the ultimate meaning of the novel must be understood. A subtle reader of biblical literature, Dostoevsky here picks up on the theological significance of the garden motif in the drama of Christ’s passion. John underscores the fact that after the agonizing prayer in the garden, where Christ resolves to drink the cup of suffering (18:1-11), he is taken by the soldiers in the same garden, tried and soon crucified near another garden, where later his body is buried in a tomb (19:41). The garden motif culminates in the resurrection scene where Mary Magdalene, the prototype of Nastasya Filippovna in the novel, the first of the living, sees the resurrected Christ and at first mistakes him for a gardener (20:15). This reference to Mary’s encounter with the resurrected Christ will have a more explicit significance later in the chapter. It suffices here to point out that by describing Christ as the gardener, John presents him as the one who through his resurrection restores the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden. Magdalene’s role in this scene is highly symbolic. She is Eve, who on behalf of the fallen human race recognizes in the resurrected Christ the restoration of the universe. Like the Johannine Magdalene, Dostoevsky’s Nastasya Filippovna is not merely an individual character, whose significance in the novel is limited to her role in the narrative. Her role is highly symbolic, as captured in the meaning of her full name Anastasia, anastasis [resurrection]. The antithesis to Magdalene, who witnesses the resurrection, Nastasya Filippovna

is the one futilely *awaiting the resurrection* for all of humanity. Myshkin’s inability to save her is his ultimate failure to incarnate into human reality as it is and transform it. The full poignancy of the final scene, where a helpless Myshkin is sitting next to the corpse of his Magdalene, will be entirely lost on the reader if its Johannine background is not kept in perspective.

Let us now return to Pavlovsk, where Ippolit is waging a crusade against both Schiller and Myshkin. Ippolit marks his first appearance with an assault on the Pavlovsk residents’ aesthetic sensibilities. On a night when Myshkin is hosting guests on the veranda of his summer house, Ippolit storms in with a group of gaudy hooligans who come to extort money from Myshkin. The scandal outrages Lizaveta Prokofievna, the materfamilias of the Epanchin family. As she desperately tries to restore social decorum, Ippolit decides to unsettle it even further by uncouthly announcing that he is terminally ill and that he is glad to be able to die contemplating the Pavlovsk trees:

Think of it, today I’m outside and with people for the last time, and in two weeks I’ll probably be under the ground. So this will be a sort of farewell both to people and to nature. Though I’m not very sentimental, you can imagine how glad I am that it all happened here in Pavlovsk; at least you can look at a tree in leaf (286-287).

Ippolit’s sarcasm remains unnoticed as everyone is overcome with sympathy towards the dying young man. A few moments later, however, Ippolit resumes his assault on the social gathering with a defense of Bur dovsky, the young man on whose behalf the group has come to extort money from Myshkin. Ippolit says,

You all hate Bur dovsky, because in your opinion his attitude towards his mother is not beautiful [nekrasivo] and graceful [neiziaschchno] […] And you’re all terribly fond of the beauty [krasivost’] and gracefulness of forms [iziaschestvo form], you stand on that alone, isn’t it so? (I’ve long suspected it was on that alone!) Well, know, then, that maybe not one of you has loved his mother as Bur dovsky has […] I’ll bet that Bur dovsky himself will now accuse you of indelicacy of form [nedelikatnosti form] (297).
Three adjectives “neizishchno,” “nekrasivo,” and “nedelikatno” are all variations on the idea of beauty. However, the word for beauty that Ippolit uses here is not the regular “krasota” but a demeaning derivative “krasivost” [beautifulness], which underscores the ridiculousness and superficiality of aesthetic beauty and thus exposes the life that relies solely on aesthetic vision [izishchestvo form] as utterly bankrupt.

Ippolit proceeds with a direct attack on the essential premise of Schiller’s philosophy — the benevolent picturesqueness of nature. Despite the blissful illusion created by the beautiful landscapes of the Pavlovsk park, nature, in Ippolit’s opinion, is a destructive force, and the moments of its idyllic calm only exacerbate its ultimate annihilating essence:

Yes, nature is given to mockery! Why does she create the best beings only so as to mock them afterwards? Didn’t she make it so that the single being on earth who has been acknowledged as perfect…didn’t she make it so that, having shown him to people, she destined him to say things that have caused so much blood to be shed, that if it had been shed all at once, people would probably have drowned in it! Oh, it’s good that I’m dying! I, too, might utter some terrible lie, nature would arrange it that way! […] I wanted to live for the happiness of all people, for the discovery and proclaiming of the truth! … I looked through my window at Meyer’s wall and thought I could talk for only a quarter of an hour and everybody, everybody would be convinced, and for once in my life I got together […] with you, if not with the people! And what came of it? Nothing! (296).

Nature mocks people precisely through the mimetic proclivity of their imagination. Having seduced the imagination with noble and beautiful images, nature treacherously turns those images into lies. Like Myshkin or Christ himself, who both were trapped within the illusions of their hearts, Ippolit at one point also trusted the phantoms of his imagination. Struck down with illness, he spent six months in a room projecting onto an empty wall the vision of how one day he would preach to people the truth that would transform their lives. What came of this illusion? Nothing. Nature is relentless in its desire to humiliate, for even here, right under the beautiful Pavlovsk trees, nature continues to mock Ippolit by turning his noble ideas into the ridiculous pathos of a sensitive and sickly youth. The faithful servant of imagination, his language exhibits
the impotence of mimesis to capture truth. Like Holbein’s painting that could only reproduce
decay, Ippolit’s words make vivid the disintegration of his ideas and perceptions.

Ippolit’s commentary on Holbein’s painting comes in the closing part of his monologue
and thus culminates his polemic with Schiller. Like Myshkin, Ippolit had seen the painting at
Rogozhin’s house. Looking at the image had reminded him of a delirious dream, wherein he was
trapped in a room with “an impossible” beast:

Nature appears to the viewer of this painting in the shape of some enormous, implacable,
and dumb beast […] The painting seems precisely to express this notion of a dark,
insolent, and senselessly eternal power, to which everything is subjected, and it is
conveyed to you involuntarily. […] All this came to me in fragments, perhaps indeed
through delirium, sometimes even in images [inogda dazhe v obrazakh] […] Can
something that has no image appear as an image? But it was as if it seemed to be at
moments that I could see that infinite power, that blank, dark, and dumb being, in some
strange and impossible form (409).

Ippolit’s wrestling with the implications of Holbein’s painting resolves in a question, which gets
to the heart of his problem with aesthetic perception: “Can something that has no image [chto ne
imeet obraza] appear [mereshitsia] as an image [v obraze]?” The sense in which Ippolit uses
“chto ne imeet obraza [something lacking an image] is not bezobrazie [formlessness,
imagelessness] but in the absolute sense of non-existence. What does it mean when something
that should not have had an image because of its non-existence nevertheless appears to the mind
as an image? The idea of the ultimate non-existence of that-which-appears is reinforced by the
verb mereshchitsia, which means “to appear,” “seem,” “falsely manifest itself to perception.”
Ippolit’s ultimate question is nothing other than a precise rendition of Plato’s argument against
mimesis. Through Holbein’s painting the annihilating force of nature, the nothingness of the
decomposing body, has assumed the impossible yet viciously real form of an insolent beast ready
to devour the spectator’s mind and soul.
The verb “mereshchitsia,” with which Ippolit describes the workings of mimesis, is significant for understanding how the problem of the mimetic mode of perception manifests itself in the novel at large. It not only means that whatever manifests itself in an image does so falsely, but suggests that the image appears to the mind intermittently and each time in slightly different variation. It follows that the mind does not see a single image, but a sequence of variations of the image. The effect therefore is similar to the rapid flow of images in a feuilleton, which we recall from the first chapter. While it might seem that the mind’s ability to register the image is compromised by the constant flow of images, the effect is the opposite. By distracting the mind, by not allowing the imagination to hold on to a single image for too long, the intermittent mimetic flow energizes the mind’s curiosity, forcing it to latch onto each new image with the rigor and appetite of a starved animal. Ippolit captures for us this intense mimetic mode of perception, when he describes his struggle with a vision of the mysterious tarantula inside his delirious dream. He says,

I made it out very well: it was brown and had a shell, a creeping reptile, about seven inches long, about two fingers thick at the head, gradually tapering towards the tail, so that the very tip of the tail was no more than one-fifth of an inch thick. About two inches from the head, a pair of legs came out of the body, at a forty-five-degree angle, one on each side, about three and a half inches long, so that the whole animal, if seen from above, looked like a trident. I could not make out the head very well, but I saw two feelers, not long, like two strong needles, also brown. Two identical feelers at the tip of the tail and at the tip of each foot, making eight feelers in all. The animal ran about the room very quickly, supported on its legs and tail, and when it ran, its body and legs wriggled like little snakes, with extraordinary rapidity, despite its shell, and this was very repulsive to look at (389-390).

With photographic exactness Ippolit’s mind reproduces every manifestation of the tarantula, demonstrating that for a fascinated imagination a repulsive image is just as enticing as a beautiful one. Endlessly reinvigorated by an influx of visual stimuli, curiosity turns what is a state of distractedness into a continuous and obsessive visual experience.
Ippolit’s experience of the Holbein painting and his experience of the delirious dream merge into one event, when in a vision he sees Rogozhin come into his room to stare silently at him. In the mocking smirk of Rogozhin’s eyes, Ippolit discovers the same humiliating indifference of nature that, like a dark tarantula, threatened to leap at him from the Holbein painting. Ippolit is especially bothered by Rogozhin’s intentional silence, which he understands as a demonstrative refusal of dialogue. This definition of aesthetic reality as fundamentally non-dialogic will be crucially important for our interpretation of silence later in this chapter. Post-Bakhtinian readings of Dostoevsky are too often ready to attribute dialogic potential to all instances of silence in Dostoevsky. Ippolit’s argument is a crucial reason why such interpretation is impossible in *The Idiot*. Reduced to a silent spectator, Ippolit experiences the deepest sense of offense and resentment, which he feels leaves him no other choice but to end his misery with suicide. He says, “It is impossible to remain in a life that assumes such strange, offensive forms [obizhaiushchie menia formy]. This apparition [prividenie] humiliated me. I am unable to submit to a dark power that assumes the shape of a tarantula” (411). Thus on the one hand, Ippolit accepts reality as inescapably aesthetic; on the other hand, he will not yield to the absolute power of nothingness in the mimesis of imagination.

**Nastasya Filippovna’s Suffering Face**

A fragment from Mikhail Bakhtin’s early writings, when the problem of the image still constituted his main interest, helps us bring Ippolit’s theoretical exploration of mimesis into the interpersonal drama of *The Idiot*. Looking for ways that aesthetic vision might still be able to yield a non-objectifying way of contemplating the other, Bakhtin says:

[...] one can speak of a human being’s absolute aesthetic need for the other, for the other’s seeing, remembering, gathering, and unifying self-activity—the only self-activity
capable of producing his outwardly finished personality. This outward personality could not exist, if the other did not create it: aesthetic memory is productive—it gives birth, for the first time, to the outward person on a new plane of being. 18

In this dense quote Bakhtin says several important things. First, that we are vitally dependent on the other person’s visual perception of us. This is what Bakhtin calls our “absolute aesthetic need for the other person.” Second, in their perception, the other person collects an array of images about us and through a complex synthesis of these images — “gathering and unifying self-activity” — the other person “gives birth” to our full “external person” on “a new level of being.” Bakhtin here stretches mimesis to the point where he believes it transcends itself into an alternative mode of seeing, which no longer relies on concrete, objectifying images but transfigures the contemplated other into their true wholeness.

This wonderful act of loving vision, however, is precarious and is in Bakhtin’s view prone to one particularly deadly failure — compassion. As we saturate ourselves with images of the other, gathering and uniting them in our being, we are prone to identify with the suffering of the other person too closely. Bakhtin calls it “the pathological phenomenon of experiencing another’s suffering as one’s own” (AA, 26). Bakhtin understands this pathological tendency as an inherent propensity of our perception. We naturally become obsessed with the suffering features of the other person’s body, especially their face, where the suffering is visible most intensely. Though compassion is largely impulsive, we justify it in our mind as our ethical duty to the other and thus endow our obsession with positive and real value, when in fact it is only “an infection with another’s suffering, and nothing more” (AA, 26).

Bakhtin borrows the description of compassion as “an infection with another’s suffering” from Nietzsche.\textsuperscript{19} In *The Anti-Christ* Nietzsche says:

[…] pity negates life, it makes life worthy of negation, pity is the practice of nihilism […] by multiplying misery just as much as by conserving everything miserable, pity is one of the main tools used to increase decadence — pity wins people over to nothingness!\textsuperscript{20}

All compassion does, Nietzsche argues, is multiply pathetic images of the other. As with Plato’s painter, the mind clutters the room of the soul with enchanting but invariably false versions of the other and thus not only destroys itself, but negates the other. It traps the other in fragments of the other, and for Nietzsche these are the worst bits of the other. Since none of these bits are ultimately true, not even cumulatively, all compassion accomplishes is sealing the other in nothingness. In this interpretation of Platonic mimesis, Nietzsche unpacks the annihilating essence of compassion. It is in this aesthetic sense that the violence of compassion becomes significant for *The Idiot*.

“I am very attentive to faces now [vsmattrivaius’ v litsa],” confesses Myshkin in a conversation with the Epanchins at the opening of Part I (75). Throughout the novel we catch him obsessively studying people’s faces. One face in particular captures his enraptured attention — the face of Nastasya Filippovna. The first time Myshkin sees her is on a photograph in General Epanchin’s study. Dostoevsky introduces the scene with a bizarre incident, which affords us a crucial insight into the nature of Myshkin’s looking. The general, who wants to help the penurious Myshkin obtain some paying employment, asks him to demonstrate his skills in calligraphy. Myshkin seizes the opportunity to show off his artistic talent by producing exquisite

\textsuperscript{19} Bakhtin takes this idea from Nietzsche via its use in Max Scheler’s *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 17. For an exploration of the connection between Bakhtin and Scheler and an argument of how it is significant for Dostoevsky see Alina Wyman, *The Gift of Active Empathy: Scheler, Bakhtin and Dostoevsky* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

copies of ancient shrifts. With an obsessiveness to detail reminiscent of Ippolit’s meticulousness in the re-telling of the tarantula vision, Myshkin explains to the awestruck general what he has re-produced:

They had superb signatures, all those old Russian hegumens and metropolitan, and sometimes so tasteful, so careful! […] here I’ve written in a different script: it’s the big, round French script of the last century; some letters are even written differently; it’s a marketplace script, a public scrivener’s script, borrowed from their samples (I had one) — you must agree, it’s not without virtue. Look at these round d’s and a’s. I’ve transposed the French characters into Russian letters, which is very difficult, but it came out well. Here’s another beautiful and original script […] Now, here is a sample, ordinary English script of the purest sort: elegance can go no further, everything here is lovely, a jewel, a pearl; this is perfection; but here is a variation, again a French one, I borrowed it from a French traveling salesman: this is the same English script, but the black line is slightly blacker and thicker that in the English, and see — the proportion of light is violated; and notice also that the ovals are altered, they are slightly rounder, and what’s more, flourishes are permitted, and a flourish is a most dangerous thing! A flourish calls for extraordinary taste; but if it succeeds, if the right proportion is found, a script like this is incomparable, you can even fall in love with it (33-34).

This basking in the mimetic ability of his mind reveals in Myshkin a consummate aesthete, whose adoration of the beautiful object reaches the intensity of an erotic experience. It is right after this hymn to calligraphy that Myshkin picks up from Ganya’s table the portrait of Nastasya Filippovna. With the same calligraphic precision, he begins to copy details of the photograph:

An astonishing face! And I am convinced that her fate is no ordinary one. It’s a cheerful face, but she has suffered terribly, eh? It speaks in her eyes, these two little bones, the two points under her eyes where the cheeks begin. It’s a proud face, terribly proud, and I don’t know whether she’s kind or not. Ah, if only she were kind! Everything would be saved! (36).

A few moments later, the general’s wife sends Myshkin to fetch Nastasya Filippovna’s portrait from the general’s study. On his way back, in the drawing room Myshkin stops, looks around, and having made sure that no one can see him, looks again at the portrait:

It was as if he wanted to unriddle [razgadat] something hidden in that face which had also struck him earlier. The earlier impression had scarcely left him, and now it was as if he were hastening to verify something. That face, extraordinary for its beauty and for
something else, now struck him still more. There seemed to be a boundless pride and
contempt, almost hatred, in that face, and at the same time something trusting, something
surprisingly simplehearted; the contrast even seemed to awaken some sort of compassion
as one looked at those features. That dazzling beauty [oslepiaiuushaia krasota] was even
unbearable, the beauty of the pale face, the nearly hollow cheeks and burning eyes — a
strange beauty! The prince gazed for a moment, then suddenly roused himself, looked
around, hastily put the portrait to his lips and kissed it (79-80).

It is significant that the first image of Nastasya Filippovna that Myshkin sees is a photograph.21
This most direct of visual mediums, the photograph is a perfect instance of mimesis. With its
exactness of detail and uncompromising authority, like no other image a photograph fixes reality
in a fragment, making it a convenient object for immediate contemplation. Born out of
contemplating “dazzling beauty” Myshkin’s contemplation is deeply confused in its
understanding and therefore is only “some sort of compassion” [kak budto dazhe kakoe-to
sostradanie]. While often insightful, Myshkin’s reading of faces remains that of “a good
guesser” [khorosh uga'dchik] (76). This initial encounter with the photograph will continue
shaping Myshkin’s perception of Nastasya Filippovna throughout the novel, forever binding his
compassion to the mimetic experience of his mind.

The first person in the novel to pick up on the strangeness of Myshkin’s looking is an
amateur painter, Adelaida Epanchina. After hearing Myshkin boast of his travels and the sights
he has seen, she asks him for a good subject for a picture, because she “does not know how to
look” [vzglianut’ ne umeiu] but he, apparently, had “learned how to look” [vyuchilsia gliadet’]
abroad. Having at first dismissed the request — “I don’t understand anything about it. It seems to
me you just look and paint” [vzglianut’ i pisat’] — Myshkin soon comes up with a perfect

21 For the significance of the photograph both as a visual metaphor and as a medium see Andrew Wachtel’s
“Dostoevsky’s The Idiot: The Novel as Photograph” in History of Photography, Vol. 26, No. 3 Autumn (2002): 205-
215. Also see Olga Soboleva, “Images are Created to be Destroyed (Photography and Painting in The Idiot)” in
Robert Reid and Joe Andrew edited, Aspects of Dostoevskii: Art, Ethics and Faith in Studies in Slavic Literature and
suggestion: “You should draw the face of a condemned man one minute before the stroke of the guillotine, when he’s still standing on the scaffold, before he lies down on the plank” (58, 63). The topic, but even more the odd zooming in on the face of the condemned, strikes Adelaida as strange. She asks: “What? Just the face? […] That would be a strange subject, and what sort of picture would it make? […] Can you say how you imagine it yourself? How should the face be portrayed? As just a face? What sort of face?” (63). Myshkin is prepared to give Adelaida all the details necessary because he had stored them perfectly in his photographic memory:

   It was exactly one minute before his death, […] the very moment when he had climbed the little stairway and just stepped onto the scaffold. He glanced in my direction; I looked at his face and understood everything… but how can one talk about it! I’d be terribly, terribly glad if you or someone else could portray that! Better if it were you! I thought then that it would be a useful painting. You know, here you have to imagine everything that went before, everything, everything (63-64).

As if an executioner himself, Myshkin cuts off the face of the condemned man from the rest of the body, the move that felt strange and unnatural to Adelaida. But Myshkin does not need the entire condemned man, just a snapshot of his face, the most intense image of suffering. With the directness of a painter — “just look and paint” — Myshkin surrenders himself completely to the mimetic propensity of his own imagination, mistaking the intensity of his immersion in the other’s suffering for a fullness of understanding.

   The sight of the execution, which Myshkin witnessed at Lyons a month before he arrived in St. Petersburg, controls his imagination throughout the novel. He confesses to a servant at the Epanchins’: “I saw it a month ago, and it’s as if it were still there before my eyes. I’ve dreamed
about it five times” (22). The strange enthusiasm with which Myshkin shares the gruesome scene at the Epanchín’s dinner makes the always incisive Aglaya wonder if the prince might have enjoyed the spectacle too much. Myshkin replies that although the sight has indeed gripped his imagination, the experience was that of painful compulsion: “I didn’t like it at all, and I was a bit ill afterwards, but I confess, I watched as if I was riveted to it [smotrel kak prikovannii], I couldn’t tear my eyes away” (64). It is with the same kind of painful infatuation that Myshkin looks at Nastasya Filippovna:

Several times during those six months he had recalled the first sensation that the face of this woman had produced in him when he had only seen it in a portrait; but even in the impression of the portrait, he recalled, there was a great deal of pain […] For him there was something tormenting in the very face of this woman; the prince […] had translated this feeling as one of infinite pity, and that was true: this face, ever since the portrait; had evoked in his heart all the suffering of pity; the impression of compassion and even of suffering for this being never left his heart and had not left it now. Oh, no, it was even stronger […] and only now, at this moment of her unexpected appearance, did he understand, perhaps through immediate sensation, what had been lacking in his words to Rogozhin. Words had been lacking expressive of horror—yes, horror! Now, at this moment, he felt it vividly; he was sure, he was fully convinced, for his own special reasons, that this woman was mad. If a man, loving a woman more than anything in the world, or anticipating the possibility of such a love, were suddenly to see her on a chain, behind iron bars, under a warden’s stick—the impression would be somewhat similar to what the prince was feeling now (349-350).

Time and time again Myshkin’s imagination returns to the photograph, which immediately evokes in him not only compassion but outright suffering. His impotence to change Nastasya Filippovna’s fate manifests itself in Myshkin as helplessness to resist his fascination with her suffering face.

To understand how Myshkin’s failure to overcome the mimetic pull of compassion contributes to the tragedy of the novel, we must consider the broader significance of the execution metaphor in The Idiot. For as Myshkin discovers soon upon his arrival in St. Petersburg, a public display of suffering, whether in the form of self-laceration or the humiliation
of others, is an everyday event, not at all the rare accident he thought he had witnessed at Lyons.

Part I, which covers the events of Myshkin’s first day in St. Petersburg, culminates in a scene which Dostoevsky describes as the public mockery of Ganya Ivolgin. A vain and ambitious person, Ganya has agreed to marry Nastasya Filippovna for a seventy-five-thousand-ruble dowry and thus help Totsky, her wealthy lover, to dispose of an inconvenience. In a spiteful gesture Nastasya Filippovna decides to turn her name-day party into the moral annihilation of Ganya. It soon becomes obvious, however, that Nastasya Filippovna is driven by far more than mere retribution. There is in her a spiteful desire to make public her suffering. An astute observer Totsky compares her to a Japanese samurai, who rips open his belly before the eyes of the offender, thus turning his own pain into a spectacle and the offender into a paralyzed spectator (175).

