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Learning to Look

The Meaning of the Unseen Icon in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

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Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* is often approached as a failed masterpiece. The unseen presence of "text" or "word" icons, however, challenges this assumption. A reading of the novel on the "iconic" level demonstrates the possibility of spiritual renewal through the image of the Mother of God as represented textually in *Dormition* and *Do Not Lament Me, Mother* icon types. For Dostoevsky, verbal icons retain their transformative function for his characters as well as for his readers. Through verbal icons, Dostoevsky explores the role of the artist, the possibility of the literary text as a source of spiritual transformation, and the nature of the nineteenth-century Russian cultural mindset.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, *Idiot*, Myshkin, Holbein, Grünewald, icons, Madonna, Mother of God, vision

*Look now upon the face that is
most like the face of Christ; for
only through its brightness
can you prepare your vision to
see Him.*

(Paradiso XXXII, 85-87)¹

The Idiot (*Idiot*, 1868-1869) is Dostoevsky's darkest and most terrifying novel. It's no wonder, as images of dead and dying bodies real and imagined dominate the book. Frequent descriptions of executions and murders, the ubiquity of the consumptive Ippolit and the prominence of the portrait of the dead Christ in Rogozhin's house cast a somber if not macabre shadow. The ending of *The Idiot*, too, seems to lack the kind of redemptive scene we find in Dostoevsky's other post-Siberian works. Instead, Nastasia Filipovna is murdered, Rogozhin is sent to Siberia, Ippolit dies, Aglaia is estranged from her family, and the Prince retreats into a kind of madness. So, it is puzzling that Dostoevsky wrote in a letter to his friend and poet Apollon Maikov in 1868 that the novel was meant to explore his most challenging, but "favorite" idea - to portray a "positively beautiful man" (*izobrazit' polozhitel'no prekrasnogo cheloveka*), an ideal embodied, he said, by Christ (*polozhitel'no prekrasnoe litso*) and the "infinite miracle" of his incarnation as the visible Word of God.²

To address this paradox, some readers approach the novel as something of a flawed masterpiece and Myshkin as a failed Christ, who, in various ways, does not properly "fit" into the novelistic world of *The Idiot*.³ For Dostoevsky, however, the perceived success of the novel was not so much an issue of Christology or character development. Instead, it was a matter of knowing how, as Myshkin does, to "look" and, doing so, to perceive beyond the "repulsive crust" (*otvratitel'naia kora*) of everyday reality the image of God in man.⁴ Like *The Idiot*, much of Dostoevsky's post-Siberian work bears witness to the revelation of man's true image (*obraz*) in a world that is degraded, monstrous, or evil (*bezobrazie*).⁵ "The literary journey in *House of the Dead*," Robert Louis Jackson says,

“like the journey of Dante the traveler, was an expedition to see and learn” and the work, like its companion piece “The Peasant Marey,” is structured by vision “as an aesthetic and religious category.”⁶

In Dostoevsky’s work, the ability to perceive or sense the Mother of God (*Bozh’ia mater’, Bogoroditsa*) often presages spiritually transformative experiences. References to these iconic images, however, are not always apparent, but only suggested by verbal description or, in some cases, the mention of certain dates. In Dostoevsky’s “Dream of a Ridiculous Man” (“Son smeshnogo cheloveka. Fantasticheskii rasskaz”, 1877), the hero’s quest to give shape to the “living image” (*zhivoi obraz*) of truth (*istina*) begins late November third, on the eve of the feast day of the Mother of God of Kazan, suggesting the link between “knowing truth” (*uznat’ istinu*) and seeing (*videt’*) her image or icon (*obraz*).⁷ In the *Idiot*, Myshkin more obviously connects his encounters with the inexpressible to a Madonna figure. In the state of hyper-awareness that precedes his epileptic fits, Myshkin claims to experience the “highest synthesis of life” (*vysshii sintez zhizni*), the “essence of Christianity” (*sushchnost’ khristianstva*) and a “religious feeling” (*religioznoe chuvstvo*) which, for him, finds visual expression in the Madonna-like pose of the young peasant woman who sees in her child’s first smile the love of God for the sinner.⁸ Myshkin’s recollection of this scene appears early in the novel and sets the pattern in which the ability to properly look and see iconic images becomes akin to a spiritual act of witness.

