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Prophecy in “The Peasant Marei”

Literary influence works in ways that are simultaneously obvious and ineffable. Citation, even when direct, always entails a degree of “transformative use,” as the lawyers call it.¹ Among the Russian classics, Dostoevsky is conspicuous in his abundant use of quotations from other writers. His vaunted polyphony (Bakhtin 6-7) represents not only an internal conversation among characters, narrator, and author, but also a dialogue with predecessors and contemporaries. Dostoevsky’s usual pattern is to use quotation to parody, ironize, or polemicize. But As Nina Perlina shows in her classic study on quotation in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the writer does not use irony or parody when he cites from the Bible and Alexander Pushkin (“the revealed Truth of the Gospels and the ideal and harmonious truth of Art” [5]), thus signaling their status as his most important interlocutors. This dynamics of quotation permeates not only the writer’s last and greatest novel, but also a number of his works of the 1870s. “The Peasant Marei” (Muzhik Marei, 1876) in particular bears powerful yet veiled quotations from both the Bible (the Old Testament Book of Isaiah) and Pushkin’s famous poem “The Prophet” (Пророк, 1826).² The three works are of different genres – non-fictional prose; poetry; Biblical prophecy – which allows us to raise the question of the role that generic boundaries play in literary borrowing. The generic issues are rendered potent by the fact that “Peasant Marei,” and the closely related story “The

¹ “If [...] the secondary use adds value to the original--if the quoted matter is used as raw material, transformed in the creation of new information, new aesthetics, new insights and understandings-- this is the very type of activity that the fair use doctrine intends to protect for the enrichment of society.” Pierre N. Leval, “Toward a Fair Use Standard,” *Harvard Law Review* 1105 (1990). <<http://docs.law.gwu.edu/facweb/claw/levalfrustrd.htm>> (accessed 25 March 2014).

² For the reader’s reference, these two texts are provided at the end of this article.

Dream of a Ridiculous Man” (which also develops the theme of prophecy, but in a work of narrative fiction),³ are nestled within Dostoevsky’s generically ambitious *The Diary of a Writer*, identified by Gary Saul Morson as a “boundary genre.” The references to Pushkin and Isaiah in “Peasant Marei” until now have not attracted attention from scholars and readers. As I intend to show, their very *hiddenness* signals a complex and powerful dynamic that draws power not only from these sources but also from Dostoevsky’s own autobiographical experience as he creates a distinctive new poetics of prophecy, one which will become a key element in his enduring legacy.

The focus of my study is a unique pattern of textual clues reflecting the significance of both Pushkin’s “The Prophet” and the sixth chapter of the Book of Isaiah in the writer’s thinking and artistic development not only at a critical time in his life, but also over his entire career as a writer. Prophecy was an important theme for Dostoevsky in the 1870s. He had intended to include an article on the subject in *The Diary of a Writer* in 1877,⁴ and he repeatedly returned to it in his fictional and non-fictional works of the period. Viewing the Westernized, liberalizing urban Russia of his day as a kind of fallen Babylon, he offers his Christian vision in terms of prophecy.⁵ The theme is associated, naturally, with texts from the Old Testament, notably the Book of Isaiah (Iakubovich 59). Prophecy figured prominently in Russian Romantic poetry beginning in the 1810s; it was associated both with the aspiration to political freedom and with the theme of poetic inspiration, granted to poets from above. Dostoevsky placed special value on Pushkin’s “The Prophet,” and he frequently recited it at literary readings during the 1870s. His readings of the poem during the Pushkin anniversary celebration in June 1880 and during the fall of that year were memorable

³ The relevant poetic predecessor in the case of “The Dream of the Ridiculous Man” is Lermontov’s “The Prophet” (“Пророк,” 1841). See editors’ notes, *PSS* 25: 408.

⁴ See the variant for the May-June 1877 issue in *PSS* 25: 261-66.

⁵ In her overview of Dostoevsky’s use of Old Testament quotations, I.D. Iakubovich writes, in reference to the 1870s, “The writer’s thought moves from the ‘eternal’ to the events of the day, revealing the inner connection between them and prophesizing the distant future” (59). Iakubovich focuses on Dostoevsky’s direct citations from the Old Testament, including a reference by the *Diary of a Writer*’s paradoxicalist to Isaiah 2:4 (“and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks” [перекуют мечи свои на орала и копыя свои на серпы] [22: 124]). Iakubovich does not address Isaiah 6.

for their powerful effect on his listeners.⁶ In the eyes of many, Dostoevsky's Pushkin speech established the writer as a prophet foretelling Russia's destiny⁷ – a role that drew renewed attention after the fall of the Soviet Union.⁸