The “torture for a vainglorious man” begins many hours before the reception at Nastasya Filippovna’s salon, when she unexpectedly shows up at Ganya’s family residence to mock him in front of his family. As she hysterically laughs at the poverty of his apartment and humiliates his drunken father, her attention is fixed on Ganya’s face, where she craves to see pain: “What’s that face? Oh, my God, what a face you’ve got right now!” (103). A cornered animal, Ganya “turned terribly pale; his lips twisted convulsively; silently, with a fixed and nasty look, not tearing his eyes away, he stared into the face of his visitor, who went on laughing” (103). Just when the scene could not get uglier, Rogozhin with a retinue of drunk vagabonds storms into Ganya’s apartment throwing money into his face in exchange for a refusal to marry Nastasya Filippovna. “The scene was becoming extremely ugly, but Nastasya Filippovna went on laughing and did not go away, as if she were intentionally drawing it out” (115).
The scene gets even more revolting and “performative” at Nastasya Filippovna’s party. The night begins with a petit jeu, a peculiar parlor game, in which participants agree to publicly reveal the most shameful of their deeds. The buffoon Ferdyshchenko, invited by Nastasya Filippovna to entertain the crowd, explains what makes the game so enticing: “[…] to see how the person’s going to lie […] just think with what eyes we’ll look at each other later, tomorrow, for instance, after our stories!” (143). This cynical Rousseauian exhibitionism, which denigrates the idea of confession by turning it into a feuilletonistic reel of images, is an important setting within which the entire scene must be understood. In the first chapter, I suggested that the inherent untruthfulness of all self-revelation constitutes in Dostoevsky the ultimate idea of the world’s fallenness. Here in The Idiot this orgiastic wallowing in the untruthfulness of reality is once again postulated by Dostoevsky as the ugly truth about the world into which Myshkin, with his naïve and therefore reckless directness, has arrived.

The game sets the appropriate stage for the events of the night, which develop quickly. First Myshkin shows up to the evening uninvited and thus immediately adds “strangeness and originality” to Nastasya Filippovna’s night (139). She knows exactly how to involve him in her scheme. To everyone’s amusement and shock, she appoints him the final arbiter in the most important and anticipated decision of the night. Myshkin must decide whether she should marry Ganya. Her calculation that Myshkin could only say “no” proves correct. Ganya is publicly rejected by the “idiot,” who showed up out of nowhere just this morning. Meanwhile the guests begin to realize that the night has been thoroughly planned by Nastasya Filippovna and is bound to be entertaining: “The guests went on being amazed, whispering and exchanging glances, but it became perfectly clear that it had all been calculated and arranged beforehand, and that now
Nastasya Filippovna […] would not be thrown off. They all suffered terribly from curiosity” (156).

The curious crowd did not have to wait very long. Rogozhin, with the same retinue of drunken vagabonds, shows up at Nastasya Filippovna’s apartment with a heap of a hundred thousand rubles. By way of subjecting Ganya to the final trial, Nastasya Filippovna offers him a challenge. She explains,

Well, then listen, Ganya, I want to look at your soul for the last time [khochu na dushu tvoiu posmotret]; you’ve been tormenting me for three long months; now it’s my turn. Do you see this packet? There’s a hundred thousand in it! I’m now going to throw it into the fireplace, onto the fire, before everyone, all these witnesses! As soon as it catches fire all over, go into the fireplace, only without gloves, with your bare hands, with your sleeves rolled up, and pull the packet out of the fire! If you pull it out, it’s yours, the whole hundred thousand is yours! You’ll only burn your fingers a little—but it’s a hundred thousand, just think! It won’t take long to snatch it out! And I’ll admire your soul [na dushu tvoiu poliubuius] as you go into the fire after my money. They’re all witnesses that the packet will be yours! And if you don’t get it out, it will burn; I won’t let anyone else touch it (171).

The entire room turned into one overheated gaze. “Everyone crowded around the fireplace, everyone pushed in order to see […] some even climbed onto chairs to look over the heads” (172). Ganya “stood silent […] looking at the fire. An insane smile wandered over his face, which was pale as a sheet.” Nastasya Filippovna “stood right by the fireplace and waited, not tearing her burning, intent gaze [ognennogo, pristal’nogo vzgliada] from him.” Rogozhin “had turned into one fixed gaze [nepodvizhnyi vzgliad]. He could not turn it from Nastasya Filippovna, he was reveling; he was in seventh heaven.” Torn between his pride and greed, Ganya barely managed to tear his eyes away from the burning pile of money; however, he was not able to walk far away, collapsing unconscious in exhaustion (173). To everyone’s amazement Nastasya Filippovna leaves the apartment with Rogozhin.
Throughout this bacchanalia of fascination, Myshkin is absorbed by Nastasya Filippovna’s suffering face, the only face that entirely consumes him. At Ganya’s flat, where he had seen her in person for the first time, he had already fallen into the condition of staring at her as might a stone idol [gliadel kak istukan]. So intense is Myshkin’s act of looking that Nastasya Filippovna interrupts her mocking of Ganya to inquire: “Where have you seen me before? In fact, it’s as if I have seen him somewhere—why is that? And, allow me to ask you, why did you stand there so dumbstruck just now? What’s so dumbstriking [ostolbeniauchsего] about me?” Myshkin murmurs in response: “[…] at the very moment when I opened the door, I was also thinking about you, and suddenly there you were […] that was precisely how I imagined you.” As Myshkin succumbs to this visual fascination, the boundary between reality and the dream disappears: “It’s as if I’ve also seen you somewhere. As if I’ve seen your eyes somewhere…but that can’t be! I’m just…I’ve never even been here before. Maybe in a dream…” (105). At the party, Myshkin’s attraction to Nastasya Filippovna grows even stronger. He confesses at her doorstep: “Everything in you is perfection…even the fact that you’re so thin and pale…one has no wish to imagine you otherwise…I wanted so much to come to you” (139). Still unable to understand the nature of Myshkin’s emotion, Nastasya Filippovna mockingly wonders if he, the prince, would marry “a Rogozhin kind of woman,” Myshkin responds that he would marry her, but as an honest woman, not as “Rogozhin’s kind”: “I don’t know anything, Nastasya Filippovna, I haven’t seen anything, you are right, but I…I would consider that you are doing me an honor, and not I you. I am nothing, but you have suffered and have emerged pure from such a hell and that is a great deal” (164). At first she laughs off his effusion of love as something “out of a sentimental novel,” but Myshkin’s compassion soon begins to entice her soul, thus turning fascination into a reciprocal event. She says,
As if I haven’t dreamed of you myself? […] I used to think and think, dream and dream — I kept imagining someone like you, kind, honest, good…and as silly as you are, who would suddenly come and say: “You’re not guilty, Nastasya Filippovna, and I adore you! [obozhau]” And I sometimes dreamed so much that I’d go out of my mind…And then this one would come: he’d stay for two, months a year, dishonor me, offend me, inflame me, debauch me, leave me—a thousand times I wanted to drown myself in the pond, but I was base, I had no courage—well, but now…Rogozhin, are you ready?” (170-171).

Though powerfully drawn to Myshkin’s obozhanie [adoration], she is in the end distrustful and even scared of it. He is but a quixotic knight from her dreams, a painfully seductive idea of redemption yet one that is utterly impotent and disappointing.

At one point it seems that Myshkin’s compassion might not be so naïve and in fact is part of a subtle psychological strategy. On the eve of what is one of the most important scenes in the novel — a face-off between Nastasya Filippovna and her rival Aglaya, which inaugurates the novel’s tragic finale — Myshkin begs Aglaya not “to cast a stone” at his Magdalene. With an unexpected astuteness, he explains why he thinks she keeps running away from him: “She ran away from me […] precisely to prove to me alone that she is base […] You know, there may be some terrible, unnatural pleasure for her in this constant awareness of disgrace, a sort of revenge on someone” (434). Nevertheless, this insight into Nastasya Filippovna’s tragedy still falls short of realizing how his compassion might have contributed to her anguish. Myshkin is mystified as to why when he “managed to bring her to a point where she seemed to see light around her,” she would become “indignant at once” and reproach him bitterly “for putting himself far above her” and insist that she “asked no one for supercilious compassion [vysokomernogo sostradaniia]” (434). When Myshkin shares these thoughts with Aglaya, she cannot resist a sarcastic suggestion, which in the second layer of irony underscores Myshkin’s failed Christlikeness: “Sacrifice yourself, then, it suits you so well! You’re such a great benefactor […] You must resurrect her [vokresit’], it’s your duty, you must go away with her again to pacify and soothe
her heart” (435). The irony is lost on Myshkin who is only too ready to accept his defeat: “I can’t sacrifice myself like that, though I did want to once and...maybe still want to. But I know for certain that she’ll perish with me, and that’s why I’m leaving her” (435).

The contrast between Myshkin’s resignation of his salvific role and Christ’s redemptive role in the Gospel of John, returns us to the Romantic shadows of the Pavlovsk garden, where Dostoevsky re-enacts the scene of Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the resurrected Christ. The episode occurs just an hour after Ippolit’s long speech, wherein Ippolit mocks Romantic idealism and Myshkin’s Holbeinian Christlikeness. Unsettled by Ippolit’s ideas as well as the suicide attempt, Myshkin escapes into the park in the fourth hour of the night, right around the time when, according to the gospel, Magdalene comes to the garden tomb and finds it empty (John 20:1). As if he was reproducing that outstretched body in the Holbein’s painting, Myshkin stretches out on a bench and falls asleep:

Around him there was a beautiful, serene silence, with only the rustling of leaves, which seemed to make it still more silent and solitary. He had a great many dreams, and all of them anxious, so that he kept shuddering. Finally, a woman came to him; he knew her, knew her to the point of suffering; he could have named her and pointed to her any time, but—strangely—she now seemed to have a different face from the one he had always known, and he was painfully reluctant to recognize her as that woman. There was so much repentance and horror in this face that it seemed she was a terrible criminal [strashnaia prestupnitsa] who had just committed a horrible crime. A tear trembled on her pale cheek; she beckoned to him with, her hand and put her finger to her lips, as if cautioning him to follow her more quietly. His heart stood still; not for anything, not for anything did he want to recognize her as a criminal; yet he felt that something horrible was just about to happen, for the whole of his life. It seemed she wanted to show him something, not far away, there in the park. He got up to follow her, and suddenly someone’s bright, fresh laughter rang out close by; someone’s hand was suddenly in his hand; he grasped this hand, pressed it hard, and woke up. Before him, laughing loudly, stood Aglaya (424).

In this painful vision of Nastasya Filippovna Myshkin is struck by a profound difference in her face. There is no more pride and spitefulness but pure suffering and overwhelming remorse. Myshkin’s ability to insist on her innocence is paralyzed as he is reduced to a dumb spectator.
summoned to witness a tragic sight hidden somewhere in the depth of the garden. Although we never discover what it was that he had to see, we can guess that it must have been some foreshadowing of the novel’s finale. By way of linking Myshkin’s vision to the events in the novel, Dostoevsky recreates the encounter, only this time in reality:

He went down the road that skirted the park to his dacha. His heart was pounding, his thoughts were confused, and everything around him seemed like a dream. And suddenly, just as earlier, both times when he was awakened by the same vision, so the same vision again appeared before him. The same woman came out of the park and stood before him, as if she had been waiting for him there. He shuddered and stopped; she seized his hand and pressed it hard. “No, this is not a vision!” And so she finally stood before him face to face, for the first time since their parting; she was saying something to him, but he looked at her silently, his heart overflowed and was wrung with pain. Oh, never afterwards could he forget this meeting with her, and he always remembered it with the same pain. She went down on her knees before him right there in the street, as if beside herself; he stepped back in fear, but she tried to catch his hand in order to kiss it, and, just as earlier in his dream, tears glistened now on her long lashes. “Get up, get up!” he said in a frightened whisper, trying to raise her. “Get up quickly!” “Are you happy? Are you?” she kept asking. “Tell me just one word, are you happy now? Today, right now? With her? What did she say?” She would not get up, she did not listen to him; she asked hurriedly and was in a hurry to speak, as though she were being pursued. “I’m leaving tomorrow, as you told me to. I won’t…I’m seeing you for the last time, the last! Now it really is the last time!” “Calm yourself, get up!” he said in despair. She peered at him greedily, clutching his hands. “Farewell!” she said at last, stood up, and quickly walked away from him, almost ran (456-457).

In the Johannine telling of the garden encounter Christ forbids Magdalene to touch him (John 20:17). She should not hold on to him in this world of sorrow but allow the unfolding of resurrection to take its full course. By contrast, Nastasya Filippovna seizes Myshkin’s hand and “presses it hard,” by which act she snatches him out of his illusory dreaming and returns him to the depth of her own suffering. Unlike Christ who supersedes the human tragedy, Myshkin is trapped fully inside it. An inability to disrupt the perpetual cycle of contemplation brings Myshkin to intense pain and utter despair.

By this point in the novel, the idea of simply running away from the tragic scene has crossed Myshkin’s mind: “he suddenly wanted terribly to leave all this here and go back where
he came from” (306). It is however too late, as the mimetic vortex galvanized by his compassion has reached its momentum. Now, independently of his direct involvement, it begins to devour the world around him. Despite her deep distrust of Myshkin’s obsessive adoration, Nastasya Filippovna begins to mimic his attitude, selecting the image of Aglaya as the object of her worship. In one of the three letters secretly sent to Aglaya she writes:

Do not consider my words the morbid rapture [bol’nym vostorgom] of a morbid mind, but for me you are—perfection [sovershenstvo]! I have seen you, I see you every day. I do not judge you; it is not by reason that I have come to consider you perfection; I simply believe it. But there is also a sin in me before you: I love you. Perfection cannot be loved, perfection can only be looked at as perfection, isn’t that so? And yet I am in love with you (453). Oh, remember only that! What do you care about my passion for you? You are mine now [vy teper’ uzhe moia], I shall be near you all my life” (454).

The rhetorical question as to whether a perfect image could be loved or whether it can only be an object of fascination ironically captures the possibility of misunderstanding aesthetic infatuation as love. We find here the same kind of erotic possessiveness that we have been seeing in Myshkin’s own fascination with Nastasya Filippovna’s image. While it is unlikely that her intentions are malicious, the intensity with which she pursues the object of her religious adulation approaches the violent. All three letters that Nastasya Filippovna sends to Aglaya are saturated with this aesthetic rapture. At one point her imagination pours out in a painting:

Yesterday, after meeting you, I came home and thought up [vydumala] a painting. Artists all paint Christ according to the Gospel stories; I would paint him differently: I would portray him alone—the disciples did sometimes leave him alone. I would leave only a small child with him. The child would be playing beside him, perhaps telling him something in his child’s language. Christ had been listening to him, but now he has become pensive; his hand has inadvertently, forgetfully remained on the child’s blond head. He gazes into the distance, at the horizon; a thought as great as the whole world reposes in his eyes [pokoitsia v ego vzgliade]; his face is sad. The child has fallen silent, leaning his elbow on his knees, and, his cheek resting on his hand, has raised his little head and pensively, as children sometimes become pensive, gazes intently at him. The sun is setting...That is my painting! (454).
It is hard to resist the mellow solace of this painting. The fierce striving of aesthetic perception has been canceled out within the calm gaze of Christ. His eyes have absorbed the whole world and in those eyes the restless world has found its repose [pokoi]. The child’s intense [pristal’nyi] gaze does not arouse any pain or anguish in Christ, whose tranquil presence allows the child to surrender to compassion in complete trust. The painting, of course, is the yearning of Nastasya Filippovna’s soul for the Christ that Myshkin cannot become. Just in case the image proves too seductive, the mention of the sunset sends the reader back to Ippolit’s discrediting of Schiller’s idealization of nature, with all its illusory tranquility of sunsets and sunrises (412). Nastasya Filippovna’s painting is another Romantic illusion and therefore is only a different rendition of the novel’s master painting — Holbein’s Dead Christ.

The violence latent in Nastasya Filippovna’s adoration of Aglaya bursts out when the two women meet. This “capital scene” was originally intended by Dostoevsky to take place in a brothel, where Aglaya seeks out Nastasya Filippovna, to berate her for playing “the role of Magdalene” (9:228). While some of “the fallen woman” motif has been preserved — Aglaya accuses Nastasya Filippovna of playing “the fallen angel” to bask in the pathological enjoyment of her own shame [pozor] and resentment [obida] — the main focus has shifted from the moral to the epistemic. Inaugurating the novel’s tragic finale, the scene culminates in an emotional breakdown, which Dostoevsky describes by means of the escalating violence of looking:

Both she and Aglaya stopped as if in expectation and looked at Myshkin as if in madness [smotreli kak pomeshannya]. But he may not have understood all the force of this challenge, even certainly did not […] he only saw before him the desperate, insane face [on tol’ko videl pered soboi otchaiannoe, bezumnoe lito] … He could no longer bear it and with entreaty and reproach turned to Aglaya, pointing to Nastasya Filippovna: “It’s not possible! She’s…so unhappy!” But that was all he managed to say, going dumb under Aglaya’s terrible look [pod uzhasnym vzgliadom]. That look expressed so much suffering, and at the same time such boundless hatred, that he clasped his hands, cried out, and rushed to Aglaya, but it was already too late! She could not bear even a moment of hesitation in him, covered her face with her hands, cried: “Oh, my God!” — and rushed
out of the room […] the prince also ran, but arms seized him on the threshold. Nastasya Filippovna’s stricken, distorted face looked at him pointblank [ubitoe, iskazhennoe litso gliadelo na nego] (571-72).

Myshkin’s complete absorption in the suffering of Nastasya Filippovna has deprived him of all agency, and his actions are now dictated entirely by the mimetic propensity of his eyes. We see here the beginning of Myshkin’s descent into madness, which takes form of aesthetic disintegration. He is haunted not so much by Aglaya or Nastasya Filippovna as by their faces and gazes. In the manner of a Hoffmanesque horror story, images and impressions that Myshkin has been obsessively copying throughout the novel have now violently turned against him, threatening to devour his imagination. Attempting to understand why Myshkin preferred to stay with the suffering Nastasya Filippovna over the suffering Aglaya, Evgeny Pavlovich asks: “You saw Aglaya’s face at that moment: tell me, did she suffer less than that one, than your other one, her rival? How could you see it [videli] and allow it [dopustili]? (581) To answer his question frankly Myshkin once again returns to the portrait: “I couldn’t bear Nastasya Filippovna’s face [litsa…ne mog vynesti] …I was looking at her face that morning, in her portrait, I already couldn’t bear it […] I’m afraid of her face [boius’ litsa]!” (582).

The scene ends with a reproduction of Nastasya Filippovna’s painting. “Unable to tear his eyes away” [ne otryvajas’ smotrel] from Nastasya Filippovna, Myshkin is “stroking her dear head and face with both hands, like a little child” (572). He has completely dissolved in Nastasya Filippovna’s emotional state:

He laughed when she laughed and was ready to weep at her tears. He did not say anything, but listened intently to her fitful, rapturous, and incoherent babbling, hardly understood anything, but smiled quietly, and as soon as it seemed to him that she had begun to be anguished again, or to weep, or reproach, or complain, he would at once begin again to stroke her dear head and tenderly pass his hands over her cheeks, comforting and reassuring her like a child (572).
It is very likely that Dostoevsky here alludes to *The Pietà*, a Medieval tradition of depicting Virgin Mary lamenting over the dead body of Christ, which she is holding in her hands.\(^2^3\) The mellow sadness that emanates from the image is superseded by the readers’ recollection of the corpse in Holbein’s painting. By replacing Christ’s dead body with the soon-to-be-dead body of Nastasya Filippovna, Dostoevsky one more time reiterates the tragic irony of the novel — a failed Christ laments the death of his Magdalene, and through her he laments the world, whose givenness to aesthetic disintegration his is unable to overcome. From this point on, Myshkin will know of the impending death of Nastasya Filippovna but, as if resigned to his impotence, will not interfere with the tragic course of her life.

**Rogozhin’s Silent Gaze**

So far I have considered the problem of compassion primarily in the context of the relationship between Myshkin and Nastasya Filippovna, where the first is the subject and the latter the object of the mimetic flow. If in Part I we are given some insight into Nastasya Filippovna’s inwardness, beginning with Part II she is increasingly isolated, becoming purely the object of Myshkin’s perception. The few significant expositions of her subjective experience that we find in the novel, including the quoting of her letters, are delivered to the reader via some form of mediation by Myshkin. Myshkin’s subjectivity thus emerges as the universal realm where the problem of compassion in the novel finds its root. Here, however, we confront a paradox. Although Myshkin is often full of profound psychological insights, which presuppose complex inwardness, of all the characters in the novel he comes across as the least endowed with

---

\(^2^3\) The quintessential example of *The Pietà* is the sculpture by Michelangelo Buonarroti housed at St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican. For a reproduction see Antonio Paolucci, *Michelangelo: Le Pietà*, fotografie di Aurelio Amendola (Milano: Skira, 1997).
subjectivity. His naiveté and directness betray no psychological complexity, while his often perceptive remarks are channeled through him as sybillic oracles. To unravel the paradox of Myshkin’s subjectivity we must include into the equation the enigmatic character of Parfyon Rogozhin.

The first time we meet Rogozhin is in the opening scene, where, as if he were Myshkin’s mirror reflection, he sits directly in front of him on the overnight train to St. Petersburg. The last time we see Rogozhin is in the final scene, where he and Myshkin physically and emotionally merge in a listless embrace next to the dead body of Nastasya Filippovna. In the uncanny affinity between these two characters we recognize a mysterious bond linking them together. The nature of the bond is less clear in Part I of the novel, where Rogozhin’s role as Myshkin’s rival is straightforward and does not go beyond the demands of the plot. However, as between Part I and Part II Dostoevsky’s vision for the novel evolves, Rogozhin’s role is transformed from a manifestation of physical lust into a dark psychological force.24 No longer is he merely a contrast to Myshkin’s compassion, he is the revelation of its sinister inner truth. Rogozhin is Myshkin’s double, the second pole of the same consciousness. Therefore, it is in the relationship between these two poles rather than inside Myshkin’s own character that we should look for the psychological depth that defines Myshkin’s presence in the novel.

The idea that Rogozhin is Myshkin’s double finds strong support in Dostoevsky’s notebooks. The original idea for Myshkin’s character included many of the features that eventually comprised Rogozhin’s character. For example, in the earliest plan for the novel

---

Myshkin’s antecedent, the Idiot, burns with lust [potrebnost’ liubvi zhguchaia], which leads him to rape Minyona — the prototype for Nastasya Filippovna (9:141). Easily spurred to “horror, crimes, and villainy” [reshalsia na uzhasy, na zlodeianiia, na podlosti], the Idiot craves revenge and even harbors thoughts of murder when he learns of Minyona’s unfaithfulness (9:150). However, as the Idiot’s violent tendencies threaten to reach monstrous proportions [doiti do chudovishchnosti], they conflict inside him with an overwhelming influx of compassion [pronikaetsia gluboachaishim sostradaniem] (9:146). While it is not clear where and why the sudden turn towards compassion develops in the Idiot, it is obvious that it creates a tension too complex to be preserved within a single character. Splitting the Idiot’s consciousness into the two poles of Myshkin and Rogozhin not only allows Dostoevsky to preserve both strands of love — compassion and lust — but more importantly, allows him to explore the insidious dialectic between the two.