Among the many icons that appear in Dostoevsky’s work, none is more prominent than those of the Russian Mother of God. “The cult of the Madonna,” Robert Louis Jackson writes, “is clearly felt throughout Dostoevsky’s works.”⁹ Studies on the Mother of God image show how characters’ interaction with this icon type - most notably in “The Landlady,” “A Gentle Creature,” *Notes from Underground*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed* (or *Devils*) - define the contours of Dostoevsky’s moral universe and the dynamics of the narrative.¹⁰ European models that entranced Dostoevsky, like Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* and the *Madonna della Sedi*, provide the aesthetic ideal of beauty that the artist himself perceives and reveals.¹¹ “The aesthetic act, a revelation of light and beauty,” Jackson notes, “presages rebirth and transfiguration. In the deepest sense, though, Dostoevsky would say of the artist and his aesthetic act what the Gospel says of John the Baptist: ‘he was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light’ (John 1:8).”¹²

The Idiot is a decidedly visual text and its symbolism is structured around the discussion of the real and imaged paintings, portraits and photographs that crowd its pages.¹³ Yet, although Myshkin does compare Aglaia Epanchina’s beauty to Holbein’s Dresden Madonna and his interaction with Nastasya Filipovna’s photographic portrait suggests veneration, there is hardly a single description of a Russian icon in the novel.¹⁴ Instead, Rogozhin’s painting of the dead Christ that Myshkin identifies as a likely Holbein copy is widely considered to be the central image of the novel and is often approached as an icon or even an “anti-icon.”¹⁵ The present essay, however, aims to demonstrate the presence of *unseen* icons in *The Idiot*. To do so, it engages in what we will call an “iconic” reading, that is, an understanding of the novel through its “imagic” elements and through the “energy” (*energiia*) of the Russian icon itself. Reading the novel in this way allows us better access to its essential “mystery” - which revolves not around the inevitability of the much anticipated murder, but around the possibility of new life and spiritual reevaluation, an idea that consumed Dostoevsky as he was working on *The Idiot*.

For Dostoevsky, the icon is the visual incarnation of divine beauty that often precedes moments of revelation and transfiguration in his work. In his study of icons in literature, Valerii Lepakhin considers this kind of relationship between the visual and textual icon, suggesting that, like an actual icon, an icon described or even suggested by a literary text may retain its iconic function or *ikonichnost’*.¹⁶ In *The Idiot*, the presence of the “verbal” or “word” icons (*verbal’naia* or *slovesnaia ikona*) that Dostoevsky creates textually can only be perceived if the reader looks beyond the verbal plane of the narrative and the everyday reality (*bezobrazie*) of the novelistic world.¹⁷ Fittingly, the ability to “look” is a topic of great discussion when Prince Myshkin first enters the Epanchin household. Adelaida Epanchina asks Myshkin for a subject for her painting; she has not been able to find one for two years because, as she says, “I don’t know how to look” (*Vzglianut’ ne umeiu*).¹⁸ Adelaida’s claim elicits a surprised reac-

tion from her literally-minded mother who exclaims, "What do you mean, you don't know how to look? You have eyes, so look" ("Kak eto vzglianut' ne umeiu? Est' glaza, i gliadi.").¹⁹ But, for Dostoevsky, of course, the problem of "seeing" is not about eyesight *per se* but about seeing with a different eye altogether, the "eye of the soul" (*glazami dushi ili okom dukhovnym*).²⁰

The present reading of *The Idiot* on the iconic level focuses primarily on two Mother of God icon types - the Dormition of the Mother of God (*Uspenie Presviatoi Bogoroditsy*) and the Do Not Lament Me, Mother (*Ne Rydai Mene, Mati*), both of which incorporate themes of death and resurrection. Through these examples, this essay explores the dynamics of the creation of text or word icons and investigates their function within the novel. It also considers how the presence of these text icons introduces the image of John the Baptist into the narrative, which further informs Dostoevsky's ideas on the "vision" of the writer. Ultimately, our reading aims to reassess the perceived "success" of the *The Idiot* in light of the aesthetics of transfiguration that are so closely associated with the iconic imagery of the Mother of God.