René Girard’s idea of triangulated mimetic desire helps us understand why the relationship between Myshkin and Rogozhin inevitably resolved itself in an act of violence towards the object of their mutual obsession. According to Girard, we never desire anything for its own sake but always because we see someone superior to us desiring the same object.\textsuperscript{25} Having our desire validated by the other’s craving of the same object, we are naturally drawn into mimetic rivalry with the other, in which we try to outperform the other’s example of desiring. Caught up in the mimetic whirlpool, wherein images of the rival mix with the images of the desired object, our desire soon escalates beyond any sustainable degree, inevitably leaving us

frustrated in our inability to triumphantly end the race. In Girard’s view, it is this *mimetic frustration* that gives rise to Dostoevsky’s concept of the “underground,” a place where the frustrated rivals “carefully hide their imitations, even from themselves, so as not to give their models the psychic reward of seeing themselves imitated, not to humiliate themselves by being revealed as imitators.”

In the underground, however, the mimetic rivalry does not recede, but continues to intensify until it reaches the point when a violent resolution becomes inevitable. In a desperate final dash, the frustrated consciousness leaps out to secure the object of desire by imposing on it some form of finalizing possession. Even when the object can no longer be secured, either due to the fact that it has always been only imaginary or because it is no longer within the frustrated rival’s reach, the violent attack is still unleashed vicariously on a random victim. A good example of such vicarious substitution is Liza in *Notes from Underground*, whom the underground man rapes in spiteful revenge for his utter failure to compete with the rivals he sees on the Petersburgian boulevards. A feuilletonistic barrage of images vomited up by the underground man onto Liza is nothing other than a reversal of the same mimetic flow that forced him into the underground in the first place.

It is not hard to see how Girard’s idea of *mimetic desire* maps onto the three-way relationship between Myshkin, Rogozhin and Nastasya Filippovna. In its tenacious striving for its object of perception, Myshkin’s compassion is a supreme form of the same rapacious voluptuousness that finds a cruder expression in Rogozhin’s bestial sensuality. This is precisely Rogozhin’s point when he observes to Myshkin: “The surest thing of all is that your pity is still worse than my love!” [Vernee vsego to, chto zhalost’ tvoia, pozhalui, eshe pushche moei liubvi!] (213). For most of the novel, however, Myshkin is either unaware of his competition with

---

26 Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 78.
Rogozhin, or tries to downplay it by insisting on his brotherly love for Rogozhin (221). Whether genuine or pretended, Myshkin’s obliviousness cannot reduce Rogozhin’s escalating jealousy, nor can it disguise his own investedness in the imminent tragedy. The doubles in Dostoevsky are always vehicles of their progenitors’ darkest desires. Myshkin’s desire to entrap Nastasya Filippovna in a stable image is ultimately a craving to reduce her to a breathless body, a desire that Rogozhin’s murder of her fulfills. This vicarious bond that links Myshkin to Rogozhin explains why in Part IV of the novel, aware of the impending murder, Myshkin no longer resists Rogozhin’s violent intentions.

Myshkin’s vicarious involvement in the murder of Nastasya Filippovna adds an important nuance to Girard’s idea of mimetic desire. Warning against the Freudian tendency to ascribe desire to the particulars of the individual somatic experience, Girard has insisted that desire is never purely subjective, nor does it stem from the object, but arises from and dwells within that mimetic flow which is the same in all manifestations of desire. While in Dostoevsky we find the same resistance to internalize desire within any particular character, the mimetic flow that propels desire is ultimately defined by Dostoevsky as the very essence of subjectivity. However, instead of describing it as the subjectivity of a particular character, in The Idiot Dostoevsky postulates consciousness as an abstract entity, a kind of universal epistemic space of which Myshkin and Rogozhin constitute two extremes. The entire novel is thus submerged in this abstract subjectivity, being slowly sucked into the mimetic vortex that animates its space.

To endow the mimetic vortex with a physical attribute, Dostoevsky describes it as the heavy and sinister gaze of Rogozhin. Though it largely remains in the background on the novel, silently surveying its course, the gaze manifests itself explicitly in a number of important

---

27 Ibid., 79.
instances. I mentioned one such instance when discussing Ippolit’s delirious dream, wherein Ippolit sees Rogozhin walk into his room, sit himself down in the corner, and for twenty minutes silently stare at him (409). In Rogozhin’s silent eyes Ippolit recognizes the same dumb annihilating force of nature which, in the semblance of the black tarantula, leaped at him from Holbein’s painting. Ippolit is deeply offended by the silence of Rogozhin’s presence, which mockingly refuses to engage his vain and futile need to speak. Unable to bear the aesthetic violence of this gaze, which has reduced him to a caricature, Ippolit resorts to suicide as a way of escaping — if not annihilation, then at least humiliation.

Rogozhin’s gaze zooms in on Ippolit for a reason. With his sudden appearance in Part III of the novel, Ippolit disrupts the triangulated mimetic relationship between Myshkin, Rogozhin and Nastasya Filippovna. He thus imposes himself as the second of Myshkin’s doubles, and therefore as another rival. However, while there is some suggestion of Ippolit’s interest in Myshkin’s “lovers” — in a brief aside we learn that he develops a relationship with both Nastasya Filippovna and Aglaya — Ippolit pursues them as a necessary component of the mysterious relationship between Myshkin and Rogozhin, which constitutes his true interest (472). As we see from his discerning critique of the Holbein painting, Ippolit is the only character in the novel who has broken through to the real essence of the novel’s tragedy: reality’s entrapment in the disintegrating force of aesthetic perception.

For all the crucial importance of his ideas, however, Ippolit as an actor in the plot is a marginal character and is soon expelled from the novel, while the focus of Rogozhin’s gaze returns to the main rival Myshkin. In the opening of Part II, in one of the most haunting and perplexing sequences in the novel, Dostoevsky unravels the epistemic nature of the relationship between Rogozhin’s gaze and Myshkin. The sequence begins with Myshkin’s visit to
Rogozhin’s house, followed by his protracted wandering around the city in a pre-epileptic delirious state, and finally culminating in an epileptic seizure. The entire time, from the moment he gets off the train to the moment the epileptic thunder breaks, Myshkin is fighting the haunting and ominous presence of “the strange, burning gaze of someone’s two eyes” [strannyi, goriachii vzgliad ch’ikh-to dvukh glaz] (190). The same uncanny atmosphere of being inside someone’s consciousness that permeates The Double here envelops the novel, permanently shifting its landscape away from the realm of a realistic narrative into a more abstract epistemic realm. Given its crucial importance for my interpretation of the final scene, the sequence deserves a closer look.

Haunted by this mysterious gaze, Myshkin feels an unbearable urge to see Rogozhin. As he approaches Rogozhin’s dark house, he is struck by the house’s “peculiar physiognomy” [osobennoi fizionomii], which vividly “captured Rogozhin’s entire life” (204, 207). This architectural anthropomorphism effectively turns Myshkin’s visit to Rogozhin into a physical merging of two rivals. For the first time in the novel, Myshkin is entering inside his own mystery, inside that abstract mimetic vortex that constitutes his own inwardness. As if he were journeying into the deep recesses of his own subjectivity, Myshkin ascends a dark staircase, then travels through winding corridors, poorly lit because of the paucity of windows, with fake marble walls and cheap wooden floors, cluttered with old furniture. Deep in the bowels of the building Myshkin knocks on the door, which Rogozhin hurriedly opens, looking both surprised and expectant. In the “extremely strange and heavy gaze” of Rogozhin, Myshkin immediately recognizes the same two eyes that haunted him at the train station earlier that day. As entranced as “a stone statue,” Myshkin for a while stares “straight into Rogozhin’s eyes” (205).
The reason for Myshkin’s visit is an effort to rescue Nastasya Filippovna from Rogozhin. During the time that elapsed between Part I and Part II, she managed to run away from Rogozhin to Myshkin seeking his protection, but has now come back to Rogozhin. Myshkin begins the conversation by vowing that he is no rival to Rogozhin: “I’m not your enemy and have no intention of hindering you in anything. I repeat it to you now just as I told it to you once before, in a moment almost like this” (208). A promise not to hinder Rogozhin “in anything” sounds strangely like an encouragement for Rogozhin to proceed with the course of events. Perturbed by the ease of his own acquiescence to Rogozhin’s sinister intentions, Myshkin pleads in horror: “How can you marry her now! …How will it be afterwards?” Rogozhin makes no reply and only returns “a heavy and terrible look” in the ensuing silence, in which Myshkin can see the inevitable (210). Quietly, “almost pensively, as if responding to some inner, hidden thought of his own,” Myshkin once again agrees to the wretched consequence of his decision: “all the same I won’t hinder you” (212).

Lost in his dark thoughts, Myshkin twice grabs from the table a small garden knife, which Rogozhin has to snatch out of his hands both times (217). Still refusing to fully accept his vicarious involvement in the murder, Myshkin wonders what a garden knife is doing on Rogozhin’s table. This persistence in obliviousness irritates Rogozhin and he begins to show Myshkin out. They pass through a large reception room, the walls of which are covered with numerous cheap copies of European paintings purchased by Rogozhin’s father for a few rubles at a flea market. In this aesthetic kaleidoscope, one image in particular — Holbein’s *Dead Christ* — attracts Myshkin’s attention. This is the first time the painting is mentioned in the novel. Terrified by the image, Myshkin recognizes in the picture an excellent reproduction of the painting he once saw in Basel. The image becomes the occasion for a threshold discussion of
faith and atheism, followed by an exchange of crosses as a symbol of brotherhood. Myshkin’s visit comes to an abrupt end when Rogozhin, out of desperation, shouts “Take her, then, if it’s fate! She’s yours! I give her up to you! …Remember Rogozhin!” and slams the door behind Myshkin (223).

The sequence continues with Myshkin meandering through the streets of St. Petersburg in an increasingly delirious state, signaling the approach of the epileptic seizure (224). Fleeing from the “dark, tormenting curiosity” which has entered his soul with Holbein’s painting, Myshkin begins to distract himself with every random image:

> There was a sort of lure in his contemplative state right then. His memories and reason clung to every external object, and he liked that: he kept wanting to forget something present, essential, but with the first glance around him he at once recognized his dark thought again, the thought he had wanted so much to be rid of […] With tormenting strained attention, he peered into everything his eyes lighted upon, he looked at the sky, at the Neva. He addressed a little child he met (227-228).

The dark thought that Myshkin is desperately trying to run away from anticipates the murder of Nastasya Filippovna. An effort to escape this realization casts Myshkin deeper into the vortex of mimetic disintegration. As the epileptic fit draws closer, Myshkin’s mind begins to unravel into a feuilletonistic reel of images consisting of random objects gleaned from passing shopwindows, a digest of graphic murder stories from the chronicle recounted to him earlier by Lebedev, memories of Rogozhin’s knife and thoughts of Nastasya Filippovna. Exhausted by this whirlpool of “chaos,” “turmoil,” and “the ugliness of it all,” Myshkin craves the final encounter with the gaze, which he anticipates would release him from this mimetic hell (228). Intuiting that his double would be waiting for him at the hotel, Myshkin heads home, where he sees a shadow of Rogozhin waiting under the hotel’s dark arch. He begins to chase the shadow up the stairs, reaching his “double” at the top of the dark staircase:
Today’s two eyes, the same ones, suddenly met his gaze. The man hiding in the niche also had time to take one step out of it. For a second the two stood face to face, almost touching. Suddenly the prince seized him by the shoulders and turned back to this stairs, closer to the light: he wanted to see the face more clearly. Rogozhin’s eyes flashed and a furious smile distorted his face. His right hand rose, and something gleamed in it; the prince did not even think of stopping him. He remembered only that he seemed to have cried out: “Parfyon, I don’t believe it!” … Then suddenly it was as if something opened up before him: an extraordinary inner light illumined his soul. This moment lasted perhaps half a second; but he nevertheless remembered clearly and consciously the beginning, the very first sound of his terrible scream, which burst from his breast of itself and which no force would have enabled him to stop. Then his consciousness instantly went out, and there was total darkness (234).

The mimetic rivalry between Myshkin and Rogozhin has finally reached its culmination and its violent potential has almost found its release. At the last moment, Myshkin’s epileptic seizure prevents this outpouring of violence thus storing it away for the novel’s finale.

In her psychoanalytical study of the novel, Elizabeth Dalton marked this scene as an example of Myshkin’s struggle with his sublimated sexuality, seeing the knife as both the instrument of penetration as well as that which castrates. However, she does recognize that “the primal scene” as described by Dostoevsky is not a physical but a visual experience, wherein “the persistent emphasis on darkness and indistinct vision […] at once arouses and frustrates the desire to see.”28 Indeed, from Dostoevsky’s notebook we know that he had originally intended this scene to be explicitly sexual. In the earliest sketch for this scene, the Idiot is awaiting Menyona at the top of a staircase to prevent her forcibly, from meeting with a lover (9:152). However, as in the final version the object of the Idiot’s desire is removed, the emphasis shifts from sexuality to the mimetic essence of perception itself. Therefore, it is not so much the visual nature of the erotic as it is the thoroughly erotic essence of the visual that is emphasized in this scene.

The problem of perception is at the heart of Myshkin’s epileptic experience. Given that Dostoevsky himself suffered from a grand mal epilepsy, this scene has generated endless medical and psychological studies. In the novel itself, however, the discussion of epilepsy is scarce and is limited to a description of Myshkin’s visual experience. The intensification of the mimetic flow builds up to the epileptic stroke, which is described as a fleeting yet powerfully pleasant moment of illumination of the soul with “extraordinary inner light” immediately followed by the collapse of consciousness into utter darkness and silence. Earlier in the scene, anticipating the pleasant moment of inner enlightenment, Myshkin recollects it by means of a phrase from The Apocalypse of St. John: “time shall be no more” [vremeni uzhe ne budet] (6:10). Myshkin further describes this timeless transcendent reality by means of the new form of vision that becomes possible in it: “it’s the same second in which the jug of water overturned by the epileptic Muhammad did not have time to spill, while he had time during the same second to survey [obozret’] all the dwellings of Allah” (8:227). In this brief moment of transcendence the incessant mimetic flow is suspended, thus liberating vision from the aesthetic mode of perception.

32 Jacques Catteau interprets time in The Idiot through the musical metaphor of tempo, thus suggesting that time plays a positive role of structuring the novel. See his “Chronology and Temporality in The Idiot” in his Dostoevsky and the Process of Literary Creation, trans. by Audrey Littlewood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 336-353.
beholds reality as wholesome, as one body not threatened by disintegration into endless fragments and pieces. Most likely Dostoevsky had intentions to develop Myshkin’s fleeting moment of transcendence later in the novel as counterpoint to the aesthetic vision epitomized in Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. However, the idea receives no development in the novel, which centers solely on the problem of aesthetic vision.

The brief moment of transcendent seeing is followed by Myshkin’s terrible cry and the collapse of his consciousness into darkness and silence. Dostoevsky’s reference here is to Christ’s cry on the cross. In the 1867 plan of the novel, just around the time when Dostoevsky saw the Holbein’s painting in Basel and began wondering how to incorporate it into the novel, he sketches the following dialogue in his notebooks: “Death on the cross disconcerts reason. But he has overcome reason too.” “What is this — a miracle?” “Of course, a miracle, although…” “What?” “Although there was a terrible cry as well.” “What sort of cry?” “Eloi! Eloi!” “That was the eclipse [zatmenie],” “I don’t know, but it is a terrible cry [uzhasnyi krik].” The dialogue is immediately followed by a brief note: “The story of Holbein’s Christ from Basel” (9: 184). Dostoevsky here alludes to the synoptic tradition of Christ’s passion, according to which at the moment of his death Christ cries out in a loud voice: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46).\(^{33}\) Nariman Skakov has argued that this Biblical allusion should not be interpreted as unequivocally nihilistic, but rather that we should see it as Dostoevsky’s rhetorical gesture aimed at creating a dialogically fertile silence.\(^{34}\) Indeed, while underscoring the nihilistic potential of Christ’s suffering on the cross, Dostoevsky’s passage does

---


not insist on it.\textsuperscript{35} It is significant, however, that Dostoevsky omits the passage from the final version of the novel. He thus distances Myshkin’s epileptic fit from its immediate Biblical context, instead rooting it deeper in the grotesque horror of Holbein. Therefore, while attributing to the novel an ultimate rhetorical significance, we should be careful not to underemphasize the seriousness of the tragedy that transpires within it. For there is in the novel a silence that is not rhetorical. The dumb silence that steps out of Holbein’s painting offers no occasion for dialogic reflection, but seeks to devour and annihilate.

It is this negating silence that links the Myshkin-Rogozhin sequence with the final scene of Nastasya Filippovna’s murder. Foreshadowing her own death in a letter to Aglaya, Nastasya Filippovna describes herself as being slowly swallowed by the silent gaze of Rogozhin:

\begin{quote}
I almost do not exist now and I know it; God knows what lives in me in place of me \textit{[chto vmeesto menia zhivet vo mne]}. I read that every day in two terrible eyes that constantly look at me, even when they are not before me! Those eyes are silent now (they are always silent), but I know their secret (455).
\end{quote}

We find in this passage a rare perspective from within the experience of the aestheticized object. Trapped inside the mimetic vortex of Myshkin’s compassion and Rogozhin’s lust, Nastasya Filippovna feels as if her being is gradually extinguished, while something nameless and mysterious slowly gains life inside her and in her stead \textit{[chto vmeesto menia zhivet vo mne]}. The process of aestheticization described by Nastasya Filippovna precisely follows Ippolit’s earlier description of how, by means of an image, aesthetic perception allows nothingness to gain a life and thus effectively to turn this nothingness into a kind of something. Nastasya Filippovna’s echoing of Ippolit is not accidental. As we will discover in the final scene, she is being slowly

\textsuperscript{35} With this passage Dostoevsky echoes one of the most important theological debates in the history of Christianity, the Christological implications of Christ’s suffering on the cross. For a broad overview of the matter within explicitly Patristic tradition see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, \textit{The Suffering of the Impassible God} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
turned into a version of Holbein’s painting, the image that Ippolit has discerned to be the ultimate expression of the demonic in the novel.

Dostoevsky introduces the final scene by recreating the Myshkin-Rogozhin sequence from the beginning of Part II. Since then, the mimetic triangle has been in the background of the novel, giving space over to numerous plot developments. It reemerges again in full force in the beginning of Part IV, in the capital scene of Aglaya’s confrontation with Nastasya Filippovna. After Aglaya runs out of the room (and out of the novel’s plot as well), Myshkin, Rogozhin and Nastasya Filippovna are left in the room, reconstituting the novel’s core triangulated relationship. As if purposefully encouraging the mimetic rivalry, Nastasya Filippovna, demonstratively and with demeaning laughter, orders Rogozhin to leave the room. Silently burning with spite, Rogozhin shifts into his mode of the devouring gaze thus sending the mimetic vortex into its final violent run: “Rogozhin looked at them intently [prista’no], did not say a word, took his hat, and left” (572).

In Girard’s framework, the frustrated “mimetic” rivals leave only to return to make one final effort to secure the object of desire through violence. Rogozhin returns to Pavlovsk on the day of Myshkin’s wedding with Nastasya Filippovna. Awaiting his bride at the church, Myshkin recognizes Rogozhin’s presence in the crowd; he senses the ominous burning gaze focused on himself (585). When Nastasya Filippovna arrives at the church’s porch she immediately falls under the control of the same gaze and, as if in a frenzy, begins to look for Rogozhin in the crowd: “[…] the crowd parted before her, and Rogozhin suddenly appeared five or six steps from the porch. It was his gaze that Nastasya Filippovna had caught in the crowd. She rushed to him like a madwoman and seized him by both hands” (593).
As she throws herself into Rogozhin’s embrace, Nastasya Filippovna shouts “Save me! Take me away!” (593). The irony of this exclamation reveals that she does not so much run to Rogozhin as away from Myshkin, finding his compassion more threatening than Rogozhin’s deadly lust. Aware of the fate awaiting her in Rogozhin’s house, she deliberately seeks Rogozhin’s knife, seeking not physical death but liberation from that demonic mimetic force that is slowly eroding her soul (215, 454). However, as the tragic irony of her fate would have it, Nastasya Filippovna cannot escape the aesthetic realm. Her dead body, like the dead body of Christ in Holbein’s painting, is destined to become a vehicle through which the demonic will exercise its final grip on the novel.

After Nastasya Filippovna elopes with Rogozhin to St. Petersburg, Myshkin spends the night in Pavlovsk in an inexplicable state of obliviousness to the unfolding tragedy. He leaves for St. Petersburg only the following morning, where he begins to look for Rogozhin and Nastasya Filippovna. Unable to find either of them, overcome with “complete despair” [sovershennoe otchaianie], he returns to his hotel. Here at the top of the dark staircase, at the same spot where he earlier wrestled with Rogozhin’s shadow, the realization of what must have taken place over the night begins to dawn on him.

Then he remembered Rogozhin himself: recently at the burial, then in the park, then suddenly here in the corridor, when he had hidden himself in corner that time and waited for him with a knife. His eyes he now remembered, his eyes looking out of the darkness then. He gave a start: the earlier importunate thought now came to his head (602).

As in the first sequence in Part II, the dark realization comes to Myshkin by means of a reconnection with his double. Haunted by Rogozhin’s eyes, Myshkin leaves the hotel, where immediately he is grabbed by Rogozhin and ordered to follow (603). Now that the object of desire has been secured, the two rivalling poles must come together around the object of their mutual pursuit, forming the whole that they are and have always been.
As if trying to ward off what he knows is true, Myshkin tries to engage Rogozhin in a conversation, but Rogozhin refuses dialogue. They walk silently, along opposite sides of the road, and as they approach Rogozhin’s dark house Myshkin’s realization of what he is going to find there is growing stronger while his body is getting weaker. Incessantly he keeps asking Rogozhin: “Where is Nastasya Filippovna?” to which Rogozhin returns only intent gazes and a simple word “there.” Myshkin must see it for himself. They walk into a dark room. Rogozhin refuses to light a candle, which intensifies the dramatic suspense created by the scarcity of light.

“It’s dark here,” Myshkin said. ‘You can see!’ Rogozhin muttered. ‘I can barely see…the bed.’ ‘Go closer” Rogozhin suggested quietly” (606). The prince took a couple of steps closer and stopped.

He stood and peered for a minute or two; neither man said anything all the while they were there by the bed; the prince’s heart was pounding so that it seemed audible in the dead silence of the room [pri mertvom molchanii komnati]. But his eyes were accustomed now [prigliadesia] so that he could make out [razlichat ‘] the whole bed; someone was sleeping there, a completely motionless sleep; not the slightest rustle, not the slightest breath could be heard. The sleeper [spavshyi] was covered from head to foot with a white sheet, but the limbs were somehow vaguely outlined; one could only see by the raised form that a person lay stretched out there. Scattered in disorder on the bed, at its foot, on the chair, next to the bed, even on the floor, were the discarded clothes, a costly white silk dress, flowers, ribbons. On the little table by the ‘head of the bed, the removed and scattered diamonds sparkled. At the foot of the bed some lace lay crumpled, in a heap, and against this white lace, peeping from under the sheet, the tip of a bare foot was outlined; it seemed carved from marble and was terribly still [uzhasno nepodyzhen]. The prince looked and felt that the more he looked, the more dead [mertvee] and quiet the room became. Suddenly an awakened fly buzzed, flew over the bed, and alighted by its head. The prince gave a start (606).

In this remarkable reconstitution of Holbein’s painting, death and silence are directly linked to vision. The more Myshkin looks, “the more dead [mertvee] and quiet” the room becomes. In his interpretation of this scene Skakov insists on the ambiguity of death and sleep, finding in the phrase “the dead silence of the room” [pri mertvom molchanii komnati] an indication that the room itself, like Holbein’s painting, is not a negating void but is full of fertile silence, pregnant
with dialogic potential.\footnote{Skakov, “Dostoevsky’s Christ and Silence at the Margins of The Idiot,” 125-127, 133.} This is an altogether too hopeful view of the matter. There is no ambiguity in this scene, just as there is no ambiguity in Holbein’s painting. The metaphor of sleep here is only an illusion to which Myshkin clings, trying to escape as long as possible that realization, which must finally dawn on him. In the end he does see the “marble body” that is “terribly still” [uzhasno nepodvizhen]. The seeming contradiction in the phrase “in the deathly silence” [pri mertvennom molchanii], wherein the Russian word molchanie as opposed to tishina indicates a silence created by some living being’s withholding of speech, precisely captures the contradiction inherent to the demonic essence of aesthetic vision. By means of an image — in this case the image of Nastasya Filippovna’s body — nothingness has gained a body and has become a kind of something. It is this “something” [chto] that Nastasya Filippovna describes in the letter to Aglaya as gaining “life” inside and instead of her.

The buzzing fly, which references Ippolit and his argument against Schiller’s aesthetic philosophy, adds the final layer of tragic irony (413). In the joyous buzzing of the fly, which in a carefree way participates in “the banquet and chorus of nature,” Schiller found a perfect illustration for his idea of “free contemplation.” Like a buzzing fly, Schiller argued, aesthetic perception should safely abandon itself to contemplation, trusting that the mimetic flow will eventually lead the gaze to idyllic calm and beauty. The fly joyously buzzing over the disintegrating body of Nastasya Filippovna underscores the tragedy of such Romantic naiveté.

Now that the violent potential of desire that had energized the mimetic rivalry has been released, the merging between the two rivals can finally take place:

Meanwhile it had grown quite light; he finally lay down on the pillows, as if quite strengthless now and in despair, and pressed his face to the pale and motionless face of Rogozhin; tears flowed from his eyes onto Rogozhin’s cheeks, but perhaps by then he no longer felt his own tears and knew nothing about them… (611).
The tears flowing from Myshkin’s eyes and onto Rogozhin’s face is the most fitting expression of that sorrowful bond that binds together the two kinds of aesthetic existence. With Nastasya Filippovna’s tragedy, Myshkin’s mind permanently descends into that darkness that had threatened to swallow him in Part II.

Conclusion

The Idiot is the only truly tragic novel in all of Dostoevsky’s works. To reduce its tragedy to a mere device of plot development would be to miss the epistemological significance the novel has for Dostoevsky’s poetics. In the determination with which Dostoevsky drives his novel towards its pronounced tragic finale we find nothing less than the author’s renunciation of the Romantic belief that a beautiful image — a form — can save the world. Not only is the beautiful image impotent to transform the world, but the mimetic flow it generates drives epistemic entropy. As the theological implication of Holbein’s painting suggests, aesthetic reality knows no resurrection and therefore is one of a decomposing body. Lest the world be lost to disintegration by aesthetic vision, a new form of vision radically dissimilar to aesthetic vision must be possible. Thus, from The Idiot onward, establishing the contours of such a vision is the main purpose of Dostoevsky’s poetics.
Chapter Three: The Empty Tomb

In the previous chapter I suggested that *The Idiot* is the novel where Dostoevsky’s polemic with the aesthetic worldview reaches its definitive breaking point. Holbein’s painting *Dead Christ*, which structures the novel’s drama, makes vivid Dostoevsky’s verdict — not only can beauty not save the world, but aesthetic perception is precisely the force by means of which the epistemological decomposition of reality occurs. Dostoevsky’s condemnation of aesthetic perception, however, is not an end in itself. As I argue in this dissertation, the nihilistic finale of *The Idiot* is part of an apophatic movement within Dostoevsky’s poetics, which seeks to affirm its main truth negatively, by means of dramatically intensifying its absence. Given the theological significance of Holbein’s painting, the truth that is emphatically absent in *The Idiot* is the truth of resurrection. Furthermore, resurrection is absent in *The Idiot*, not abstractly as an idea of moral renewal but as an epistemological revolution, which is grounded in the miracle of Christ’s resurrection. If by means of mimetic decomposition aesthetic perception inaugurates the eventness of death through mimetic decomposition, then resurrection constitutes a phenomenological event that endows the perceiver with the ability to see and thus inaugurate the reality of the transfigured world.

In this chapter I argue that the apophatic function of resurrection in Dostoevsky follows a distinctly Johannine blueprint. The Gospel of John conceives of the Christological drama in terms of epistemology, as an event that has fundamentally redefined our ability to relate to reality. If through incarnation Christ has entered the realm of aesthetic disintegration, through resurrection he has lifted perception from its mimetic servitude and into the fullness of perceiving and knowing. The Christological problem in Johannine theology is formulated in terms of the relationship between *seeing* and *believing*. The aesthetic vision demands first to see
a sign and then, based on the evidence, to believe that Christ has risen from the dead. The eyes of faith, on the other hand, believe and by means of faith recognize that Christ is the risen one without having to rely on the mimetic deduction. In Dostoevsky this epistemological formulation of the Christological problem finds its most forceful expression in Ippolit’s rhetorical question, who looking at the ghastly image of Christ’s decomposing body in Holbein’s painting asks: “By means of what image [kakim obrazom] could one believe, looking at such a corpse, that this sufferer would be resurrected?” (8:409). While Ippolit’s despair captures the futility of aesthetic perception, the phrasing of his question points in the direction of the answer that Dostoevsky will offer. It is not by means of looking that one will believe but by means of believing that one will see. Such vision of faith, however, must be born as one confronts the full depravity of aesthetic vision.

The Holbeinian image, however, is not merely an illustration of what aesthetic perception is but a mechanism by which aesthetic perception is driven to despair from its own fragmentation, where it is forced to open up to the radically new mode of encountering the world. Thus the resurrection vision, which is characterized in John by the disciples’ encounter with the empty tomb, is negatively pronounced by Dostoevsky through the Holbeinian image of a tomb literally full of a decomposing body. Hence an image/idea of a disintegrating body becomes central to Dostoevsky’s appropriation of Johannine theology.

In this chapter I focus on two of Dostoevsky’s most explicit engagements with Johannine theology — the resurrection of Lazarus motif in Crime and Punishment and the resurrection joy motif in “The Cana of Galilee” chapter of The Brothers Karamazov. In both instances the idea of a decomposing body is central to Dostoevsky’s argument. In Crime and Punishment Dostoevsky explores the idea of decomposition from within by delving into the drama of Raskolnikov’s
mental disintegration. In order to arise to new vision Raskolnikov must face himself as a dead and decomposing body of Lazarus inside a grave. In *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky describes Alyosha’s vision of the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee, which unfolds as Alyosha is sitting by a coffin with Zosima’s putrefying body. By analyzing the nature of the relationship between the image of decomposition and new vision I seek to demonstrate how the Johannine theology of resurrection expresses itself in Dostoevsky’s poetics.

I preface my analysis of these two Dostoevsky texts with a brief summary of Johannine theology. My goal here is both to offer a basic idea of the Johannine theology as a whole and to explain how the two portions borrowed by Dostoevsky — the resurrection of Lazarus and the Cana of Galilee episode — fit into the gospel structure. In John, poetics is an extension of theology. They cannot be understood separately. For Dostoevsky to borrow the two crucial scenes from the gospel is necessarily to engage not only with Johannine theology but also with his poetic structure. Therefore, by demonstrating the relationship between theology and poetics in John, I set the stage for appreciating the theological significance of Dostoevsky’s own poetics.

**The Irony of the Empty Tomb**

The Johannine imagination begins where the biblical imagination begins — with the fall. According to John the world has fallen into *the lust of the eyes* (1 John 2:16) — a state of epistemic blindness, which manifests itself as an unquenchable appetite for illusion, or as John refers to it, signs [*semeia*]. Just how serious the world’s epistemic blindness is John captures in one of the central miracles in the gospel — the healing of a man born blind (9:1-41). The metaphor of inborn blindness illustrates for John the tragic state of humanity, which requires not merely a correction of its vision but a gift of new sight. This point is underscored right at the
outset of the account, when disciples inquire of Christ whether the man was born blind because of his own sins or the sins of his parents. Christ responds that it was neither but had occurred so that “God’s works might be revealed in him” (9:3). Of course, the point here is not that the man is somehow outside the Adamic fall but only that his blindness is symbolically more profound than merely a punishment for a moral misstep. In fact, everything in this miracle becomes symbolic. To heal the eyes, Christ makes a mixture of saliva and mud and applies it to the eyes. He then sends the blind man to wash off in a public bath, from which the man returns “able to see” (9:7). The mixing of mud and saliva symbolizes incarnation, while the washing of the mud from the eyes in a pond looks through the metaphor of baptism to the idea of resurrection. Thus the Christological event unfolds literally on the blind man’s eyes.

John reiterates the link between the gaining of new sight and resurrection in another focal miracle in the gospel — the raising of Lazarus. At Lazarus’ grave, where Christ arrives four days late and where the smell of decomposition leaves no doubt that Lazarus has indeed died, people wonder with some resentment: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (11:37). By means of this question, which Dostoevsky quotes verbatim in Crime and Punishment, John directly links Christ’s gift of vision to the man born blind with the resurrection of Lazarus. The linking of two episodes is, however, saturated with irony as it exposes the crowd’s misunderstanding of what truly unfolded in the first miracle and explains why they could never have anticipated the latter. They understood the first miracle merely in physical terms, whereas it was already an unfolding of the Christological event. Indeed, Christ will do with Lazarus exactly what he did with the blind man, namely he will raise him from the grave of darkness. The irony of the crowd’s misunderstanding is amplified by the fact that Christ deliberately refused to “prevent” Lazarus from dying by purposefully delaying his help upon
learning of Lazarus’ illness (11:6). On a purely narratival level this seems cruel, of course, but
the Johannine gospel is not unfolding on the level of narrative. It is a cosmic drama that unfolds
in the ontological realm, altogether beyond the aesthetic and the ethical buttressing of the plot.
The basic assumption of this dramatic space is that the act of arising to new ontological seeing,
requires that one dies to the lustful eyes, to that aesthetic wantonness that keeps the soul in
perpetual blindness. It is precisely in this ontological sense of epistemic resurrection that the
Lazarus passage becomes significant for Crime and Punishment.

On the literary level, therefore, the Johannine gospel can be seen as a dramatization of
epistemic blindness. To this literary end it makes significant use of a device, which Aristotle in
the Poetics calls anagnorisis [recognition] (1450a33–34; 1452a28), the sudden “change from
ignorance to knowledge” that occurs in a character within a tragic plot or in a spectator (reader)
of tragedy.¹ A locus classicus of anagnorisis in ancient literature is the bath scene in Homer’s
The Odyssey. Having arrived at the shores of his native Ithaca after twenty years of absence,
Odysseus disguises himself as an old acquaintance of his master and as a stranger enters his own
house. As a gesture of hospitality, Odysseus’s childhood nurse Eurycleia, now an old woman,
gives the stranger a bath. As she reaches for Odysseus’s thigh, she touches the scar received by
Odysseus at a young age long before the Trojan expedition. Bursting into tears of joy Eurycleia
captures the moment of her anagnorisis with the famous line: “Surely you are Odysseus, dear
child…” (19.474).²

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 392-393. For the study of the bath scene see Sheila Murnaghan,
Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 14-40. For the bath scene in
the context of world literature see Erich Auerbach’s “Odysseus’ Scar” in Mimesis, trans. Willard R. Trask
This Homeric episode finds an indirect manifestation in the gospel of John, where “the doubting” Thomas demands to see and touch the scars of the resurrected Christ in order to believe that the one who was crucified has in fact risen from the dead: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (20:25). The next time the resurrected Christ visits the gathering of the disciples, he invites Thomas to touch the scars and thus recognize that resurrection has indeed taken place: “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (20:28). However, unlike Eurycleia’s anagnorisis, which requires her to touch the scar of Odysseus, Thomas does not take Christ’s invitation to touch the scars and simply proclaims: “My Lord and my God!” To which Christ reacts with a rhetorical question: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29). In Christ’s response we find the crucial departure of the Johannine idea of anagnorisis from its Aristotelian counterpart, which holds that true knowing is mimetically deliverable. By means of the rhetorical ambiguity of Christ’s response, John underscores the ridiculousness of Thomas’s earlier demand for a sign. Whether Thomas’s faith is in any significant way linked to his seeing of the sign or whether it is granted to him as a gift, and thus comes into being despite the sign, Christ’s ultimate exhortation affirms the anagnorisis of faith as fundamentally non-mimetic.

In The Brothers Karamazov the “doubting Thomas” pericope is mentioned twice, and both times Thomas’ faith is emphasized as preceding the miracle. In the opening pages of the novel, supporting the claim that “in the realist, faith is not born from miracles, but miracles from faith,” the narrator deliberates, “Was it the miracle that made Thomas believe? Most likely not, but he believed first and foremost because he wished to believe, and maybe already fully
believed in his secret heart even as he was saying: ‘I will not believe until I see.’”

The same point is ironically reiterated by Ivan’s “devil,” a demonic apparition that haunts Ivan in the concluding parts of the novel. Mocking Ivan’s refusal to believe in the supernatural, the devil observes, “Don’t believe it then [...] what good is faith by force? Besides, proofs are no help to faith, especially material proofs. Thomas believed not because he saw the risen Christ but because he wanted to believe even before that” (BK, 636).

It is in the *The Idiot*, however, that we find Dostoevsky’s most important reference to “doubting Thomas.” In his characteristic manner of indirect quotation, Dostoevsky evokes Thomas’ “unless I see…I won’t believe” with Ippolit’s: “By means of what image [kakim obrazom] could one believe, looking at such a corpse, that this sufferer would be resurrected?” (8:409). Unlike Thomas, who is in the presence of the resurrected Christ and therefore within the eventness of resurrection, Ippolit is haunted by Holbein’s image of Christ’s decomposing body, which seals him inside the mimetic impulse of his imagination. With his rhetorical question Ippolit exposes the tragic irony of Thomas’s demand for a sign. For eyes trapped within the mimetic propensity of perception, to demand a sign is to ask for a vision of a disintegrating corpse. Within the aesthetic mode of relating to the world, the Aristotelian anagnorisis is bound to prove an impotent modulation of perception, which can only bring the soul to the brink of despair by making it realize that it is hopelessly trapped within the disintegrating force of reality.

To be an engaged reader of John, as I believe Dostoevsky was, is to saturate one’s thought process with the fundamental question: “are signs [images] necessary for faith or is faith something that liberates sight and therefore liberates a being from the need to rely on aesthetic vision?” As regards this question, the readers of John can arguably be divided into two camps.

---

The first group insists that “signs” have positive value and function as tokens of a developing narrative, the final purpose of which is to prove to both the characters in the gospel and to the readers of the gospel that Christ is indeed divine, that he has indeed risen from the dead. For this group of readers the Johannine anagnorisis is identical to the Aristotelian, which means that sacred knowledge is somehow the product of successful mimesis. The other group takes seriously the mystical nature of Johannine theology and therefore understands the signs in the gospel to have a negative function. The signs are apocalyptic distractions, which intensify the world’s tragic blindness and thus bring the spectator to an apophatic threshold where he must renounce mimesis and arise, or rather be risen to new seeing.

It is the argument of this dissertation that Dostoevsky belongs to the second group of Johannine readers. Exactly how such reading expresses itself in Dostoevsky’s poetics we can understand with the help of the Johannine scholar George L. Parsenios. In a study of the dramatic aspect of the gospel, Parsenios raises a fundamental objection to the first group’s tendency to emphasize the narrative structure of the gospel by arguing that the idea of plot in the gospel is highly problematic. While there are portions of the text that exhibit some plot-like features — the recognition scenes in Chapters 5 through 19 could be seen as forming some gradual progression — there are crucially important scenes in the gospel that not only break that sequence but theologically “undermine” the very idea of sequential development. Therefore, Parsenios argues, instead of understanding the scenes to be fitting “after one another,” we should understand them as fitting “into one another.”

---

6 George L. Parsenios, Rhetoric and Drama in the Johannine Lawsuit Motif (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 113-121.
Parsenios here echoes György Lukács, who formulated a non-sequential structuring principle based on his examination of the structural significance of death in Greek tragedy. Death in a Greek tragedy does not function as the culminating point of a plot. Already in the opening verse the chorus informs the spectator of the hero’s death and the rest of the tragedy is performed with the understanding that the death has already taken place. More often than not, death itself occurs offstage so that the spectator only gets to see the corpse, which is brought on stage for viewing as the final report of death is read. The most obvious manifestation of this tragic principle in Dostoevsky is *The Idiot*, where Nastasya Filippovna’s death is hinted at as early as the opening of Part II, while her murder is not described and her corpse is dramatically presented in the final scene. Here is how Lukács summarizes the *eventness* of death in Greek tragedy: “The dying heroes of tragedy […] are dead a long time before they die […] the tragic experience, then is a beginning and an end at the same time. Everyone at such a moment is newly born, yet has been dead for a long time…” It can be said therefore that Greek tragedy cancels out the sequential flow of time, collapsing it into one dramatic event, which is not a mere freezing of time but an apocalyptic *fulfillment* of its tragic potential.

The gospel of John resembles the structure of Greek tragedy, with the crucial difference that it is not Christ’s death but resurrection that binds it into one event. Here is how Parsenios puts it: “If those destined to die in tragedy have already died, are dying and are no more, then, in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus has risen, is risen and is no longer in the world, but has ascended to the Father — even before these events are actually narrated.” In other words, the gospel is written

---

8 Lukács, Ibid., 159. Quoted in Parsenios, 119-120.
9 Parsenios, 120.
from the post-resurrection perspective, which means that before any event is narrated in the gospel, it has already been placed under the irony of Christ’s resurrection.

The idea that everything that transpires in the gospel is already under the irony of resurrection is not only the single most important idea in Johannine theology but also constitutes the gospel’s single most important structuring principle. A pivotal manifestation of Johannine irony in the gospel both ideologically and structurally is Christ’s miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee (2:1-11). John underscores the fact that this is the first miracle performed by Christ with a phrase — arche ton semeion [the first of the signs] (2:1-11). Willis Salier has pointed out that the first [arche] here should be understood not so much as “the first” in order of signs but as “the foundation” and therefore, as we might phrase it, a fullness of everything that is to transpire in the gospel.10 To mark this miracle as a manifestation of the full glory of resurrection, John has Christ first resist performing a miracle, with the words: “My hour has not yet come,” thus implying that he abides by the logic of the narrative (2:4). However, John makes Christ render this response only to underscore his “premature” performing of the miracle and thus his manifesting of the glory of resurrection in fullness even before the narrative of the gospel had begun. Perhaps the best summary of the theological significance of Cana of Galilee is found in the following chapter, in the words of John the Baptist who says: “He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled” (3:29). The metaphor of a wedding feast becomes here a metaphor for Christ’s incarnation, while the completeness of the Baptist’s joy once again underscores the fact that resurrection is not something pending but already an event that is fully in play.

10 Willis H. Salier, The Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia in the Gospel of John (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 50. See also the discussion of this point of Salier’s in Parsenios, 107-108.
It is this fullness of the joy of resurrection that Dostoevsky appeals to in The Brothers Karamazov, when in the chapter titled “Cana of Galilee,” he tells of Alyosha’s ecstatic experience by the coffin of his beloved elder Zosima. This episode will deserve a close reading later in this chapter where I will consider how in this scene Dostoevsky creates apophatic tension by colliding the Holbeinian theme of a decomposing body with Johannine resurrection joy. At this point, it is worth highlighting that Dostoevsky’s appeal to the Cana of Galilee motif at such an important juncture in the novel is by no means an instance of random intertextuality but an astute engagement with Johannine theology.

In order to appreciate how Johannine irony expresses itself structurally, it is worth making a few observations about the poetic structure of the gospel as a whole. It can be broken down as follows: A. Prologue (ch. 1); B. The Miracle at Cana (ch. 2); C. The Law Suit Motif (chs. 5-19); and D. Resurrection (ch. 20). I have omitted chs. 3-4, which feature Christ’s conversation with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. Both chapters can be seen as prequels to the narrative section of chs. 5-19. I also omit ch. 21, which describes Christ’s post resurrection appearances. Most scholars agree that as a much later textual interpolation, ch. 21 stands outside the gospel’s main theological problematic and thus constitutes a sort of appendix to ch. 20.¹¹ The prologue is a poetic celebration of Christ’s incarnation, which proclaims Christ not merely as a historical figure but as the universal mystery of Logos and Light who had victoriously entered the world and thus transfigured its reality. “That which has come into being, in Him had its life, and the life was the light of the people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not mastered it” (John 1:4, 5). Dostoevsky’s prolific reliance on the darkness/light dualism is

¹¹ For a survey of the Johannine scholarship on this point see John Ashton, Understanding the Fourth Gospel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42-44.
fundamentally rooted in the theology expressed in this Johannine prologue.\textsuperscript{12} We can say that the miracle at Cana of Galilee is a continuation of the prologue’s celebratory message and thus forms one single theological unit with it. The bulk of the gospel belongs to chs. 5-19, a portion that could be described as the narrative of Christ’s life in the world. The basic idea that structures this narrative is best described as Christ on trial by the Jews, who demand from him “signs” of his divinity, remaining blind to the fact (unable to recognize) that they are already in the divine presence. The irony of resurrection, which has been announced in ch. 2 in the miracle of Cana, permeates this entire sequence of recognition scenes. Thus Christ turns his miracles not into mere “evidence” of his divine essence — no matter what miracles he performs, they remain insufficient to persuade all or most of the judges — but into miracles that symbolically underscore and thus almost mock the blindness of the judges. The healing of the inborn blind man is the most obvious example of such an ironic miracle.

The trial theme that structures most of chs. 5-19 sequence has earned this section the label of “The Lawsuit Motif.” Only fittingly therefore the entire chs. 5-19 sequence culminates in the trial of Christ by Pontius Pilate (ch. 19).\textsuperscript{13} In the person of Pilate the whole world, the universal history of humanity attempts to put Christ on trial. Pilate’s rhetorical question “What is truth?” thrown at Christ captures not only Pilate’s own disillusionment with the very idea of knowledge but also underscores the inevitable nihilistic finale of all aesthetic judgment. The

\textsuperscript{12} For a survey of Dostoevsky’s use of the dark/light dualism, which illuminates the distinction between aesthetic and religious ideas of light in Dostoevsky, see Margarita M. Pankratova’s dissertation “Poetika sveta i t’my v tvorchestve F.M. Dostoevskogo,” PhD diss., Moskovskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 2007. For a more explicit engagement of Johannine theology in interpreting the darkness/light dualism in Dostoevsky, see the discussion of the Johannine apocalyptic image of a “dead sun” by P.V. Bekedin in his “Povest’ ‘Krotkaia’ (K istolkovaniu obraza mertvogo solntsa)” in Dostoevskii. Materialy i issledovaniiia, Vol. 7 (1987): 102-124.