The Dormition of the Mother of God

The connection between Myshkin's name and the ill-fated Cathedral of the Dormition in Moscow is established early in the novel. The writing sample (*obrazchik kalligrafii*) Myshkin submits to General Epanchin reinforces this link; it is the stylized signature of the fourteenth-century Hegumen Pafnuty, founder of the Novoezerskii Monastery in Kostroma built in honor of the Dormition of the Mother of God. In her astute reading of the strange architecture of Rogozhin's house, Tatiana Kasatkina sees the symbolic ruins of the collapsed fifteenth-century Cathedral of the Dormition designed by Myshkin's ancestral namesake.²¹ Thus, she notes, by the end of the novel, the body of the murdered Nastasya Filipovna becomes the "main icon of his cathedral" (*glavnaia ikona ego khrama*).²² Indeed, the peculiar dimensions of Rogozhin's house, like those noted in Sonia's room in *Crime and Punishment*, seem to reflect the reverse perspective of the icon while the presence of Rogozhin and Myshkin, who sit on opposite sides of the body, may suggest the composition of the Dormition of the Mother of God icon. The scene is highly reminiscent of the novel's opening, when Myshkin and Rogozhin also sit across from each other, one "very blond" and the other "black haired", like portraits of opposites; but here, too, the iconic function is missing. In addition, despite certain markers of the iconic, the stillness of the death scene is marked by "disorder" (*besporiadok*), the smell of death and the buzzing of a fly. The Prince's subsequent descent into his previous madness is a far cry from the expected moral transformation effected by Dostoevsky's verbal icons. Like her symbolic connection in the novel with Pushkin's ribald *Gavriliada* (1821), Nastasya Filipovna's Dormition "icon" casts her only as a problematic Madonna, one that remains tethered to the physical world.²³ Like the decaying body of Father Zosima, Nastasya Filipovna's repose challenges rather than reinforces the faith of the viewer; as such, the nearest correlate to the scene is not really the Dormition icon but, perhaps, Rogozhin's portrait of the dead Christ. In another visual parallel, we recall how Myshkin and Rogozhin stood in a similar fashion in front of the portrait in the second part of the novel.²⁴

The episode in Switzerland with Mari - the other "fallen" woman - is a scene that gets less critical attention but one that is key to the sense of the novel. In contrast to the description of Nastasya Filippovna's dead body, Myshkin's story about Mari's death demonstrates both the composition and function of a verbal icon.²⁵ His recollection is comprised of the events and their aftermath, which take place over several years. Sickly and destitute, seduced and abandoned, Mari is the quintessential village pariah; she is considered "vermin," a "spider," and the "lowest sort of creatures" by the villagers, who spit on her and throw rocks and mud at her. The local priest says that she is "marked by the finger of God" (*otmechena perstom bozhiim*) as "an example to those who lose their virtue" (*primer tem, kotorye teriaut dobrodetel'*).²⁶ Carol Apollonio points out, however, that in Dostoevsky's work "a trope of reversal or negation" is often at work; "the more appealing or seductive the arguments or images on

the surface of the text, the more likely it is that they are false - not in a primitive factual sense, but in the sense that their seductiveness leads away from the truth. Conversely, an ugly or dirty surface may very well serve as a conduit to revelation.²⁷ Indeed, Mari becomes the key to Myshkin's "particular story" (*osobennaia istoriia*), as the village children "step in" and set the example to others by starting to love Mari instead of reviling her.

The treatment of Mari by the children invokes many of the expected visual elements of the Dormition icon: the recumbent Mary surrounded by mourners, the halo around her head, winged angels and flowers above and, in many, the Jewish priest who tries to turn over Mary's bier. In *The Idiot*, when Mari can no longer leave her bed, the children come to the window, which provides the frame, to say "Bonjour, notre bonne Mari." (Dostoevsky's translation of this French phrase - "Zdravstvui, nasha slavnaiia Mari" - for his readers is interesting in its use of the Russian "slava" as it echoes the language of veneration).²⁸ "Like little birds," Myshkin describes the children, "they fluttered their wings against her window (*Oni, kak ptichki, bilis' krylyshkami v ee v okno*) and called to her every morning, 'Nous t'aimon, Mari.'²⁹ When Mari dies, the children "decorated the whole coffin with flowers and put a wreath on her head," recalling the nimbus. At the funeral, the village priest refrains from castigating her, as with the conversion of Jephonias.³⁰ After the funeral, Myshkin says, "Mari's little grave has been constantly venerated (*pochitalas'*) by the children: every year they decorate it with flowers, and they've planted roses all around it."³¹ These acts of compassion and charity, as expressed through the iconic reading of the scene, offer a "distinctive religious vision and the potential for salvation."³²