\textsuperscript{13} See Parsenios, 34-41. For the broader significance of the judgement motif in Johannine theology see C.H. Dodd’s “Light, Glory, Judgement” in his The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 201-212.
irony of this scene is once again Pilate’s inability to recognize that he is in the presence of truth. Cast in the light of resurrection irony, Pilate stands as an impotent executor who fails to see not only that he could never be a judge of Christ but that he himself has been judged by the one who has risen from the dead.

It is this irony of “unrecognized presence” that becomes central in Dostoevsky’s dramatization of this scene in Ivan Karamazov’s poem “The Grand Inquisitor.” Ivan is obsessed with judgment — note his article on the Russian ecclesial courts as well as his final mental disintegration in the court scene of Dmitri’s trial. This obsession with judgment finds its ultimate expression in Ivan’s putting Christ himself on trial through a literary alias of The Grand Inquisitor. Alyosha will point out to Ivan the irony of his brother’s situation as his inability to recognize Christ as the one who has suffered a human life and has risen.

Johannine irony finds a further structural manifestation in The Brothers Karamazov. The two most important scenes in the novel are Ivan’s rebellion, which includes his “The Grand Inquisitor,” and Alyosha’s dream sequence next to Zosima’s coffin. While Ivan’s poem is a rendition of Christ’s trial by Pontius Pilate, Alyosha’s dream sequence is an interpretation of the miracle at Cana of Galilee, a fact emphasized by Dostoevsky by titling the chapter — “Cana of Galilee.” What is accomplished with these two central poles of the novel, therefore, is a dramatization of two major structural junctures in the Johannine gospel. It is safe to assume that these strategic references to Johannine material are not random instances of a Biblical presence but are Dostoevsky’s purposeful, even if not conscious, absorption of the Johannine poetic structure within his own text. Dostoevsky’s theological purpose with these borrowings becomes obvious once we remember the nature of the relationship between John’s ch. 2 and ch. 19. I have already mentioned how the miracle at Cana of Galilee is a celebration of the resurrection truth
which by coming in ch. 2 precedes the narratival sequence of chs. 5-19 and thus markedly stands outside the narrative. As a timeless event of Christ’s glorious resurrection, it projects its irony onto the sequence of chs. 5-19. Thus when the sequence culminates in ch. 19 in the trial of Christ by Pilate, it does so in a critically important relationship to ch. 2, which has already put this trial under the irony of resurrection. When Dostoevsky puts Ivan’s “trial of Christ” in tension with Alyosha’s “Cana of Galilee,” he re-creates inside his own text the same theological dynamic of irony that governs the Gospel of John.

It remains to show how the “Resurrection Chapter” (ch. 20) fits into John’s structure. When pointing out the non-narrative structure of the gospel, I have suggested that ch. 20 is not a culmination of the chs. 5-19 sequence. First, chs. 5-19 do not really display any significant gradual development, and can be described as a narrative only provisionally. Secondly, and most importantly, Christ’s resurrection — his hour of glory — has already been pronounced in ch. 2 at Cana of Galilee and thus ch. 20 effectively says nothing new but only reiterates the truth that has already been announced. The best way to conceptualize ch. 20, therefore, is as we think of ch. 2, namely as an atemporal proclamation of the resurrection truth which subjects chs. 5-19 to the irony of this timeless event.

Ch. 20 deserves a closer look, because it constitutes an important, even if silent, background to *The Idiot* and thus by extension a critical background for Dostoevsky’s entire poetics. The chapter consists of three central episodes: the discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene and her subsequent meeting of the resurrected Christ in the garden; Peter and John’s discovery of the empty tomb; and finally the two visitations of the disciples by the resurrected Christ, where at the second visitation the aforementioned encounter with “doubting Thomas” occurs. The entire chapter can be summarized as a development of the “empty tomb” motif.
Unable to recognize that Christ has risen from the dead, the disciples are shocked by the fact that his body is missing from the tomb. Gradually, however, their inability to see Christ’s dead body is replaced by their beholding of a resurrected Christ. When in *The Idiot* Dostoevsky places at the heart of the novel Holbein’s painting, which is a graphic depiction of a tomb literally full of Christ’s decomposing body, he is alluding to this Johannine “empty tomb” motif. We see here Dostoevsky’s apophaticism at work wherein the reality of resurrection is affirmed through its emphatic absence.

In addition to Dostoevsky’s general evocation of the Resurrection Chapter (ch. 20) he makes specific reference to each of the chapter’s three episodes. In my reading of *The Idiot* in my second chapter, I examined at length Dostoevsky’s appeal to the Mary Magdalene motif in the drama of Nastasya Filippovna. And earlier in this chapter, I indicated the link between Thomas’s desire to see the body of Christ and the opposite idea in Ippolit, who cannot escape looking at Christ’s body in Holbein’s painting. I shall now briefly expand on how Peter and John’s discovery of the empty tomb is relevant for *The Idiot*.

Having heard from Mary Magdalene that the body of Christ had disappeared, the two disciples run to the tomb. John gets to the tomb first but does not enter, while Peter, spurred by an uncontrollable desire for evidence, steps right into the tomb upon reaching it:

> Peter saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed (20:6-9).

This scene closely resembles the episode wherein Thomas demands to see evidence in order to believe. Thomas’s reaction is here split by John into two potentialities that are implicit in Thomas’s doubt. Peter enters into the tomb, sees the physical manifestations of Christ’s miraculous disappearance from the tomb — the linen wrappings are lying in a way that
demonstrates that Christ’s body was not unwrapped — yet the “signs” so directly present before his eyes do not lead him to believe. By contrast, and the contrast is deliberate in this scene, John enters the tomb, sees the “signs” and immediately believes. The sudden transition from seeing to believing, which markedly keeps silent about any mediating images, creates the same kind of theological ambiguity that we saw in Thomas’s final recognition of Christ, namely: we cannot easily tell whether it was evidence that led John to faith or whether he believed regardless of the evidence. However, the deliberate contrast with Peter’s lack of believing despite signs strongly suggests the second reading.

The relationship between seeing and believing in John’s “saw and believed” once again takes us directly back to Ippolit’s “how can one believe looking at” (8:409). Holbein’s painting makes an important use of Christ’s linen wrappings. They are barely covering Christ’s body and are almost entirely unbundled, so that if Christ’s body were to disappear from the tomb, the linen wrappings would never become “signs” of resurrection. Holbein’s own polemic with the Johannine “empty tomb” motif here is unmistakable as he assaults aesthetic perception to the point of leaving it no hope of arising to faith by means of mimetic relationship with anything that is depicted in the image. It is this Johannine theology apophatically [in absentia] present in Holbein’s painting that most likely drew Dostoevsky to it and encouraged him not only to make it an important part of the novel but in fact to turn his own novel into a rendition of the painting. We arrive here at the ultimate Johannine significance of The Idiot for Dostoevsky’s entire poetics. By means of The Idiot’s own apophatic relationship to the idea of resurrection, the entire problematic of decomposition in Dostoevsky, whether it explicitly manifests itself in a dead and putrid body such as Zosima’s in The Brothers Karamazov or is silently present in the novel’s
feuilletonistically fragmenting structure as in *The Devils*, it has already been placed by *The Idiot* under the irony of the empty tomb.

By way of a transition to my discussion of Johannine irony in *Crime and Punishment*, let me make a final observation about the nature of the structural relationship between ch. 20 and The Lawsuit Motif sequence of chs. 5-19. I already mentioned that ch. 20 is not a culmination of the sequence but stands in an atemporal relationship to it. If The Wedding at Cana of Galilee (ch. 2) can be seen as a prologue to The Lawsuit Motif sequence (chs. 5-19), The Resurrection (ch. 20) can be seen as its epilogue. However, if for the most part ch. 20 remains negatively present in The Lawsuit Motif (chs. 5-19), that is to say it is present only as unrecognized reality, there is one scene where Christ’s resurrection enters into the narrative almost explicitly — the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection in ch. 11. By suddenly breaking into the narrative sequence of chs. 5-19, the Lazarus pericope pronounces Christ’s resurrection *from within* the narrative and thus further undermines its temporal and therefore mimetic validity.

The problem of time here is especially significant. The latest of the four gospels, John was written when some basic structures of Christian theology had already solidified. Among these basic theological ideas, we find a proclamation of Christ as “the firstborn from the dead,” which means that by being the first to rise from the dead Christ has foreshadowed the resurrection of everyone and everything. Here is how this idea manifests itself in the writings of St. Paul: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Corinthians 15:20) and “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, *the firstborn from the dead*, so that he might come to have first place in everything” (Colossians 1:18). We can also find this Pauline proclamation inside a Johannine text: “From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, *the firstborn of the dead*, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation...
1:5). The question to ask here then is, if Christ is the first to rise from the dead then why does John tell us of Lazarus’s resurrection in ch. 11 and thus chronologically put it before Christ’s own resurrection in ch. 20? Once again, in play here is the Johannine irony of resurrection that assumes Christ’s resurrection is an atemporal event and therefore one that took place long before Lazarus was even born. By placing Lazarus’s passage right at the heart of the gospel’s narrative, John has both undermined its temporal/mimetic validity and also created a structural link between the narratival sequence of chs. 5-19 and the resurrection epilogue of ch. 20. Thus Lazarus’s resurrection is both made possible by Christ’s resurrection and at the same time foreshadows Christ’s resurrection. Within the theological logic of the gospel there is no contradiction here.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky recreates the same structural relationship between the epilogue and the novel’s main narrative. In the scene where Sonya reads John ch. 11 to Raskolnikov, the Lazarus passage fulfills a similar theological and structural purpose as it does in the gospel itself. On the one hand, from within the narrative it pronounces resurrection as an event that has already taken place, thus suspending the mimetic flow of the novel as something that has already been overcome. On the other hand, it foreshadows Raskolnikov’s resurrection in the epilogue and thus creates a theological link that relates the epilogue to the main body of the novel. I will argue that Raskolnikov’s resurrection is postulated by Dostoevsky as an atemporal event. As something that is fated to happen, it is in some sense something that has already happened. Once again we see Dostoevsky appealing to John not only for theology but also for structure, which of course is understandable, since Johannine poetics is an extension of Johannine theology. The same link between theology and structure is true of Dostoevsky’s post-Siberian texts, and the first novel where Dostoevsky’s poetics becomes explicitly theological is
Crime and Punishment. It is therefore fitting to begin my discussion of Johannine irony in Dostoevsky with an analysis of this novel.

Lazarus

Crime and Punishment is a novel that ultimately concerns itself neither with crime nor with punishment. In a set of notes from 1944 devoted to Shakespeare’s murderous dramas, Bakhtin makes an observation that takes us to the heart of the novel’s problem:

Raskolnikov’s room […] is a grave [grob], in which Raskolnikov goes through the phase of death [faza smerti] so as to be resurrected and renewed. Sennaya Square, the streets—all these are the arena on which God and the devil struggle in a person’s soul; every word, every thought, is correlated with the [outer] limits [sootneseny s predelami], with hell and paradise, with life and death. But it is typical that life and death are given here exclusively on the inner plane, having to do only with the soul; nobody (among the main characters) faces the threat of physical death; the struggle between life and death on the earthly plane is here altogether absent—the heroes live in a rather safe world. But how problematic these poles and coordinates are: defining the human being [opredelenie cheloveka], they themselves need definition; they themselves are drawn into the struggle (there is a need for some kind of coordinates for the coordinates).14

The claim that “the threat of physical death” is absent in the novel, which features the single most graphic murder scene in the entire Dostoevsky corpus, might strike us as strange. What allows Bakhtin to make this claim, however, is an assumption that the drama of the novel takes place exclusively “on the inner plane” and therefore has to do “only with the soul.” Building on the Johannine motif of Lazarus’s resurrection, which Dostoevsky places at the heart of his novel, Bakhtin associates the inner plane with Raskolnikov’s dark, coffin-like room wherein the protagonist — a Lazarus in a grave — is passing through “the phase of death.” We should not, however, confuse the interiority of Raskolnikov’s soul with psychological subjectivity, a

category uninteresting to Bakhtin and not very important to Dostoevsky. When it comes to tragedies, Bakhtin would explain, one may speak only of “the deep psychology of life itself, the psychology of individuality as such” (553). In other words, within the austerity of Raskolnikov’s grave, where his every thought is correlated with ontological limits, Raskolnikov’s individuality is stripped down to its basic coordinates, to bare being.

Raskolnikov is a tragic figure and therefore the murder he commits is not an immoral act but, as Bakhtin puts it elsewhere in the Shakespeare notes, the “suprajuridical crime [nadyuridicheskoe prestuplenie] of any self-asserting life” (553). Bakhtin’s reasoning here is simple. To persist in living is in a fundamental sense to live at the expense of another and thus, in the ultimate sense, it is to live a murderous life. As a tragic figure, Raskolnikov is called forth to unambiguously relive the dark truth of all human existence. His transgression [prestuplenie] is not an overstepping some rule of law but a stepping outside the ethical and into the ontological realm where the buttressing of law is altogether absent. It is therefore difficult to agree with Konstantin Mochulsky’s famous description of the novel as a “medieval morality play,” since the overwhelming role of fate in the novel makes Raskolnikov’s drama far closer to that of ancient Greek tragedy. Acknowledging the central role of fate in the novel Robert Louis Jackson offered a middle ground solution, according to which Raskolnikov is still morally responsible for his crime because through despair he loses himself to the tragic “wheel of fate,” which then makes the murder inevitable. In my reading, however, this turns Raskolnikov into too much of an Ivan Karamazov figure. Just as Sonya Marmeladova is not Alyosha, so Raskolnikov is not Ivan Karamazov. Raskolnikov is not a character in any traditional sense of the word but the

naked potentiality of a life, or as Bakhtin puts it in the first quote, he is a set of “poles and coordinates” drawn into a conflict with each other in an effort to define a human life. There in the cold severity of the infinite ontological sphere a disoriented Raskolnikov must face his “need for some kind of coordinates for the coordinates.”

As Raskolnikov’s ontological drama takes central stage, his psychological dismantling has direct ramifications for the novel’s structure. John Jones has observed that the narrator’s voice often merges with Raskolnikov’s own, thus fusing the reader’s perspective with that of the protagonist. As a result we do not receive a steadily unfolding narrative but are forced to follow Raskolnikov’s agitated gaze. Arguing in favor of the visual composition of the novel, Roger Anderson has pointed out that Raskolnikov’s “movement through the novel is recorded in a composition of unpredictable, brilliantly marked scenic episodes, each of which he experiences as an independent psychological event with its own duration.” While causally unrelated, these visual fragments for Anderson are not entirely random. Observing that the scenic episodes would often be marked by the presence of objects and details that hold a special significance to Raskolnikov, Anderson goes on to suggest that such “spatial images” (objects, details, colors, architectural spaces, portraits, characters etc.) accumulate into “patterns of repetition and juxtaposition which carry the secrets of Raskolnikov’s compulsion to explore his own disjointed interiority.” Indeed, Raskolnikov is obsessed with details and Anderson is justified not to see

---

19 Ibid. Anderson builds his idea of “the spatial image” as a structuring principle of Dostoevsky’s poetics on a seminal article by Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Three Parts” in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (1945): 643-653. Though this essay belongs to the pre-Dostoevsky stage of Frank’s career and therefore does not deal with Dostoevsky’s poetics, it has been adopted by a number of scholars as a lens through which to read Dostoevsky. For another example, see James M. Curtis, “Spatial Form as the Intrinsic Genre of Dostoevsky’s Novels” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1972): 135-154.
this obsession as merely an irrational anxiety of a pursued criminal consciousness but an effort of a disintegrated consciousness to hang on to an image as onto something stable. However, the stream of innumerable details that flash through Raskolnikov’s and therefore the reader’s mind hardly amounts to any intricate psychological totality, “an optically ordered canvas” that could be “perceived simultaneously” as a whole. Instead, the novel remains a manifestation of Raskolnikov’s “disjointed interiority.”

It is, of course, not an accident that the novel is set in St. Petersburg, the city described by the underground man as the “most abstract [otlechennyi] and intentional [umyshlennyi] city in the whole world” (5:101). Since within Dostoevsky’s world St. Petersburg is not a physical but an imagined place, it never amounts to a stable image or a set of images but always remains a flexible ebb of images spawned by a feuilletonistic flow of consciousness. If we distance ourselves from the immediate “chase and catch” theme in the novel, we can see Raskolnikov’s ceaseless roaming throughout St. Petersburg as a desperate effort to construct a system of coordinates that could provide him with aesthetic stability. Michael Holquist, who reads the novel as an opposition between secular and eternal time, shows how most of what constitutes the realm of the city and the novel’s plot is essentially Raskolnikov’s effort to produce his own “secular kairos,” a flow of time that he controls. While I entirely agree with Holquist’s idea of dual time in the novel, I believe Raskolnikov’s “secular kairos” is best understood as the image flow. Raskolnikov is not interested in time or history for its own sake, but only as part of his effort to arrange his disjointed mental fragmentation into an aesthetic wholeness. Therefore,

---


Raskolnikov’s ultimate choice is not so much between two ideas of time as between two kinds of visual realities — the reality of disintegration induced by the feuilletonistic time flow, and a reality of beholding that is induced by iconic presence wherein time and therefore the mimetic flow ceases. The choice between these two potentialities for Raskolnikov is a choice between Svidrigailov and Sonya, two ontologically significant characters in the novel not on par with the other characters.

Before more closely examining the nature of Raskolnikov’s relationship with Svidrigailov and Sonya, it is necessary to make some observations about other characters in the novel. By means of the murder Raskolnikov exited into the suprajuridical realm, placing himself beyond the narrative and therefore beyond all the characters in the novel. Hence his inability to communicate with anyone in his world, except Svidrigailov and Sonya. No matter how profound and intricate their ideas or observations might be, for Raskolnikov and therefore for the reader, all the other characters in the novel exist already as fragments of Raskolnikov’s feuilletonistic consciousness. As is the case with theatrical props, the characters in Crime and Punishment do not ultimately matter until that moment when the mystery unfolding on the tragic stage chooses to speak through them. In that second, the tragic mask grows heavy with potentiality and enters inside ontological space as one of its coordinates, a pole towards or against which the being of Raskolnikov must struggle. Such moments are few and usually very brief. Most of the novel’s plot and characters remain a distant urban noise floating by somewhere outside Raskolnikov’s soul.

In a scene that inaugurates Raskolnikov’s arrival into the ontological sphere we find one of the earliest moments when a seemingly insignificant character suddenly becomes a powerful gravitational pole. Soon after the murder a restless Raskolnikov returns into his room where he
has trouble falling asleep due to “boundless horror.” Suddenly a bright light breaks into his dark room. Nastasya, “a very talkative countrywoman” serving as a cook and a servant at the lodge, walks in with “a candle and a plate of soup.” As she is setting up food on the table, Raskolnikov attempts to have a regular conversation with her about what he thinks was the noise of the landlady being beaten by police. Having replied that there had been no beating, Nastasya gives Raskolnikov a severe look, from which we can gather that this scene is not another routine narratival occurrence:

Nastasya studied him silently, frowning, and went on looking at him like that for a long time. He began feeling very unpleasant, even frightened, under this scrutiny. “Nastasya, why are you silent?” he finally said timidly, in a weak voice. “It’s the blood,” she finally answered softly, as if speaking to herself. “Blood! What blood?” he murmured, turning pale and drawing back towards the wall. Nastasya went on looking at him silently […] “No one was here. It’s the blood clamoring in you. When it can’t get out and starts clotting up into these little clots, that’s when you start imagining things… Are you going to eat, or what?” He did not reply. Nastasya went on standing over him, looking at him steadily, and would not go away. “Give me water…Nastasyushka.” She went downstairs and came back about two minutes later with water in a white earthenware mug; but he no longer remembered what happened next. He only remembered taking one sip of cold water and spilling some from the mug onto his chest. Then came unconsciousness.22

A. Khots observes that for Dostoevsky, the concentrated light of a candle is an artistic means of suspending time and “localizing amorphous space,” thus “thickening” [uplotnenie] the eventness [sobytiinost’] of the scene. “Pinpoint lighting removes for the hero all that ‘middle’ world that separates him from the cosmos, thus directly colliding him with the space of the universe.”23 As all the “middle” feuilletonistic imagery is removed and Raskolnikov is no longer able to hang on to his “spatial images,” he is suddenly open to the vastness of the ontological realm yet at the


same time firmly *beheld* by a combination of concentrated light and Nastasya’s piercing gaze. In a similar fashion Dostoevsky employs candle light in the scene where the Lazarus passage is read: “The candle-end was flickering out in the battered candlestick, dimly lighting up in the poverty-stricken room the murderer and the harlot who had so strangely been reading together the eternal book” (CP, 261). Candle light extracts the passage from the narrative and places it in the vastness of ontological space.

The candle light, however, is more than merely an artistic device. In the hands of Nastasya, whose name *anastasis* means “resurrection,” it foreshadows Raskolnikov’s own resurrection. Just as with the raising of Lazarus in the gospel, so the resurrection here is not suggested as a possible scenario but as fated inevitability. As an artistic device, this scene is in service of the novel’s apophatic purpose. Planted right in the depth of the novel’s feuilletonistic sequences, it instantaneously suspends the mimetic flow and thus, on the level of poetic structure, opens the novel up to an ontological experience. The suprajuridical situation of Raskolnikov in this scene is underscored by a lack of condemnation on behalf of Nastasya. While her attitude towards Raskolnikov is severe, which is captured in her silent gaze, it is at the same time kindly and not judgmental. As if preparing Raskolnikov for his sojourn in the ontological desert, she insists on him eating some food. The kindly severity of Nastasya’s silent gaze, however, proves too difficult for Raskolnikov to bear and he craves a return to his world of shadows. By calling her endearingly “Nastasyushka” [*my little resurrection*] he tries to relate to her as if she were still the simple peasant woman from the plot and therefore somehow part of his aesthetic game. In this instance, however, the aesthetic realm is suspended and Raskolnikov’s being must remain in the ontological desert.
This moment when after the murder Raskolnikov returns to his room-grave, and therefore inside his own inwardness, is where the main body of the novel begins. Perceived in this way, the novel is a decomposing body. In what follows the reader is forced to witness Raskolnikov strung between two potentialities — the aesthetic and the religious, the only two options available to a consciousness in the Dostoevskian world. While we get an intuition that the religious horizon of Raskolnikov’s being is the direction that he will ultimately follow, the aesthetic pole is the direction Raskolnikov will pursue throughout the novel. This is understandable, since the aesthetic pole constitutes a fulfillment of Raskolnikov’s own constructed reality — his “own way.” While the novel itself, with all its characters and ideas, can be seen as already somehow an expression of Raskolnikov’s mimetic subjectivity, one character in particular comes to embody the ultimate expression of Raskolnikov’s “own way.” This is Svidrigailov, a ghostly figure who plays Raskolnikov’s double in the novel. The religious pole, which manifests itself in the figure of Sonya Marmeladova, is placed by Dostoevsky outside the aesthetic realm, and therefore outside the main body of the novel. Hence the ultimate significance of Sonya for Raskolnikov becomes clear only in the epilogue, though a number of important scenes are planted inside the novel to announce the timeless reality of the epilogue to come. It is misleading to think of either Svidrigailov or Sonya as characters in the novel. Both Svidrigailov and Sonya are transgressers — Svidrigailov is a murder, while Sonya is a prostitute — and therefore they both dwell in the same suprajuridical sphere as Raskolnikov. Unlike Raskolnikov, however, neither Svidrigailov nor Sonya are full tragic heroes. To evoke Bakhtin’s ontological lexis, they are two opposite poles that designate two different potentials for Raskolnikov’s being. Therefore, to understand the nature of the ontological tension in which
Raskolnikov finds himself, it is worth delving deeper into the nature of the pull exerted on him by these two poles.

Let us begin with Svidrigailov. On the level of the narrative, Svidrigailov plays a shadowy character. He is a gambler, likely a double murderer of his servant and his wife, a sensualist who violates young girls. He pursues Raskolnikov’s sister Dunya, whom he tries to marry at gunpoint but is forced to give up his hopes of reciprocal love, exiting the novel’s plot by means of suicide. Before Raskolnikov confesses to Sonya, Svidrigailov is the only figure in the novel who knows about his crime. Purely narratively, therefore, he represents a constant existential threat to Raskolnikov, which keeps the dynamic of the detective motif alive. However, to limit the significance of the relationship between Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov to the exigencies of the plot, which is entirely secondary in the novel, would be to miss the whole significance of the bond that links the two together.

Richard Peace points us in the right direction when he suggests that Svidrigailov is significant because in him Raskolnikov finds an image of the truly powerful figure who has been able to murder yet peacefully, almost gracefully, go on with his life, the image that Raskolnikov is not able to see in himself.24 Peace’s observation helps us understand that Raskolnikov’s obsession and therefore his true tragedy is not ideological but aesthetic. Maurice Beebe reinforces this perspective when he observes that Raskolnikov commits a murder “not that he may be an “extraordinary” man but that he may see if he is one.”25 Indeed, when confessing his murder to Sonya, Raskolnikov explains: “I wanted to find out then and quickly whether I was a louse like everybody else or a man, whether I can step over barriers or not, whether I dare stoop

to pick up or not, whether I am a trembling creature or whether I have the right…” (CP, 329).

Elsewhere in the novel, in a moment of self-disgust Raskolnikov admits to himself: “Ech, I am an aesthetic louse [esteticheskaia ia vosh’] and nothing more” (CP, 218). For all his ideas, Raskolnikov is not a failed ideologist but a failed aesthetic project. Stepping right out of Raskolnikov’s mad dream, Svidrigailov is an apparition, Raskolnikov’s own “successful” projection of himself, his double.

There are a number of important scenes in the novel between Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov, but one reveals the true nature of the bond between the two. It takes place in the last part of the novel, after Raskolnikov had already confessed his murder to Sonya. While roaming the streets of the city Raskolnikov catches himself “hastening to Svidrigailov.” Suddenly Sonya comes to mind and Raskolnikov begins to wonder if he should instead go to her. In this moment, the two poles of his ontological situation distinctly identify themselves in his mind. Raskolnikov chooses a meeting with Svidrigailov, which he hopes will provide him with an escape from the necessity to face Sonya:

He was afraid of Sonya, too. Sonya stood before him as an irrevocable sentence. He must go his own way or hers. At that moment especially he did not feel equal to seeing her [ne v sostоянии был ее видеть]. No, would it not be better to try Svidrigailov? And he could not help inwardly owning that he had long felt that he must see him for some reason (CP, 364).

The emphasis on seeing here is significant. Sonya represents a particular kind of visual encounter that lays a demand on Raskolnikov’s being. A meeting with Svidrigailov is an effort to escape from this demand. Raskolnikov identifies his desire to see Svidrigailov with going “his own way,” thus demonstrating that Svidrigailov represents the extreme expression of his own desire. The aesthetic essence of this desire is captured by Dostoevsky with an emphasis on the visual dynamic of the meeting between the two. When Raskolnikov sits down in front of Svidrigailov
in a dark corner of a cheap tavern, he is not so much eager to hear Svidrigailov as to see his appearance:

For a full minute he scrutinized his face, which had impressed him before. It was a strange face, like a mask; white and red, with bright red lips, with a flaxen beard, and still thick flaxen hair. His eyes were somehow too blue and their expression somehow too heavy and fixed. There was something awfully unpleasant in that handsome face, which looked so wonderfully young for his age. Svidrigailov was smartly dressed in light summer clothes and was particularly dainty in his linen. He wore a huge ring with a precious stone in it (CP, 367).

The performative aspect of Svidrigailov is epitomized in his garish appearance and especially in his face looking like a mask. In The Demons Stavrogin is characterized by the same mask-like face (10:145, 283). In my reading of The Demons in the first chapter, I noted how Stavrogin’s dramatic performance is a culmination of his quest for power. While in the Western literary tradition power tends to be associated with will and therefore is understood in moral terms, in Dostoevsky power is associated with dramatic effect, the ability to control the imagination of the other, and thus power belongs to the aesthetic realm. In fact, so great is the power of imagination in Dostoevsky that it is capable of turning the entire good and evil dialectic into an aesthetic object, a matter of delicate balance or tension. Svidrigailov, for example, performs good and abominable deeds with equal panache, finding the relationship between the two entirely complementary. Raskolnikov’s own ambition of being a murderer and a philanthropist is an effort to generate the same aesthetic attitude to morality.

Svidrigailov’s exceeding sensuality becomes the quintessential expression of his essence and therefore epitomizes the significance he holds for Raskolnikov. He insists on confessing to Raskolnikov in graphic detail his latest debauchery, the seduction and corruption of a sixteen-

year-old girl from a poor family. There is good reason to believe that Svidrigailov makes up the story. In *The Demons* we saw an example of a similar confession, when Stavrogin prepares to publish a pamphlet in which he admits to seducing a young girl and driving her to suicide.

However, Tikhon exposes the confession as a fabrication, a performance aimed at fascinating the crowd, with the goal of spitefully wielding power over its imagination. Svidrigailov’s confession follows the same blueprint, differing only in the fact that, as a projection of Raskolnikov own imagination, Svidrigailov is not so much a seducer as evidence of the self-seduction of Raskolnikov’s own soul. In any case, the problem at hand is not physical sensuality but the inherently sensuous nature of the imagination. As if to underscore this point, Svidrigailov’s descriptive confession unexpectedly evolves into a reflection on Raphael’s Sistine Madonna:

Well, she flushes like a sunset and I kiss her every minute […] It’s simply delicious! […] Here you have what is called *la nature et la vérité*, ha-ha! […] Sometimes she steals a look at me that positively scorches me. Her face is like Raphael’s Madonna. You know, the Sistine Madonna’s face has something fantastic in it, the face of mournful religious ecstasy [*skorbnoi iurodivosti*]. Haven’t you noticed it? Well, she’s something in that line (CP, 377).

The French bit here is a fragment of Rousseau’s claim in his *Confessions* that he offers a portrait of a man “painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth” [*l’homme de la nature et de la vérité*].

A more immediate context, however, is *Notes from Underground*, where the protagonist is obsessed with the ambition to outperform Rousseau himself in depicting a man in all of his natural unseemliness. All that comes of this is the pathetic stream of a decomposing feuilletonistic consciousness, which culminates in a rapacious act of sensuality. Unlike the underground man’s aesthetic meltdown, Svidrigailov’s sensuality is exquisite. He knows exactly what the object of his contemplation is — mournful religious ecstasy [*skorbnaia iurodivost’*]. If

---

Myshkin in *The Idiot* remains oblivious to the erotic nature of his attraction to a pitiful suffering image, Svidrigailov unabashedly revels in the voluptuousness of his compassionate gaze. A consummate aesthete, he lingers right at that tipping point where his *passion* coincides with his *compassion*. It is at this tipping point that sensuality yields its greatest reward — a sense of absolute power. Having reduced the reality of the other to an aesthetic object, Svidrigailov can now decide whether the image is to be violently destroyed or graciously spared. However, the experience of power that this delicate balance between a lustful and a compassionate gaze yields is entirely illusory, since in either case it is the contemplation of an objectified entity and therefore is subject to the same erotic force of mimesis that propels all aesthetic contemplation.

The ghastly unraveling of Svidrigailov’s imagination in his suicide scene most vividly captures the illusory nature of his aesthetic power game. In the hours preceding the suicide Svidrigailov checks into a hotel, where he soon falls into delirious dreaming. As images begin to swirl in his mind, he desperately tries “to fix his imagination on something” [*k chemu-nibud’ pritsepit’sia voobrazheniem*] (CP, 396). His imagination, however, does not obey him, inundating his mind with images of a mouse crawling over his body, romantic landscapes, a theme park [*uveselitel’nogo sada*], the body of girl who committed suicide in a coffin without candles and icons, and the endless flow of dark water. This mimetic whirlpool culminates with the image of a five-year-old girl, upon whom he accidentally stumbles in the darkness of the hotel corridor. In a gesture of kindness, he decides to let the girl have his bed and blanket. As he gently tucks her in, he catches a glimpse of her face:

> Her lips parted in a smile. The corners of her mouth quivered, as though she were trying to control them. But now she quite gave up all effort, now it was a grin, a broad grin; there was something shameless, provocative in that quite unchildish face; it was depravity [*razvrat*], it was the face of a harlot [*litso kamelii*], the shameless face of a French camellia. Now both eyes opened wide; they turned a glowing, shameless glance upon him; they laughed, invited him… (CP, 400).
The image of a young Madonna has escaped Svidrigailov’s aesthetic grip and has now turned his own sensuality against him. In horror Svidrigailov raises his hand to strike the face of the child, but then he wakes up. “The candle had not been lighted, and daylight was streaming in at the windows” (CP, 400). Unlike the hopeful light of resurrection, announced by the candle-light brought into the dark room-grave of Raskolnikov by Nastasya, in Svidrigailov’s room the candle remains extinguished while daylight begins another stretch of aesthetic time. Svidrigailov is the anti-Lazarus, the one who will not be resurrected. Hence he must traverse his nihilistic path to the end.

The purpose of Svidrigailov’s sacrilegious appropriation of Raphael’s Madonna, an icon painted for an altar piece, is not only to manifest the depraved voluptuousness of aesthetic perception but also to postulate aestheticism as anti-iconic.28 Thus Svidrigailov’s Madonna becomes the antithesis of the true icon in the novel — Sonya Marmeladov.29 In fact, the antithetical tension between the lustful aesthetic gaze and religious contemplation is preserved in Sonya’s person. As a prostitute, she is the object of a lustful gaze; as an icon, however, she inaugurates the reality of objectless religious contemplation. Demanding that Raskolnikov, and therefore the reader, recognize the religious significance of Sonya’s image precisely in the sensual context of her role as a prostitute, Dostoevsky sets up the apophatic mechanism which, by means of increasing the possibility of a misunderstanding, brings understanding to the point


29 While Raphael’s Madonna was among the most revered images by Dostoevsky, the theological aspect of his relationship with this image is complex. Raphael’s icon belongs to the Western iconographic canon, which was condemned by the Eastern tradition as aesthetic. It might be the aestheticism of Raphael’s style that makes Dostoevsky surrender the image to the all devouring voluptuousness of Svidrigailov’s gaze. For more on Dostoevsky and Raphael’s Madonna see Ksana Blank’s “A Grain of Eros in the Madonna and Spark of Beauty in Sodom” in her *Dostoevsky’s Dialectics and the Problem of Sin* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 80-93.
where it can only break open to the paradoxical. To highlight this epistemological significance of Sonya is not to diminish the sacrificial significance of her “sin” but only to suggest that we should avoid aestheticizing her suffering. Instead we should recognize that her significance ultimately lies in the epistemological realm, as an icon. As early as Marmeladov’s introductory account of Sonya, her iconic significance in the novel begins to shine through the thickness of her suffering:

At six o’clock I saw Sonia get up, put on her kerchief and her cape, and go out of the room and about nine o’clock she came back. She walked straight up to Katerina Ivanovna and she laid thirty rubles on the table before her in silence. She did not utter a word, she did not even look at her, she simply picked up our big green drap de damas shawl (we have a shawl, made of drap de damas), put it over her head and face and lay down on the bed with her face to the wall; only her little shoulders and her body kept shuddering…And I went on lying there, just as before…And then I saw, young man, I saw Katerina Ivanovna, in the same silence go up to Sonia’s little bed; she was on her knees all the evening kissing Sonia’s feet, and would not get up, and then they both fell asleep in each other’s arms…together, together…yes…and I…lay drunk (CP, 14).

Marmeladov’s drunken devotion takes nothing away from the richness of his beatific vision. In Russian icons the Madonna is often depicted wearing a green dress or head covering, which symbolizes her intercessory role on behalf of the fallen natural order and the transfiguration of natural reality in the beatific vision. Sonya’s green shawl effectively turns her into a Madonna, while Katerina Ivanovna’s all-night vigil at Sonya’s feet is nothing other than her veneration of the icon. Underscoring the apophatic essence of the event the entire scene is unfolding in absolute silence.

The full religious significance of Marmeladov’s story about Sonya, however, is lost on Raskolnikov. Instead, he is attracted to Sonya’s suffering aesthetically as he finds in it a spellbinding image for his own suffering. Even more importantly, by aestheticizing Sonya into

---

an infinitely suffering image Raskolnikov conveniently traps her in his aesthetic game and thus resists the ontological demand that Sonya’s iconic presence has on his life.\(^\text{31}\) With the distance of a connoisseur in human suffering he observes this about the significance of Sonya’s self-sacrifice for her family: “Hurrah for Sonia! What a mine they’ve dug there! And they’re making the most of it! Yes, they are making the most of it! They’ve wept over it and grown used to it. Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel!” (CP, 22). Sonya’s suffering image exacerbates Raskolnikov’s disgust with humanity, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of his aesthetic attitude to reality. In his efforts to save Sonya from the sad fate of a prostitute, which echoes the underground man’s “rescuing” of Liza, we do not so much see an act of kindness as an effort to keep Sonya inside a sentimental plot and thus to further reinforce her pitiful image.

Despite all efforts, Raskolnikov’s attempt to insulate Sonya in a pathetic sentimental narrative does not prove effective. The “infinity of self-deprecation” \([beskonechnost’ sobstvennogo unichizheniia]\) puts Sonya’s suffering beyond aesthetic objectification (CP, 346).\(^\text{32}\) Time and time again Raskolnikov is forced to realize her radically non-aesthetic essence: “What held her up—surely not depravity? All that infamy had obviously only touched her mechanically, not one drop of real depravity had penetrated to her heart; he saw that. He could see this; she stood before him… \([on videl eto; ona stoiala pred nim naivu]\)” (CP, 256). Raskolnikov’s condescending rationalizations here only underscore the irony of his misunderstanding of Sonya. He wants to relate to Sonya as to a riddle directly before his eyes, while his true situation is of the one who has not been able to recognize that he is in the presence of divine revelation. The


Russian word “naiavu” can mean both “obvious” and “revealed.” When the icon inaugurates beatific reality, it is said of it that “it has revealed itself” [iavila sebia], while the beatific event itself is referred to as “a revelation” [iavlenie]. In the epilogue this precise verb will be used to describe Sonya’s final and complete iconic revelation.

The irony of Raskolnikov’s situation in the novel becomes emphatically Johannine in a pivotal scene in the novel — the reading of the Lazarus passage from the Gospel of John. Here we come to the structural significance of Johannine theology for the novel. The scene occurs before the aforementioned meeting between Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov. Unaware as to what is so powerfully drawing him to Sonya, Raskolnikov pays her a visit. As we eventually discover, Raskolnikov has been linked to this prostitute’s room from the beginning of the novel. It turns out that Svidrigailov, who we know is Raskolnikov’s double, lives next-door to Sonya. From the fact that Svidrigailov has been able to eavesdrop on Raskolnikov’s conversation with Sonya, we conclude that the two apartments are linked by highly audible walls, forming spaces that recall mental compartmentalization. It could be said, therefore, that Sonya lives inside a mental projection of Svidrigailov’s and therefore Raskolnikov’s mind. She is Raskolnikov’s Madonna, trapped inside a licentious metal compartment, just like Raphael’s Madonna is trapped inside Svidrigailov’s immoral imagination. Doubles in Dostoevsky always expose the inner dark truths of their progenitors, and Svidrigailov’s subsequent sharing of his Madonna image with Raskolnikov is by no means an accident.

It is not to repent, therefore, but to exercise the power of his voluptuous gaze that Raskolnikov comes to Sonya’s apartment. “Sonia looked in silence at her visitor, who was so attentively and unceremoniously scrutinizing her room, and even began at last to tremble with terror, as though she was standing before her judge and the arbiter of her destinies” (CP, 250).
The conversation that follows closely resembles the underground man’s conversation with the prostitute Liza, which similarly takes place inside a prostitute’s dark room. Just as the underground man rapaciously assaults Liza’s imagination with a stream of ghastly and foreboding images, so Raskolnikov subjects Sonya to the most excruciating projections of her own and her family’s morbid future. Into the barrage of distressing images Raskolnikov adds certain performance installations, such as a sudden dropping to his knees to kiss Sonya’s foot in a symbol of his bowing to “all of human suffering,” or a reminder to Sonya of how he set her — the “unworthy prostitute” — next to his own sister Dunya to demonstrate that he considered Sonya worthier than his family. Having turned Sonya’s suffering into an aesthetic object, Raskolnikov unabashedly uses it as feuilletonistic or dramatic material. His vicious attack culminates in the same way as Ivan’s feuilletonistic blitzkrieg against Alyosha, with a theodicean provocation: “‘And what does God do for you?’ he asked, probing her further” (CP, 257). As the question produces an emotional reaction in Sonya, Raskolnikov enjoys the spectacle. He “scrutinized her with eager curiosity, with a new, strange, almost morbid feeling. He gazed at that pale, thin, irregular, angular little face, those soft blue eyes, which could flash with such fire, such stern energy, that little body still shaking with indignation and anger—and it all seemed to him more and more strange, almost impossible” (CP, 257).

It is in the moment of triumph over Sonya that Raskolnikov picks up from a chest drawer a copy of The New Testament, which belonged to Elizaveta — one of the victims of his double murder. As if out of entertainment he demands that this “religious maniac,” “an unhappy lunatic” read him the passage about Lazarus’ resurrection. Raskolnikov could not have chosen a more fitting passage, though the association with Lazarus implied in the choosing of this passage is ironic. Raskolnikov has no reason to consider himself a Lazarus, nor is he interested in
subjecting himself to the power of the biblical word. His purpose is to subject Sonya to a religious experience that would force her to unveil her own spiritual emotions, thus making them available for his aesthetic game: “He understood only too well how painful it was for her to betray and unveil all that was her own […] these feelings really were her secret treasure, which she had kept perhaps for years, perhaps from childhood” (CP, 258). But why then choose this particular passage? The passage is the bait. A good reader of people and an expert publicist, Raskolnikov has intuited that it is this passage that best captures Sonya’s view of him and therefore will perfectly harness Sonya’s desire to “save him.” At every step of the way it is Sonya and her religious emotions that are Raskolnikov’s true object of pursuit: “he knew now and knew for certain that, although it filled her with dread and suffering, yet she had a tormenting desire to read and to read to him that he might hear it, and to read now whatever might come of it! …He read this in her eyes, he could see it in her intense emotion” (CP, 259).

While his own unceremoniousness pains Raskolnikov, it cannot prevent him from launching this vicious aesthetic attack. This maneuver is reminiscent of the encounter between Ivan and Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov, where even brotherly love — the strongest bond in the Dostoevskian world — is unable to prevent Ivan from playing a ruthless theodicean game with Alyosha’s religious feelings. Growing increasingly distrustful of Raskolnikov’s visit to her and specifically of his demands that she read him a passage from the sacred book — “have you not already read it? […] and haven’t you heard it in church?” — Sonya eventually acquiesces and begins to read.

To appreciate the subtlety of Dostoevsky’s use of Johannine irony in this scene, it is useful to look more closely at the manner in which the passage is quoted. Dostoevsky capitalizes on the ambiguity created by the proximity between the narrator’s and Raskolnikov’s voices in
the novel. As a result we hear both voices competing with each other. On the one hand, there is the power of divine perspective communicated through the pronouncement of the biblical word; on the other, there is resistance to it in Raskolnikov’s aestheticizing gaze, which seeks to turn the liturgical moment of scriptural reading into a spiteful vaudevillian performance. Consider this moment, when the reading of the text breaks off and we make the transition inside Raskolnikov’s gaze as he is contemplating Sonya while she is reading aloud to him:

“And some of them said, could not this Man which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?” Raskolnikov turned and looked at her with emotion. Yes, he had known it! She was trembling in a real physical fever. He had expected it. She was getting near the story of the greatest miracle and a feeling of immense triumph came over her. Her voice rang out like a bell; triumph and joy gave it power. The lines danced before her eyes, but she knew what she was reading by heart. At the last verse “Could not this Man which opened the eyes of the blind…” dropping her voice she passionately reproduced the doubt, the reproach and censure of the blind disbelieving Jews, who in another moment would fall at His feet as though struck by thunder, sobbing and believing… “And he, he—too, is blinded and unbelieving, he, too, will hear, he, too, will believe, yes, yes! At once, now,” was what she was dreaming, and she was quivering [drozhala] with happy anticipation [radostnom ozhidanii] (CP, 260).

Underscoring Raskolnikov’s ironic situation, Dostoevsky breaks off the Johannine text at the moment when Lazarus’s death is compared to inborn blindness and moves us inside Raskolnikov’s blind gaze: “Raskolnikov turned and looked at her with emotion.” In the following lines we are not given the Johannine text directly but are hearing it through Raskolnikov’s perspective. What Raskolnikov hears, however, is not the unadulterated sacred word, but what he believes Sonya to be seeing as she is projecting him into the story. To resist being dragged inside the sacred coordinates of the biblical text, Raskolnikov tries to wrestle himself away by exaggerating Sonya’s religious imagination to the point of caricature. As he hears Sonya attempting to put him among “the disbelieving blind Jews” who in another moment would “fall at Christ’s feet as though struck by thunder, sobbing and believing…” Raskolnikov
renders the biblical text in a markedly exaggerated way. Not only is the pathetic image of the sobbing Jews falling at the feet of Christ “as if stricken by lightning” absent from the gospel, but John purposefully underemphasizes the conversion of some Jews with the simplest of phrases that “many have believed,” and instead draws attention to the fact that despite the stupendous miracle of resurrection, many of the Pharisees have still not believed and in fact conspired against Christ.