Kasatkina points out that this extended scene is akin to a reverie for Myshkin. As such, it begs a certain amount of comparison - beyond the similarity of the names - with Dostoevsky's "The Peasant Marei", which Jackson has considered at length as a layered memory-vision that allows the imprisoned Dostoevsky to undergo a kind of spiritual rebirth.³³ The frame narrative takes place at Easter time, but the memory is set in mid-August, near the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God. Descriptions of the strapping peasant with his dirt-covered fingers and homespun coat combine with repeated mention of his tender and maternal qualities until it seems his bearded face disappears only to take on the attributes of an icon of the Mother of God.³⁴ Framed in iconic imagery, Dostoevsky's "vision" of this boyhood encounter with Marei/Mariia leaves him with a sense of spiritual renewal. In *The Idiot*, the text icon created by Myshkin's memory of Mari also seems to retain the energy and function of a "miraculous" icon; it is even suggested that she has a feast day. These examples demonstrate that, by perceiving the visual image of the Word of God in a bearded peasant and a fallen woman, the artist, the reader and the text itself experience the aesthetics of transformation. It is significant that, in the case of Nastasya Filipovna, her body is covered; without gazing on the image of the icon, spiritual revaluation cannot take place.³⁵ In the case of the icon, seeing *is* believing.

Do Not Lament Me, Mother

In *Notes from the House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky's narrator Gorianchikov witnesses the agonies and death of the prisoner Mikhailov, which is described in a way that suggests the "Do Not Lament Me, Mother" icon type. It is difficult not to see in the Mikhailov's death echoes of Rogozhin's painting as well: "It was terrible to see (*Strashno bylo smotret'*) that long, thin body with its arms and legs that had withered away to the bone, with its sagging belly, its arched chest, its ribs showing as clearly as the ribs of a skeleton."³⁶ As in the painting, Mikhailov's body lies naked with eyes open; his mouth "was half open, and two rows of white, young teeth gleamed through the delicate lips which stuck fast to the gums."³⁷ Readers have noted the similarities between the hospital scene and the Passion, descriptions of which Dostoevsky knew by heart.³⁸ Significantly, however, the prison guard who would represent the centurion diverges from Scripture; he does not say that Mikhailov is a child of God, but a child of his human mother:

"This man was a hard bitten, grey-headed soldier who had put in many years of service. I remember that at that same moment Chekunov, another grey-haired man, who also standing close by. He was looking steadfastly, without saying a word, into the duty sergeant's face, observing his every move-

ment with a strange attentiveness. But their eyes met, and for some reason Chekunov's lower lip suddenly started to tremble. He contorted it strangely, baring his teeth and, as if inadvertently drawing the duty sergeant's attention to the corpse, said quickly, "He, too, had a mother!" (*Tozhe ved' mat' byla!*)³⁹

Here, the text icon is only completed by the perception of the Mother of God outside of the narrative frame, a vision shared by the two unlikely witnesses. Thus intuiting the "icon", these men introduce the possibility of merciful redemption into a terrible scene of the finality of physical death.

In a similar way in *The Idiot*, the promise of transfigured humanity lies beyond the frame of Rogozhin's painting of the dead Christ in his tomb. In this case, the "icon" is structured not only on the image of the Mother of God, but also on John the Baptist or "Forerunner" who - like the mother - perceives and points out the coming of Christ. Dostoevsky is careful to note that Myshkin arrives in Russia from Switzerland on November twenty-seventh, the main feast day of the Mother of God of the Sign icon, which, beyond its own miraculous deeds, is associated with the prophecy of Christ's birth.⁴⁰ The image of John the Baptist on both a textual and subtextual level underscores this theme of the perceptive, almost prophetic seeing that is necessary to detect the transformative "icon" of Christ. It is interesting to note that one of Dostoevsky's favorite western Madonna paintings - Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* - includes the child John the Baptist in its composition.