Why did Raskolnikov need to subject Sonya to this aesthetic manipulation? It is a desperate effort to escape the religious demand that she represents for his life: “He was afraid of Sonya, too. Sonya stood before him as an irrevocable sentence. He must go his own way or hers” (CP, 364). Understanding the “irrevocable sentence” merely narratively as a requirement to turn himself in is to miss the whole severity of the demand. The punishment as such could only embellish Raskolnikov’s aesthetic construal of himself, and thus feed right into his spiteful attitude towards the world. Sonya insists on far more than a punishment and mere suffering — she insists on complete reconstitution of his being, which requires him to renounce his aesthetic obsession with power and control. By turning Sonya into an aesthetic object he not only wants to escape following “her way” but he wants to make her follow his:

Let us go together. I’ve come to you, we are both accursed, let us go our way together! […] You, too, have transgressed...have had the strength to transgress. You have laid hands on yourself, you have destroyed a life…your own (it’s all the same!). You might have lived in spirit and understanding, but you’ll end in the Hay Market. But you won’t be able to stand it, and if you remain alone you’ll go out of your mind like me. You are like a mad creature already. So we must go together on the same road! Let us go! (CP, 261)

While Raskolnikov’s admiration for Sonya’s ability to transgress the moral boundary might be genuine, his effort to construe Sonya’s own life on his terms reveals his manipulative intentions. Reiterating the morbid future that is awaiting Sonya, and as a consequence her family, is his final
effort to overwhelm Sonya’s imagination to the point of helplessness. Distrustful at first — “Go where?’ she asked in alarm and she involuntarily stepped back” — she eventually succumbs to the helplessness that Raskolnikov is counting on: “‘What’s to be done, what’s to be done?’ repeated Sonia, weeping hysterically and wringing her hands.” Raskolnikov has the answer: “What’s to be done? Break what must be broken, once for all, that’s all, and take the suffering on oneself. What, you don’t understand? You’ll understand later…Freedom and power, and above all, power! Over all trembling creation and all the ant-heap!” (CP, 262)

It is difficult to imagine how exactly in Raskolnikov’s imagination Sonya fits into his march of power, except as a neutralized and broken entity turned by Raskolnikov into an aspect of his theodicean revolt. When in the final stretch of the novel he eventually decides to turn himself in upon Sonya’s request, he still sees it as part of his manipulative game: “You wanted me to go yourself. Well, now I am going to prison and you’ll have your wish” (CP, 411). At this point, however, this is nothing more than a spiteful remark. Raskolnikov’s ability to manipulate Sonya has proven completely ineffective. She is not an image that he can control. As he sets out on his final prideful march from Sonya’s apartment to the police office, Sonya follows him through the streets as if forcing him forward. Raskolnikov turns his march into a dramatic show, with kneeling and kissing of the ground but his ability to stage his life is evaporating quickly as the aesthetic construct that is his life is reaching its point of irreversible decomposition. “He looked eagerly to right and left, gazed intently at every object and could not fix his attention on anything; everything slipped away” (CP, 412). The city with its streets, signs and pedestrian faces is eluding Raskolnikov’s grip, whereas Sonya remains continuously present. She follows him all the way to the police office and when he, in the final moment of weakness, attempts to run away from the police office before confessing the crime she meets him outside the doors and
with meek severity forces him back: “There, not far from the entrance, stood Sonia, pale and horror-stricken. She looked wildly at him. He stood still before her. There was a look of poignant agony, of despair, in her face. She clasped her hands. His lips worked in an ugly, meaningless smile. He stood still a minute, grinned and went back to the police office” (CP, 417). The most likely explanation of Raskolnikov’s “ugly” grin is his acceptance of defeat to Sonya. Despite her immense suffering, she has not succumbed to the temptation of compassion to spare Raskolnikov but has persisted in her demand. It is yielding to this demand and not to any sense of remorse for his crime that leads Raskolnikov to confess.

Dostoevsky’s commitment to the suprajuridical essence of Raskolnikov’s drama remains faithful to the end. Even in the epilogue, Raskolnikov does not repent, and we get no suggestion that there has been any moral development in his character. The regeneration of Raskolnikov is introduced as a sudden rapture preceded by a stretch of suspended mimesis:

Raskolnikov came out of the shed on to the river bank, sat down on a heap of logs by the shed and began gazing [stal gliader'] at the wide deserted river. There, in the immensity of the steppe [neobozrimo stepi], flooded with sunlight, the black tents of the nomads were barely visible dots [chut' primetnymi tochkami]. Freedom was there, there other people lived, so utterly unlike those on this side of the river that it seemed as though with them time had stood still, and the age of Abraham and his flocks was still the present. Raskolnikov sat on and his unwavering gaze remained fixed [smotreit' nepodvizhno, ne otryvaias'] on the farther bank; his mind had wandered into day dreams [mysl' ego perekhodila v grezy, v sozertsanie]; he thought of nothing, but an anguished longing disturbed and tormented him (CP, 429).

What we see here is a distillation of Raskolnikov’s gaze. From a frantic mimetic race along the streets of St. Petersburg, rich with feuilletonistic material, his gaze has come to the mimetically barren and visually ungraspable horizons of the Siberian steppe. Dostoevsky equates this deserted landscape with the biblical realm, which unfolds itself before Raskolnikov’s eyes not as a densely detailed canvas but as “barely visible dots,” inviting Raskolnikov to stop looking and begin to behold [sozertsat’]. Here the time that spurs along the mimetic flow stops and with it
stops Raskolnikov’s frantic thought process, allowing his mind to make the transition into the mode of beholding [sozertsanie]. It is in this moment when Raskolnikov’s soul has left the aesthetic realm that he is at last able to see his icon — Sonya.

How it happened he did not know. But all at once something seemed to seize him and fling him at her feet. He wept and threw his arms around her knees […] at last the moment had come… They wanted to speak, but could not; tears stood in their eyes. They were both pale and thin; but those sick pale faces were bright with the dawn of a new future, of a full resurrection into a new life (CP, 429).

Raskolnikov is on his knees before Sonya, this time not in a mocking dramatic gesture but in a state of genuine religious adoration. His passivity in this scene underscores the fact that his regeneration is not generated by an effort on his part, it is not the development of any moral or aesthetic progression but a miracle. The decomposing being of Raskolnikov has been summoned to new life.

Much criticism has been waged against the epilogue for its failure to provide fitting closure to the text. Bakhtin famously suggested that as an expression of a “monologic” bit of “conventional” Christianity, which contradicted the rich polyphonic nature of the novel, the epilogue must be dismissed as irrelevant, written by Dostoevsky merely to satisfy the demand of the piously complaisant publishers and readers.33 Ernest J. Simmons has rendered Bakhtin’s objection in less ideological terms by claiming that the epilogue was “manifestly the weakest section of the novel, and the regeneration of Raskolnikov under the influence of the Christian humility and love of Sonya is neither artistically palatable nor psychologically sound.”34 Both objections are based on a misleading set of assumptions about what sort of text the novel is.

---

33 Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii.
34 Ernest J. Simmons, Dostoevski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 165.
Bakhtin’s conception of *Crime and Punishment* as a polyphonic novel, wherein characters and voices all receive individual consciousnesses, must confront the fact that most of the novel, if not all of it, is written through Raskolnikov’s perspective and therefore most of the voices in the novel are given to us as voices inside Raskolnikov’s consciousness. Therefore, the only kind of polyphony we can talk about in *Crime and Punishment* is a cacophony inside Raskolnikov’s decomposing consciousness. As soon as we identify the fragmentation in the novel as what it truly is — decomposition, “monologism” becomes not only a possible antithesis to the novel but the only meaningful idea of redemption. Given Bakhtin’s general theological astuteness, his neglect of the Johannine Lazarus motif in *Crime and Punishment* and therefore his neglect of the central dichotomy of decomposition and resurrection is staggering. It only makes sense, therefore, that his later revision of his stance on Dostoevsky — my opening quote in this section comes from this later period — had to begin with a return to the Lazarus motif in *Crime and Punishment* and the importance of the decomposition metaphor.

In this respect, Simmons’s critique of the epilogue is more robust. After all, despite its nihilistic end, decomposition can still have aesthetic purpose and be psychologically adequately described. Where Simmons goes awry, however, is in assuming that Dostoevsky intended his epilogue to be the capstone of an aesthetic progression, a narrative, and that, therefore, the picture of the regeneration that he offers must be the result of some psychological/moral development.35 But this is precisely what Dostoevsky does not want to offer. In *Crime and Punishment*, with its insistence that Raskolnikov does not repent, Dostoevsky for the first time explicitly parts with the Romantic assumption of aesthetic/moral progress. From this point on, it

35 For an argument for how the epilogue is an aesthetically positive development of the novel see David Matual’s “In Defense of the Epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*” in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 105-114.
is not the moral revolution of *repentance* that Dostoevsky insists upon but rather the miraculous rebirth of *resurrection*. It is to underscore the fundamentally secondary role of the narrative in his poetics that every subsequent Dostoevsky novel becomes increasingly aesthetically incongruous. By means of this formal incongruity, Dostoevsky not only renounces his own artistic ambition to provide a positive description of transfigured reality but creates a reading experience that demands from its reader an apophatic attitude.

We can say therefore that it is precisely through its lack of continuity with the narrative that the epilogue is linked to the main body of the novel. In this Dostoevsky follows the poetic reasoning of the Johannine gospel. The resurrection chapter (ch. 20) in the gospel is also an “epilogue” chapter, and as a timeless event it does not represent a culmination of the narrative that “develops” in the main stretch of the gospel (chs. 5-19). Moreover, just as in the gospel, the resurrection of Lazarus pericope “intervenes” into the narrative body of the text to “pronounce” the fulfillment of the resurrection, thus placing the body of the gospel under the irony of the resurrection chapter, so does the chapter in which Sonya reads to Raskolnikov the story of Lazarus pronounce the reality of resurrection, thus placing the novel under the irony of the epilogue. Every time the Lazarus motif is evoked in the novel — as for example in the scene with Nastasya entering Raskolnikov’s grave-room with a candle and a bowl of soup — the novel is placed under the irony of the epilogue and indirectly under the irony of the Christian mystery itself.

**Cana of Galilee**

If *Crime and Punishment* stands under the irony of the epilogue, *The Brothers Karamazov* stands under the irony of its epigraph — a verse from the Gospel of John, which reads: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if
it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Coming in the chapter that immediately follows the chapter where Lazarus’s resurrection is described, this verse is part of those utterances pronounced by Christ as he is entering Jerusalem in the week of Passover. Thus looking ahead to Christ’s own death, the verse relies on a natural metaphor to underscore the significance of death in the miracle of Christological transformation. The verse, however, is more than just a metaphor. It captures the apophatic principle of Johannine theology, according to which the new reality manifests itself in a relationship to the dying of the old reality. Having put the novel under the irony of resurrection, the epigraph anticipates the scene through which the miracle of resurrection manifests itself within the novel.

This scene comes in Chapter IV, Book VII of Part III, which introduces Alyosha, the youngest of the Karamazov brothers and the novel’s protagonist. As captured in its title — The Cana of Galilee — the fourth chapter is Dostoevsky’s dramatization of John ch. 2, Christ’s miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The chapter recounts Alyosha’s vision of the feast at Cana, which he experiences while mournfully sitting next to a coffin of his beloved elder Zosima. The scene is a culmination of a sequence of four short chapters, the first of which, titled “The Order of Corruption,” describes a scandalous event that sets in motion the whole sequence. According to a non-canonical monastic tradition, the body of a deceased holy man should not succumb to corruption, thus proving the saint’s holiness. So great was the fame of Father Zosima’s holy life that when, by three o’clock in the afternoon “an odor of corruption had already begun to issue from the coffin,” the entire monastery and even the local town was thrown into utter shock and morbid curiosity. Given the sensational nature of the occurrence, the narrator of the novel feels the need to apologize for recounting the “loathsome” story. He explains his decision by the fact that it “influenced in the strongest and most definite
way” the soul and heart of the main “although future” hero of his story, Alyosha, causing “a crisis and upheaval in his soul,” it “shook his mind” but also “ultimately strengthened it for the whole of his life, and towards a definite purpose” (BK, 329).

It is worth remembering that Dostoevsky envisioned The Brothers Karamazov as a prequel to a second novel, which would be focused on Alyosha’s life. Hence the narrator’s description of Alyosha so late in the novel as only a “future” hero of the story.36 Since the Cana of Galilee scene was planted by the author as a reference point for Alyosha’s drama in the sequel, it is difficult to appreciate the full significance of Alyosha’s religious rapture. However, what we do see here is a manifestation of a distinctly Johannine structure within a Dostoevskian novel. In the Gospel of John, the Cana of Galilee pericope is similarly “planted” early on in the text (ch. 2), preceding and thus providing a point of reference for the narrative of Christ’s sojourn in the world. To reiterate my earlier point, this structure in John has a distinctly theological purpose. By celebrating the resurrection joy before the narrative even began, the Cana of Galilee pericope puts the entire gospel text under the irony of resurrection.

In The Brothers Karamazov, while looking forward to Alyosha’s future life, the Cana of Galilee sequence stands in a retrospective relationship to one moment in Alyosha’s past life, namely to his conversation with his brother Ivan the day before.37 In the theodicean tirade Ivan

---

36 For a summary of the historical evidence concerning the second novel see James L. Rice, “Dostoevsky’s Endgame: The Projected Sequel to ‘The Brothers Karamazov’” in Russian History, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2006): 45-62. While the question as to whether The Brothers Karamazov can be read as a complete novel remains open, the significance of its prequel nature for our interpretation of its poetic structure cannot be doubted. For how Dostoevsky’s intention to write the second novel contributes to our understanding of the narrator’s retrospective strategy in the first novel see Vetlovskai, V.E., “Razviazka v Brat’iakh Karamazovykh” in Poetika i stilistika russkoi literature: Pamiati akademika Viktora Vladimirovicha Vinogradova (Leningrad: Nauka, 1971), 195-203. Also Diane O. Thompson, The Brothers Karamazov and The Poetics of Memory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 48-51.

37 On the retrospective relationship between Alyosha’s vision and his conversation with Ivan see Vetlovskai, V.E. Poetika Romana “Brat’i Karamazovy” (Moskva: Nauka, 1977), 179-182.
unleashed on his younger brother a powerful reel of images that was intended to shake Alyosha’s faith by overpowering his imagination. A day later, next to a decomposing body of Zosima, at this “fateful and confused moment” a certain “strange phenomenon” revealed itself in Alyosha’s mind. This “new something [nechto]” that “appeared and flashed” [obiavivsheesia i melknuvsee] in Alyosha’s mind was “some vague but tormenting and evil impression [muchitel’noe i zloe vpechatlenie] from the recollection of the previous day’s conversation with his brother Ivan, which has now suddenly stirred again in his soul, demanding more and more to come to the surface” (BK, 340). Thus, even as the odor of putrefaction helps the sinister realization sink into Alyosha’s mind, his imagination begins to unravel under the fragmenting force of the mimetic flow generated by Ivan’s theodicean harangue.

Why would Ivan’s feuilletonistic attack on Alyosha’s imagination bring its most devastating blow precisely at this moment? To answer this question is once again to evoke The Idiot, which remains crucial background for the entire Cana of Galilee sequence. Holbein’s image of Christ’s decomposing body, as a visual manifestation of the privation of the Christological event, has become for Dostoevsky’s poetics a symbolic representation of aesthetic decomposition. For Dostoevsky aesthetic fascination, which is driven by the erotic desire to possess its object of perception completely and therefore finally, always relates to its object as dead. Zosima’s dead body is a moment when the objectifying essence of Alyosha’s fascination with the elder manifests itself unambiguously. When speaking of Zosima’s significance for Alyosha, the narrator, who is normally exceedingly fond of Alyosha, allows himself an important critique of his protagonist. He says,

In all this, and above all else, in the first place, there stood before him the face [litso], and only the face [litso]—the face [litso] of his beloved elder, the face [litso] of that righteous man whom he revered to the point of adoration [do obozhaniiia chtil]. That was just it, that the entirety of the love for “all and all” that lay hidden in his young and pure heart,
then and during the whole previous year, was at times as if wholly concentrated, perhaps even incorrectly, mainly on just one being [na odnom sushchestve], at least in the strongest impulses of his heart—on his beloved elder, now deceased. True, this being [eto sushchestvo] had stood before him as an indisputable ideal for so long that all his youthful powers and all their yearning could not but turn to this ideal exclusively, in some moments even to the forgetting of “all and all” (BK, 339).

While it is possible to translate the Russian “litso” as “a person,” the more literal translation of “a face” is here more appropriate. Objectification of the other person’s face is what in Dostoevsky constitutes the most devastating form of aesthetic fascination. Consider this quote from The Idiot, which captures Myshkin’s fascination with Nastasya Filippovna’s suffering face: “this face [eto litso] ever since the portrait had evoked in his heart all the suffering of pity; the impression of compassion and even of suffering for this being [eto sushchestvo] never left his heart and had not left it now (8:349-350).” In both quotes the face [litso] is described as belonging to a being [sushchestvo]. The neutral gender of both nouns underscore the depersonalization and ultimate neutralization of the other’s reality in aesthetic contemplation. Just as Myshkin has turned Nastasya Filippovna into an object of his compassionate fascination, so Alyosha has turned Zosima into an object of idolatrous devotion. The Russian “do obozhaniiia chtil” literally means “devoted oneself to someone (something) as if he (it) was a god."

The aesthetic essence of Alyosha’s devotion to his elder becomes obvious when we consider how Zosima’s story is introduced into the novel. It is included in the form of a Saint’s Life [zhitie], a piece of literary biography for religious devotional reading. The narrator finds it important to note that Zosima’s zhitei has been only “partly preserved in writing” by Alyosha, who wrote it down “from memory sometime after the elder’s death.” As a result, the narrator is convinced that Alyosha added [prisovokupil] to the elder’s speech from “former conversations with the elder,” “putting it all together” [sovokupil vmeste]. Furthermore, the narrator is concerned that the speech of the elder “goes on continuously” [kak by bezpreryvno], as it were “a
recounting of his life in the form of a narrative” [v formе povеsti], while in fact the conversation that evening “was general,” the guests “intervened” in the elder’s talk, “imparting and telling something of their own.” Finally, there could hardly have been such “continuity in the narration,” because the elder sometimes became “breathless, lost his voice, and even lay down on his bed to rest” (BK, 286). In other words, the narrator is concerned that Alyosha’s manuscript is more a figment of Alyosha’s imagination than a recounting of Zosima’s actual life. Ironically, despite these “reservations” about the montaged nature of Alyosha’s manuscript, the narrator decides to use the text precisely for its literary qualities. It is conveniently “briefer and not so tedious.” The last remark is especially noteworthy, since it defines Alyosha’s manuscript as a successful literary text due to the effectiveness with which it appeals to the reader’s imagination.

As a piece of effective literature Alyosha’s “The Life of the Hieromonk and Elder Zosima” stands in a direct relationship to another non-tedious literary product in the novel — Ivan’s “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.” Joseph Frank has argued that the two texts establish two polarities of “the conflict between reason and faith” forcing the main characters and the reader “to be confronted by a crisis and require them to choose between them.”38 While Alyosha’s zhitiе clearly offers itself as a counter to Ivan’s legend, the two texts hardly represent polarities, because both are products of the same aesthetic impulse. If Ivan wants to throw the world into a whirlpool of feuilletonistic decomposition and fragmentation, Alyosha wants to enchant the world — first of all his own world, which is so mercilessly shaken by Ivan’s theodicean harangue — back into wholeness with the literary narrative of Zosima’s life.

Alyosha’s adoration thus features merely as the opposite extreme of the same aesthetic continuum that began with Ivan’s despair.

It is worth pointing out that Dostoevsky’s exposing of Alyosha’s literary ambition as an aestheticization of religious devotion raises the fundamental question of the relationship between literature and religion. The challenge goes beyond exposing the aesthetic temptation inherent to hagiographic literature. Behind the narrator’s critique of Alyosha’s manuscript we discern a critique of the gospel tradition itself, for a gospel text also can be viewed as an artificial construct of Christ’s life and teaching, a compilation of fragmentary material into a suspiciously smooth narrative. With his critique of Alyosha, Dostoevsky engages in a theological problematic that is inherent to the gospels and, as can be argued, constitutes one of the most important distinctions between the Johannine and synoptic gospel traditions. In my discussion of Johannine theology earlier in this chapter, I show how unlike the synoptic gospels, which offer a historical account of Christ’s life, the Johannine gospel theologically undermines the very idea of a sacred narrative. The latest of the four gospels to be composed, the Gospel of John is permeated with awareness of the aesthetic danger that is inherent to incarnational truth of Christology. The apophaticism of Johannine theology, therefore must be seen as a reaction to the potential for aestheticization inherent to synoptic gospels. The miracle at Cana of Galilee is where the “apophatic logic” of the Johannine text manifests itself most obviously. By announcing resurrection at the outset of the gospel, the miracle at Cana places the fullness of a religious experience outside the narrative and therefore in a negative relationship to it. It is to imbue The Brothers Karamazov with this Johannine apophaticism that Dostoevsky calls upon the Cana of Galilee motif. The decaying body of Zosima, just like the decaying body of Christ in Holbein’s painting in The Idiot, is not a visual manifestation of failed religious hope but a disambiguation of the truth about aestheticism.
Therefore, just as it is not Christ who is decaying in *The Idiot*, but the object of Myshkin’s fascination, so it is not Zosima who is decomposing in *The Brothers Karamazov* but the object of Alyosha’s adoration.

The proximity of Alyosha’s aestheticism to that of Ivan is best illustrated by his reaction to the scandal following Zosima’s death. The narrator tells us that it was not the miracle itself that Alyosha expected but “higher justice” manifesting itself by means of a miracle. Likewise, Ivan in his rebellion demands “higher justice” in the world that allowed the suffering of innocent children (BK, 235). When Rakitin, a cynical seminarian who plays Alyosha’s double, wonders if by leaving the monastery during the service over Zosima’s body Alyosha was expressing his rebellion against God, Alyosha formulates his attitude with Ivan’s words: “I do not rebel against my God, I simply do not accept his world” (BK, 341).

Aestheticism in Dostoevsky is concomitant with physical lust. It is only natural therefore that Alyosha agrees to Rakitin’s provocation to consummate his religious disillusionment with a night of debauchery. They go to visit Grushenka, who has previously promised Rakitin money for bringing Alyosha to her for seduction, thus allowing her to take revenge on the novice for shunning her. Grushenka has inherited many important traits from her predecessor Nastasya Filippovna, especially the obsessive desire to use her seductiveness to control and even destroy those who are spellbound by her. She is an object of intense rivalry between Dmitri Karamazov and his father Feodor Pavlovich, which leads to the tragic events of the novel. By going to Grushenka, the symbol and vehicle of unredeemed carnality, Alyosha seeks to intensify even further his disillusionment with God’s created world, which began with Zosima’s decomposing body. Expecting to be swallowed by lust, Alyosha discovers to his utter surprise that he is able to relate to Grushenka as if lust did not exist:
[...] he still could not help marveling at a new and strange sensation that was awakening in his heart: this woman, this “horrible” woman, not only did not arouse in him the fear he had felt before, the fear that used to spring up in him every time he thought of a woman, if such a thought flashed through his soul, but, on the contrary, this woman, of whom he was afraid most of all, who was sitting on his knees and embracing him, now aroused in him [vozbuzhda v nem] suddenly [vdrug] quite a different, unexpected, and special feeling [sovsem inoe, neozhidannoe i osoblivoe chuvstvo], the feeling of some remarkable, great, and most pure-hearted curiosity [neobyknovenno, velichaishego i chistoserdechnogo k nei liubopytstva], and without any fear now, without a trace of his former terror—that was the main thing, and it could not but surprise him (BK, 349).