In Dostoevsky's stated wish to depict the "positively beautiful man (*litso*)," his choice of words should be noted. "Litso" suggests, of course, not only the "person" but also the "face" of Christ, which, by way of Rogozhin's painting, points us to the novel's symbolic system of iconographical images. But here the trope of reversal is very much in play. When Myshkin finally suggests a subject for Adelaida's painting, he tells her "to portray the face of a condemned man a minute before the stroke of the guillotine."⁴¹ "What?" asks Adelaida, "Just the face?" (*Kak litso? Odno litso?*).⁴² But for the prince, the face of a man before his own execution is the very point of the portrait. To portray the transcendent sense of clarity and timelessness experienced at the moment before death - like Myshkin's pre-seizure insight - is to create an icon of prophecy. Here, the Prince claims to have seen such a picture in Basel, referring, most agree, to the *Beheading of John the Baptist* (1514), part of a triptych on wood by Hans Fries (ca. 1460-after 1518), which Dostoevsky himself viewed in 1867 (fig. 1). The composition of the painting is striking; unlike many western representations of Saint John's martyrdom, it clearly echoes the composition of the Russian Orthodox (and Byzantine) icons that mark the same biblical event (fig. 2). Both the Fries painting and the icon type depict the moment just before the beheading. In some icon manuals (*podlinniki*), the idea of prophetic insight is further underscored by the inscription on the saint's scroll: "I saw and witnessed, behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (*Az videkh i svidetel'stvovakh, se Agnets Bozhii, vzeimiai grekhi mira.*)⁴³

The most obvious image of Christ in *The Idiot* is, of course, Rogozhin's painting, which, as stated earlier, Myshkin speculates is a copy of the painting of Christ in his tomb by Hans Holbein the Younger (fig. 3). Nikolai Karamzin's eighteenth-century description of the painting intrigued Dostoevsky from childhood and, in 1867, he made a special trip to the Kunstmuseum in Basel to see it. Holbein created the piece in oil and tempera on lime wood between 1520 and 1522. Although panel painting was still common at the time, the fact that Holbein used wood rather than a lighter canvas for this large piece indicates that it is most likely that the work was intended to serve not as a painting, but as part as part of a *predella* for an altarpiece. A wave of Protestant iconoclasm in Basel in 1522 prevented Holbein's work from reaching a church. In *The Idiot*, Rogozhin's similarly themed painting seems to form a piece of an Orthodox iconostasis in the church-like house placed, as it is, over a doorway (although this is where one would expect to see Christ enthroned). In any case, the painting suggests that it is part of an unseen composition and its meaning should be understood within this context.

Despite Myshkin's attribution, Rogozhin's painting may not, in fact, be based on Holbein's work at all. And his mistaken identification of the painting's source may play an important role in the novel's ability to model certain "truths" (*istina*).⁴⁴ Mentions of Rogozhin's painting by Dostoevsky's narrator and, later, by Ippolit, first of all, describe a Deposition scene rather than that of Christ in his tomb. In his confessional letter, Ippolit notes several times that



1. Hans Fries, *Beheading of John the Baptist*, 1514, tempera on coniferous wood, 124x76 cm, Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland (© age footstock DAE-11131984)



2. *Beheading of John the Baptist*, circa 1580, tempera on wood, 25.4x21.59 cm (© Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, Massachusetts)



3. Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* and detail, 1521-1522, oil and tempera on linden wood, 30.5x200 cm, Kunstmuseum, Basel (source: Wikimedia Commons)



4. Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece, predella*, 1512-1516, oil on panel, 336x589 cm, Museum Unterlinden, Colmar, France (source: Wikimedia Commons)



5. Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece, with John the Baptist* (source: Wikimedia Commons)



6. Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece, open* (source: Wikimedia Commons)

the painting portrays Christ “just taken down from the cross” whose body, despite great suffering, still contains “a great deal of life, of warmth” and is not yet rigid.⁴⁵ This significant discrepancy points us away from Holbein’s particular work.⁴⁶ Instead, it suggests the *predella* for Matthias Grünewald’s more famous 1515 altarpiece commissioned by the Monastery of Saint Anthony in Isenheim, France (fig. 4). Although closely associated with Basel, Switzerland, Holbein and his father (“The Elder”) also worked at the monastery close by in Isenheim and knew Grünewald’s work well.⁴⁷ If Rogozhin’s painting is considered as part of this kind of polyptypic altarpiece - an art form Dostoevsky would have encountered frequently in his European travels in the 1860s - then the reading of the work shifts toward the novel’s theme of revelation.⁴⁸ The construction of these altarpieces is designed to conceal or reveal iconic images at certain times in the liturgical calendar. Hinged wings, Martin Kemp describes, “afforded the capability of concealing the full extent of carved or painted imagery during Lent or even most of the year while providing opportunities for solemn revelation during the Eastertide or the titular feast day of the particular church or altar.”⁴⁹

For the purpose of the present discussion, two main points about Grünewald’s complex altarpiece are worth noting. The first is the appearance of John the Baptist, whose execution preceded Christ’s (although these kinds of anachronistic references were not unusual in Renaissance altarpieces) (fig. 5). A combination of images and text define his prophetic role. The inscription (“He must increase, but I must decrease”) and the symbolism of the sacramental objects - the lamb, in particular, telegraphs the import of the traditional iconic inscription - around him speak not just to sacrifice, but also to truth of his revelation (he literally “points”) of Christ as the “Lamb of God” (John 1: 35-37) and the Word of God made flesh. As with the final words of *The Idiot*, the composition directs viewers to “wait and see.” Second, the structure of Grünewald’s altarpiece is, like other such works, revelatory; it is constructed in three layers with hinged wing panels. When closed, the altarpiece depicts the Crucifixion and the Deposition of Christ. When opened (fig. 6), the work reveals images from the Annunciation, Nativity and the Resurrection, images that restore the hope that was concealed by the first panel. Like Myshkin’s buried reference to Hans Fries’s *Beheading of John the Baptist*, the unseen presence of the second panel of the Grünewald work demonstrates an “iconic” way of looking beyond the *bezobrazie* of the world to perceive the *obraz* or icon. In Grünewald’s altarpiece, the unseen presence is that of Mary, who, as in Dostoevsky’s earlier work, exists beyond the narrative or visual frame. Perceiving Mary through iconic vision, contemporary theologian John Chryssavgis writes, “moves us beyond the shattered image of a suffering world; in contemplation of the ‘unshattered’ image both world and viewer will find the potential for healing.”⁵⁰

Those who look for a Mary to complete Rogozhin’s Christ often find her in the figure of the dead Nastasia Filipovna, although, whether she represents an ironic or non-ironic Madonna remains in dispute. But, as we have noted above, the murder scene does not perform the transformative function of an icon. Part of the misreading of this scene stems from the assumption that the discovery of Rogozhin and Myshkin the morning after the crime is the novel’s *finale* where readers might expect to find at least a scene of ironic salvation. But the book ends instead in Switzerland, with Lizaveta Prokof’evna having a good “Russian” cry (*po-russki poplakala*) over the catatonic Myshkin.⁵¹ The setting and composition of the scene, it has been noted, suggest the “Do Not Lament Me, Mother” (“Ne rydai mene, mati”) icon, which within Dostoevsky’s earlier work as in Orthodox veneration, is associated with Easter and the hope of resurrection.⁵²

It is not so much Nastasia Filipovna’s murder and Myshkin’s compassion toward the murderer that makes for the “surprising” and “unexpected” ending that Dostoevsky describes in a letter to Maikov (these two events are actually quite predictable).⁵³ Rather, it is Lizaveta Prokof’evna’s prophecy, which she pronounces while *pointing* at the prince (*ukazyvaia na kniazia*):

“And all of this, and all of these foreign countries, and all of your Europe, it’s all one big fantasy (*odna fantasia*), and all of us, abroad, are one big fantasy (*odna fantasia*)... remember my words, you’ll see for yourself (*sami uvidite*)!”⁵⁴

As in Dostoevsky's earlier works, the notion of fantasy is connected to a certain way of looking at the world, of having what Jackson describes as a "philosophically idealistic or religious vision of reality."⁵⁵ Thus, the description of Myshkin and Lizaveta Prokof'evna - who cries over the Prince "with all her heart" (*zaplakala ot vsego serdtsa*) - within the Swiss landscape describes an essentially Russian and non-European "iconic" space. The actual ending of *The Idiot* challenges the reader to see the word icon that the writer perceives and presents. In a novel that is visually structured, as Kasatkina notes, on the tension between painting and icon, this final scene signifies a metaphysical victory over both the finality of death and the suffocating and reflective world of realistic art.⁵⁶