Given how thoroughly enraptured by lust the world according to Dostoevsky is, the suspension of erotic desire in this scene is nothing short of miraculous. Now that this woman was sitting on his lap, not only was there no lustful desire in him but, on the contrary, Grushenka “suddenly” [vdrug] aroused in him “a different, unexpected, and special feeling.” This new feeling is characterized by his ability to effortlessly relate to the other with “the greatest, most remarkable, pure-hearted curiosity,” which is entirely dissimilar to aesthetic curiosity, so possessive in its mimetic hunger. Unlike Myshkin’s fascination with Nastasya Filippovna’s face, which holds him in perpetual horror because of his own inability to resist it, Alyosha’s new interestedness in the other is free of all fear and terror. The sense that he is within new miraculous reality is reinforced for Alyosha when Grushenka suddenly [vdrug] “decides” to spare him. Having learned from Rakitin about Zosima’s death, Grushenka is suddenly overcome with compassion and kindness towards Alyosha: “‘Lord, but what am I doing now, sitting on his lap!’ She suddenly gave a start as if in fright [kak v ispuge], jumped off his knees at once, and sat down on the sofa. Alyosha gave her a long, surprised look, and something seemed to light up in his face” (BK, 351).

Alina Wyman has argued that the scene between Alyosha and Grushenka is a perfect instance of “active empathy” in a Dostoevskian novel. Unlike passive empathy, which surrenders itself to the reality of the other — the most obvious instance of such empathy Wyman argues would be Myshkin’s obsession with Nastasya Filippovna’s suffering — active empathy is based
on a “critical interdependence of offering and receiving love.” Thus, the crucial significance of the scene between Alyosha and Grushenka for Wyman is that it demonstrates how a dialogic relationship executed correctly can lead to mutual redemption: “these two characters are redeemed together, each affirming the other’s ideal self and becoming responsible for the other’s renewal.”\(^{39}\) In such moral exchange faith is tantamount to a correct attitude towards the other, which of course is nothing other than an effort to get the mimetic recognition right, thus remaining entirely within the aesthetic game.

It has been my argument in this dissertation, however, that redemption in Dostoevsky is never a product of moral behavior but a miracle. Hence Dostoevsky’s emphasis on resurrection and not on repentance as the only hope for transformation. Just as nothing can prevent the decay of a dead body, no morality can eradicate the disintegrating force of erotic desire that saturates all aesthetic attitude. Thus redemption in Dostoevsky is never a shifting of scales on the moral-aesthetic continuum, but rather a radical escape from that continuum altogether. This is not to say that a moral action has no place in Dostoevsky’s universe. It is only to suggest that moral action is never a cause of transformation, but its fruit. In this Dostoevsky is entirely within the tradition of Johannine theology.

In general, the major female characters in Dostoevsky are rarely agents in reciprocal dialogic relationships. They are figures of universal significance. As Evean figures, they embody and thus make possible the protagonist’s encounter with universal categories such as the world’s fallenness, or, as is the case with Sonya and briefly with Grushenka, they create an occasion for an encounter with redeemed reality where lust is no longer. Without appreciating this point, we will not understand the whole significance of the relationship between Alyosha’s visit to

Grushenka and the vision of resurrection that he experiences upon his return to Zosima’s coffin. What Alyosha experiences with Grushenka — whose name literally means a “little pear,” bringing together the idea of forbidden fruit and a luscious female body — is nothing less than a restoration of the Edenic, prelapsarian order. The miracle has manifested itself in a cancelation of lust, which is an event of eschatological significance.

Rakitin’s mocking words at the end of the chapter, in their misunderstanding of the miracle, ironically capture the true essence of that which has transpired: “‘So you converted a sinful woman?’ he laughed spitefully to Alyosha. ‘Turned a harlot onto the path of truth? Drove out the seven demons, eh? So here’s where today’s expected miracles took place!’” (BK, 358).

While everyone expected the miracle of the cancelation of the law of decomposition to manifest itself in the glorification of Zosima’s dead body, the miracle has instead expressed itself in the cancelation of the moral decomposition of lust in a relationship between Alyosha and Grushenka. Rakitin’s sarcastic effort to see the entire scene through the moralistic prism of a sentimentalist trope — the conversion of a prostitute coupled with the image of Mary Magdalene — captures precisely the kind of ethical reading of the scene that would be a misunderstanding. What has transpired between Alyosha and Grushenka was not some moral dialogic exchange but a miracle of redeemed presence untainted by the decomposing effect of lust.

When Alyosha returns to the monastery he is still overwhelmed with joy from the miracle that he has witnessed. He has gained new vision and is no longer afraid to look straight at the coffin with Zosima’s body:

Again he saw this coffin before him, and this dead man all covered up in it, who had been so precious to him, but in his soul there was none of that weeping, gnawing, tormenting pity that had been there earlier, in the morning. Now, as he entered, he fell down before the coffin as if it were a holy thing, but joy, joy was shining in his mind and in his heart. The window of the cell was open, the air was fresh and rather cool— “the smell must have become even worse if they decided to open the window,” Alyosha thought. But
even this thought about the putrid odor, which only recently had seemed to him so terrible and inglorious, did not now stir up any of his former anguish and indignation. He quietly began praying, but soon felt that he was praying almost mechanically (BK, 359).

We see here an enactment of the already familiar apophatic mechanism. Alyosha’s resurrection joy is affirmed in his relationship to Zosima’s dead body. If previously the sight of the corpse stirred up in him anguish, now his mind is “shining with joy.” The mechanistic nature of Alyosha’s prayer, which underscores the impotence of words, further underscores the non-mimetic reality that Alyosha has entered.

Fragments of thoughts flashed in his soul, catching fire like little stars and dying out at once to give way to others, yet there reigned in his soul something whole, firm, assuaging, and he was conscious of it himself. He would ardently begin a prayer, he wanted so much to give thanks and to love... But, having begun the prayer, he would suddenly pass to something else, lapse into thought, and forget both his prayer and what had interrupted it. He tried listening to what Father Paissy was reading, but, being very worn out, he began little by little to doze off... (BK, 359).

Dostoevsky here gives us an almost physiological description of Alyosha’s entry into a mystical vision. On the one hand, his mind is still fighting fragmentation, on the other, his soul is gaining new wholeness. His effort to express this new reality through a prayer or link it with the words that Father Paissy is reading does not succeed.

Alyosha wakes up at the moment when Father Paissy is reading the Cana of Galilee pericope. Alyosha makes an effort to listen to it:

Ah, yes, I’ve been missing it and I didn’t want to miss it, I love that passage; it’s Cana of Galilee, the first miracle... Ah, that miracle, ah, that lovely miracle! Not grief, but men’s joy Christ visited when he worked his first miracle, he helped men’s joy... “He who loves men, loves their joy”... The dead man used to repeat it all the time, it was one of his main thoughts... (BK, 360).

Nina Perlina has observed that Alyosha’s religious experience here is born out of his imagination mixing with the “authoritative biblical quotation.” However, the relationship of Alyosha’s

imagination to scripture in this scene is not straightforward. Dostoevsky includes four block quotes of the Johannine text, following each quote with Alyosha’s effort to imagine the biblical scene. But this aesthetic appropriation of the biblical text is dramatically interrupted at the moment within the biblical narrative when Christ turns water into wine. At this instance Alyosha’s imagination seems to break through to a new level of perception:

But what’s this? what’s this? Why are the walls of the room opening out? Ah, yes…this is the marriage, the wedding feast…yes, of course. Here are the guests, here the newlyweds, amid the festive crowd, and…where is the wise ruler of the feast? But who is this? Who? Again the room is opening out…Who is getting up from the big table? What…? Is he here, too? Why, he is in the coffin…But here too…He has gotten up, he’s seen me, he’s coming over…Lord! (BK, 360).

Alyosha’s imagination has undergone an augmentation, which has allowed him to be present both in the old room where the coffin is standing and in the new plane of vision where Zosima is alive. This arising of imagination to the new plane of vision is characterized by Alyosha abandoning direct relationship to the biblical text. From this point on no biblical text is quoted. Meanwhile, Zosima announces to Alyosha that he has now entered the reality of “new wine”:

“We are rejoicing,” the little wizened man continued, “we are drinking new wine, the wine of a new and great joy. See how many guests there are? Here are the bridegroom and the bride, here is the wise ruler of the feast, tasting the new wine. Why are you marveling at me? I gave a little onion, and so I am here. And there are many here who only gave an onion, only one little onion…What are our deeds? [Chto nashi dela?] And you, quiet one, you, my meek boy, today you, too, were able to give a little onion to a woman who hungered. Begin, my dear, begin, my meek one, to do your work! (BK, 361).

The little onion is a folk image used by Grushenka to describe a small gift of love towards a neighbor. Given my previous point about the significance of the moral deed in Dostoevsky’s conception of redemption, it is worth noting here Zosima’s rhetorical question: “What are our deeds?” which underemphasizes the moral value of neighborly love, thus subordinating it to the miracle of resurrection.
Alyosha’s vision, however, is not an escape from the aesthetic realm. As per Zosima’s command, he is to go into the world and continue his work of love. Before he does so, however, he must saturate his perception with new light: “And do you see our Sun, do you see him?” “I’m afraid…I don’t dare to look,” whispered Alyosha [ne smeiu gliadet’] (BK, 361). Zosima encourages Alyosha to look:

Do not be afraid of him. Awful is his greatness before us, terrible is his loftiness, yet he is boundlessly merciful, he became like us out of love, and he is rejoicing with us, transforming water into wine, that the joy of the guests may not end. He is waiting for new guests, he is ceaselessly calling new guests, now and unto ages of ages. See, they are bringing the new wine, the vessels are being brought in…” (BK, 361-362).

Alyosha’s life in the world is now to be sustained by the boundlessness of God’s mercy revealed in the miracle at Cana. The Eucharistic subtext here is unmistakable. As the feast is going on “unto ages of ages,” with the new wine ceaselessly pouring, so Alyosha’s life in the world can now be sustained by the fullness of joy and light.

Alyosha’s vision ends as abruptly as it began. Again he sees in front of him “the coffin, the open window […] a covered up, motionless dead man stretched out with an icon on his chest” (BK, 361). He is back in the world ruled by aesthetic decomposition. He storms out into the dark night where “The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars…” (BK, 362). Suddenly, Alyosha finds himself on the ground ecstatically embracing and kissing the earth: “He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss all of it, but he was kissing it, weeping, sobbing, and watering it with his tears, and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to love it unto ages of ages” (BK, 362). As he thus celebrates nature and cosmos as redeemable and indeed redeemed by God, the vision solidifies in his soul into something permanent: “he felt clearly and almost tangibly something as firm and immovable as
this heavenly vault descend into his soul. Some sort of idea, as it were, was coming to reign in his mind—now for the whole of his life and unto ages of ages” (BK, 363).

As powerful as a religious experience in a Dostoevsian novel might be, it remains vulnerable to the possibility of collapsing back into aesthetic anxiety. A starry sky in Dostoevsky usually belongs to the Romantic horizon, where the cold light of the stars symbolizes the cosmos’ indifference to people’s fate. The same nightly sky that fills Alyosha’s soul with divine silence leaves Mitya’s soul in torment and unable to withstand the force of desire:

The air was fresh and rather cool; big stars shone in the clear sky. This was the same night, perhaps the same hour, when Alyosha threw himself to the earth “vowing ecstatically to love it unto ages of ages.” But Mitya’s soul was troubled, very troubled, and though many things now tormented his soul, at this moment his whole being yearned irresistibly for her, for his queen, to whom he was flying in order to look at her for the last time (BK, 410).

In the juxtaposition of Alyosha’s and Mitya’s experience of the nightly sky, we find the two poles of the Dostoevskian universe and of his poetics. The aesthetic pole, ruled by anxiety and the constant agitation of the erotic desire, and the religious pole, characterized by the joy of the wedding feast at Cana.

**Conclusion**

Redemption can be a misleading word when applied to Dostoevsky’s idea of the restored universe. Rooted in the atonement theory of salvation — an idea that emphasizes Christ’s death as a vicarious sacrifice for the sinful world — redemption inevitably defines salvation in terms of moral exculpation. However, unlike Western Christianity, where atonement theory and therefore an ethical conception of Christianity gained dominance, in the Eastern tradition atonement has

---

41 Pankratova, 51-54.
played a minor role. Hence the underemphasizing of the ethical paradigms in Orthodox theology. Instead Johannine theology emphasizes resurrection, which defines salvation not so much as a restoration of moral equilibrium as an event of ontological rapture, which transfigures the world from a force for disintegration into a life of wholeness.

Dostoevsky’s poetics is rooted in the eventness of transfiguration, where Christ’s death gains negative significance as an image of the privation of the Christological event. As such it is part of the apophatic movement within Dostoevsky’s poetics, which, through a grotesque portrayal of decomposition, not only exposes the nihilism of aesthetics but, having driven aesthetic perception to its nihilistic extreme, opens up poetic structure to the necessity of the religious vision. In Crime and Punishment this apophatic logic expresses itself in Raskolnikov’s ontological drama. The effort to control his own reality mimetically will eventually bring Raskolnikov face to face with Svidrigailov. The corpse-like figure Svidrigailov is Raskolnikov’s double who vividly captures for Raskolnikov his own decomposing self. It is through a negative relationship to Svidrigailov that Raskolnikov — a Lazarus in his grave — is able to rise to the new way of relating to reality that is manifested to him in the iconic presence of Sonya. The same negative movement governs Dostoevsky’s appropriation of the Cana of Galilee motif in The Brothers Karamazov. If for Raskolnikov his own self constituted the object of aesthetic obsession, for Alyosha Karamazov the object of idolatrous fascination is Father Zosima. Hence the need for Alyosha to be confronted with Zosima’s decomposing body. As Alyosha renounces

---


the aesthetic relationship to Zosima, the true significance of Zosima’s vision of the world becomes possible for him.
Conclusion

Dostoevsky’s visual world is not only highly unstable but often grotesquely distorted. In this dissertation I offer a way of understanding this instability and distortion as part of the apophatic movement of Dostoevsky’s poetics. Since for Dostoevsky an image never fully corresponds to reality, all representation is inevitably an alteration. Distortion in Dostoevsky’s poetics, therefore, is not its own kind of aesthetic but an intensification of that which is inherently true of any aesthetic experience. However, by pushing visual decomposition in his novels to the point of grotesqueness Dostoevsky does not merely seek to make a rhetorical point but to occasion an epiphany wherein the aesthetic is renounced in favor of a non-ethical religious perception.

Throughout my dissertation the name of Mikhail Bakhtin comes up a number of times. In the first chapter I disagree with Bakhtin’s assumption in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* that fragmentation endows the Dostoevskian novel with liberating plurality. However, having disagreed with Bakhtin in the first chapter, I proceed to cite him in support of my argument in the second and third chapters. What allows me to engage Bakhtin in such different modes is the presence of different approaches to Dostoevsky within Bakhtinian philosophy. Bakhtin’s commentary on Dostoevsky is not limited to *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. He continues to ponder Dostoevsky’s novels his entire life. Naturally, as Bakhtin’s philosophy evolves, we find in his texts new and sometimes conflicting perspectives on Dostoevsky’s poetics. By way of a conclusion, I expand on the larger trajectory of Bakhtin’s engagement with Dostoevsky and how it relates to my argument.

One of the important divides within Bakhtin’s philosophy is the fundamental apposition between the epistemological optimism of late 1920’s and early 1930’s, when Bakhtin writes his
monograph on Dostoevsky, and the epistemological pessimism of the 1940’s. The optimism is characterized by Bakhtin switching epistemological paradigms from vision and the image towards the word, utterance, and dialogue more broadly. The malleable nature of language offered Bakhtin more hope for an aesthetic transformation of the self than is allowed by the aesthetic rigidity of the image. Thus in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics Bakhtin defines Dostoevsky’s conception of the self as a self-utterance. Defining the reality of the self as fundamentally rhetorical endows the self with power, if not to be understood, then at the very least not to be sealed in a misunderstanding. Always able to utter a new word about itself, self-consciousness can continuously evade any misconception about itself and thus remain constantly free.

Bakhtin’s linguistic enthusiasm comes to a halt in 1940’s. While it is significant that Bakhtin’s disillusionment occurs during the Stalinist years, the darkness of the times merely exacerbates the realization that his philosophy had been built on an overly optimistic assumption about the human epistemic condition. Some of the texts written during this time vividly capture the nature of the change that Bakhtin is experiencing: “Ritorika v meru svoei lzhivosti” [Rhetoric, so far as it is inherently false or: Rhetoric to the extent that it lies], “Chelovek u zerkala” [a person by a mirror], and “K voprosam samosoznanii a samoosotsenki” [On questions of self-consciousness and self-conception]. As Bakhtin confronts the inherent falsity of rhetorical and therefore dialogic existence, he returns to the problem of consciousness. The theme of the mirror indicates a return to the centrality of the image and vision in self-conception.

---

1 On the four distinct periods in Bakhtin’s intellectual career see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 64-100.
3 All of these texts are found in the fifth volume of Mikhail Bakhtin’s Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (Moskva, 1997).
Along with the re-evaluation of his epistemological assumptions in the 1940’s Bakhtin continues to reflect on literature. A valuable set of literary notes from this time has come down to us under the title: “Additions and Changes to Rabelais.”\(^4\) As indicated by the title, in these notes Bakhtin is rethinking his idea of carnival, which he developed in an earlier, at the time, still-unpublished monograph on Rabelais.\(^5\) If previously Bakhtin understood carnival primarily as a fearless celebration of the dismembered body, now he takes seriously the dark exigencies of carnivalesque reveling — a murdered and decomposing body. By no means does Bakhtin renounce the fundamental theological significance of carnival where the broken body of carnival is associated with the broken body of Christ and thus ultimately is grounded within the Eucharistic event. However, Bakhtin’s idea of the Christological event now gains a broader and more encompassing range. Before the paschal joy of the carnival — “the pure hosanna” \(\textit{chistaia khvala}\) — can settle in, the tragedy inherent to Christ’s death and decomposition — “the pure curse” \(\textit{chistoe prokliatie}\) — must be confronted in all of its epistemological and metaphysical seriousness (5:82).

This interest in seriousness \(\textit{oser’eznivanie}\) is nothing other than “the Holbeinian moment” emerging within Bakhtin’s own thinking. “Apart from official seriousness, the seriousness of power […] there is also the unofficial seriousness of suffering, fear, of being frightened, of weakness, the seriousness of a slave and the seriousness of the sacrificial lamb […] the unofficial seriousness in Dostoevsky” (5:81). The Christological language of “the sacrificial lamb” links the idea of seriousness with the moment of Christ’s death as an inherently


\(^{5}\) The monograph was eventually published in 1965 under the title \textit{Tvorchestvo Fransa Rable i narodnaia kul’tura srednevekov’ia i Renessansa}. For an English translation see Helene Iswolsky’s \textit{Rabelais and His World} (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).
tragic moment within the Christological event: “The idea of the unatonable [neiskupimosti] and irreparable [nepopravimosti] in Dostoevsky and its artistic importance. The separation of death from life, praise from invective, which has to do with making something serious [oser’eznivanie]; to declare something stable and unchangeable” (5:83). Bakhtin now understands the human condition as inherently “irreparable,” which means that it is not ethically salvageable. A disintegrating body is a dead body. It cannot be “repaired” but only resurrected. Hence Bakhtin’s insistence that “death” within the tragic event must be acknowledged separately from “life.” Finally, we see here the idea of “stability” gaining distinctly salvific connotation, which Bakhtin would never do in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics where any stability is considered to be the threat of monologism.

In his re-evaluation of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin turns to Crime and Punishment. As the text in which Dostoevsky develops the study of consciousness began in Notes from Underground, Crime and Punishment allows Bakhtin to return right to the heart of the argument he offers in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics as it was based largely on an analysis of Notes. However, if Notes is Dostoevsky’s study of a consciousness ad abstractum, in Crime and Punishment Dostoevsky sets the problem of consciousness within a radical opposition between the aesthetic and religious/ontological realms. Thus the idea of aesthetic fragmentation is explicitly broached in Crime and Punishment as decomposition brought about by death. Emphasizing decomposition Bakhtin writes: “Raskolnikov’s room […] is a grave [grob], in which Raskolnikov goes through the phase of death [faza smerti] so as to be resurrected and renewed” (5:99). In my analysis of this quote in the third chapter, I explain how Bakhtin here embraces the Johannine conception of transformation as religious rapture and not as aesthetic or ethical self-improvement or liberation. Bakhtin’s marked use of the passive voice underscores Raskolnikov’s condition as that of the
decomposing body of a Lazarus inside a grave, a body that is awaiting the miracle of transfiguration.

While it might seem that “resurrection” should be the most natural idea for such a theologically minded thinker as Bakhtin, it is in fact a rare concept in Bakhtin’s early analysis of Dostoevsky. In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics Bakhtin does not mention resurrection even once, which is understandable since at this time fragmentation is not understood as an aspect of death and decomposition but as a liberating “breakthrough” of a new consciousness. Perpetual instability within the Dostoevskian novel, Bakhtin argues, is in fact a poetics of “dissolving,” wherein the author takes “all that is merely material, merely an object, all that is fixed and unchanging, all that is external and neutral in the representation of a person, and dissolves it in the realm of the hero’s self-consciousness and self-utterance.” Thus self-consciousness effectively becomes a repository of fragmentation, while an outpouring of this fragmentation becomes a self-utterance.

What allows Bakhtin such a positive idea of fragmented self-consciousness in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics is the assumption that although fragmentation is infinite in its liberating potential, it is ultimately contained within the “semantic” bounds of language: “from the very beginning a certain stable semantic multiplicity exists, with unchanging content, and all that occurs within it is a rearrangement of accents” (PDP, 240). However, in his revisiting of Dostoevsky’s poetics in “Additions and Changes to Rabelais” Bakhtin is no longer optimistic that there is anything within the aesthetic realm that could contain consciousness within safe coordinates: “But how problematic these poles and coordinates are: defining the human being [opredelenie cheloveka], they themselves need definition; they themselves are drawn into the

---

6 Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 54. Henceforth referred to in the text with PDP, followed by page numbers
struggle (there is a need for some kind of coordinates for the coordinates)” (5:99). Bakhtin here is still reflecting on Raskolnikov, whose flow of consciousness Bakhtin now understands through the Holbeinian metaphor of a decomposing corpse.

Unlike physical decomposition, where the process of fragmentation has an end, aesthetic decomposition is endless. Ippolit’s critique of Holbein’s painting in *The Idiot*, which I analyzed in the second chapter, stresses precisely this point. No ethics, no moral rigor can ever deal with the despair that results from self-perpetuating aesthetic fragmentation. Nor is carnivalesque laughter an adequate response. Within the aesthetic realm, all laughter is bound to turn into the horror of neverending self-mockery and derision. What can put the “salvific” end to aesthetic despair? Bakhtin argues for the seriousness of tragedy. By refusing us the convenience of moral thinking, tragedy demands that human existence be given ultimate, that is non-aesthetic, coordinates — something Bakhtin calls “the coordinates of the coordinates.” Tragedy creates for Bakhtin the apophatic movement. By defining life as radically unexplainable by aesthetics and ethics, tragedy opens it up to the ontological and thus to the religious.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