"I have my special view (*osobennyi vzgliad*) of reality (in art)," Dostoevsky wrote to Strakhov in 1869, "and what the majority calls almost fantastic and exceptional, for me is sometimes the very essence of the real."⁵⁷ This non-Euclidean view of the world comes to represent faith as Dostoevsky understood it - "completely internal, irrational, and non-utilitarian."⁵⁸ The road to spiritual reevaluation in *The Idiot* may lead through Myshkin, but it is realized only through the perception of the verbal icon. "Each of us must once for an instant in his life," Herman Hesse wrote, "experience within himself the same sort of thing that Myshkin experienced in his moments of clairvoyance, such as Dostoevsky himself experienced in those moments when he stood face to face with execution and from which he emerged with the prophet's gaze."⁵⁹ Indeed, Dostoevsky's novel can be read as a failed masterpiece or, if read as "icon," experienced as an act of witness. Writing from Florence in December of 1868, Dostoevsky chides Maikov for excusing and justifying in his poem "In front of the chapel" ("U chasovni," 1869) the miraculous moment (*svetloe mgnovenie*) when the icon affords the soul a glimpse into eternity (*V vechnost' glianuvshei dushi*). The miracle is *how* one looks, Dostoevsky suggests, writing "What treasures there are in the galleries! My God, I examined (*prosmotrel*) 'The Madonna of the Chair' [Madonna della segiola sedia] in [18]63, walked by it for a week (*smotrel nedeliu*) and only then saw (*uvidel*) it."⁶⁰

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- 1 D. ALIGHIERI, *Paradiso*, A. MANDELBAUM (trans.), New York, Bantam, 2004, p. 291.
 - 2 Letter from Geneva, Switzerland to Apollon Maikov, January 13, 1868. F.M. DOSTOEVSKY, *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh*, vol. 15, Leningrad, Nauka, 1988-1996, pp. 342-343.
 - 3 See, for example, issues with Myshkin and Christology in R. WILLIAMS, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, Waco, TX, Baylor University Press, 2008, pp. 47-61; the impossibility of Christ existing within an aesthetic narrative in M. HOLQUIST, *Dostoevsky and the Novel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977, pp. 102-123; the difficulty of Myshkin living in a "fallen" world in S. SALVESTRONI, *Bibleiskie i sviatootcheskie istochniki romanov Dostoevskogo*, Moscow, BBI Press, 2015, pp. 75-126; the correlation between Myshkin and the Rogozhin's painting of the dead Christ in T.A. KASATKINA, "Kartina Gol'beina 'Khristos v mogile' v strukture romana *Idiot*", *Roman Dostoevskogo "Idiot": Sovremennoe sostoianie izucheniia*, Moscow, Nasledie, 2001, pp. 28-39.
 - 4 F.M. DOSTOEVSKY, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, 1988-1996, p. 415.
 - 5 According to Robert Louis Jackson, the tension between *obraz* and *bezobrazie* forms the core of much of Dostoevsky's work. See especially R.L. JACKSON, *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form. A Study of His Philosophy of Art*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966 and idem, *The Art of Dostoevsky. Deliriums and Nocturnes*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981.
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Učiti gledati: značenje nevidljive ikone u *Idiotu* Dostojevskog

U radu Dostojevskog sposobnost da percipiramo ili osjetimo Majku Božju (*Bozh'ia mater, Bogoroditsa*) često nagovještuje duhovno transformativno iskustvo. Reference na te ikoničke slike, međutim, nisu uvijek očite, već samo nagoviještene u verbalnim opisima. U *Idiotu*, prisutnost "verbalnih" ili ikona "riječi" (*verbal'naia* ili *slovesnaia ikona*) može se uočiti samo ako čitatelj gleda iznad verbalne razine narativa i svakodnevnne realnosti (bezobrazie) spisateljskog svijeta. Za Dostojevskog, ova vrsta vizije i problem "gledanja" nije vezano uz vid per se, već uz gledanje drugim očima, "očima duše" (*glazami Dushi* ili *okom dukhovnym*). Ovo se čitanje *Idiota* na ikoničnoj razini usredotočuje ponajprije na dva tipa ikone Bogorodice: Usnuće Bogorodičino (*Uspenie Presviatoi Bogoroditsy*) i Oplakivanje Krista (*Ne Rydai Mene, Mati*). Kroz ove primjere, ovaj esej istražuje dinamiku stvaranja tekstualnih ikona i njihove funkcije u romanu. Također se razmatra činjenica kako prisustvo ovih ikona uvodi prikaz Ivana Krstitelja u narativ, što dodatno upućuje na ideje Dostojevskog o "viziji" i ulozi pisca. U konačnici, naše čitanje nastoji preispitati primjetan "uspjeh" *Idiota* u svjetlu estetike preobraženja, koja je usko povezana s ikoničkim prikazima Bogorodice.

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