Dostoevsky published "The Peasant Marei" in the February 1876 issue of *The Diary of a Writer*, sixteen years after his return from Siberian prison and exile, and fifteen years after the publication of *Notes from the Dead House*. The text describes a childhood memory that came to him in prison. The frame is explicitly non-fictional and autobiographical. In his introduction to the piece, Dostoevsky stresses that this is the first time he has written so personally about his time in prison: "Up until today I have practically never addressed in print the topic of my life in prison; *Notes from the Dead House* I wrote fifteen years ago, using a fictional narrator" (*PSS* 22: 47).⁹ The very fact that the writer decides to revisit this period after such a long silence, and without the veil of fiction, underlines the importance of this text, as does the complex form and wide scope of "The Peasant Marei" itself. The temporal frame encompasses most of the author's life: the incident recalled takes place in his childhood; the convict Dostoevsky has the memory during his first year in prison, that is, when the author was twenty-nine years old – almost the exact mid-point of his life, for he will die at the age of sixty; and the time of writing comes within five years of Dostoevsky's death, when his fame and authority were at their peak. Thus these three periods represent three vitally important life stages 1) child; 2) convict; 3) writer.¹⁰ In the following analysis I aim to show how accounting for the complex time-frame allows for an integration of the

⁶ See Dostoevskaja 373, 389; F. M. *Dostoevskii v vospominaniakh sovremnikov* 303, 305, 352, 384, 402; and Annenskii.

⁷ Joseph Frank entitles the culminating volume of his biography accordingly: *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet*.

⁸ Dostoevsky's role as a prophet has been the subject of endless discussion, particularly during the Symbolist period (See Saraskina 342-3) and following the collapse of the Soviet Union. See, for example, a 2008 discussion in the popular press: "Prophet or Genius: Which was Dostoevsky?", by Iulia Shigareva, in *Arguments and Facts*.

⁹ All translations mine. – CA.

¹⁰ This triple temporal frame both complicates and enriches the critic's task. About the importance of the last level – "writer" – Linda Ivanits writes that Dostoevsky had in mind primarily an audience of his contemporaries, that is, his readers of the 1870s; in this work he hoped "to lead his readers toward a true understanding of the Russian people" (Ivanits149).

writer's biography into a complex dialogue of literary influences that culminates in a uniquely Dostoevskian use of a poetic image to convey a message about the *prose writer* as prophet.

The complex, distinctive features of "The Peasant Marei" have naturally earned it a great deal of critical attention. Standing on the boundary of autobiography and fiction, the work has been deservedly interpreted as reflecting a turning point in the writer's life and work. In his religious life, as Robin Feuer Miller shows, it serves as a "parabolic anecdote" composed of several disparate, seemingly contradictory parts filtered carefully and stregically through the medium of art" to mark a conversion; in other words, a distinctively Dostoevskian "*profession de foi*."¹¹ In his social and cultural thinking, Dostoevsky presents the incident as the moment when he came to understand the value and spiritual significance of the Russian common people within a class system that separated them from the upper classes and the educated, westernized intelligentsia. This message is reinforced by the work's context in *The Diary of a Writer*: "The Peasant Marei" was the third and last part of the first chapter for February 1876; the article immediately preceding it was entitled "On Love for the People. Necessary Contract with the People" (О любви к народу. Необходимый контракт с народом). Thus the Russian common people was on Dostoevsky's mind when he composed "The Peasant Marei." Through its complex dynamic, the piece bears factual, autobiographical, historical, symbolic, religious, and moral significance. In this hierarchy, political factors also have their place: "The Peasant Marei" represents – conventionally speaking – the moment when Dostoevsky turned away from his former radical convictions, particularly the ideas of communism that he had taken from western sources and, most importantly, which had sent the young writer to prison in the first place. The fraught setting of the frame – the hard-labor prison – highlights the point that the incident, and the memory of it that he recounts, represent not only a political change of mind, but also a new awareness of his own *moral responsibility* for his crime, that is, his new understanding of his own *guilt*. And taken within its third and final temporal frame, "The Peasant Marei" signals the moment when Dostoevsky – the editor of *The Diary of a Writer* – takes on his mature role not simply as fellow countryman and defender

¹¹ See Miller 75-8. My analysis broadens the generic parameters to include another biblical genre – prophecy, the *profession de foi* of a *prose* prophet. Robert Louis Jackson also considers the work's religious significance, as an example of the dynamic between *obraz* and *bezobrazie* in Dostoevsky's aesthetics. See his 20-32.

of the peasants during the height of Russian populism, but also as their voice, that is, their "poet in prose".

Dostoevsky always created a complex narrative frame when the stakes were high and when he needed the reader to pay close attention; the most famous examples may be "The Grand Inquisitor" and Zosima's sermons and exhortations in *The Brothers Karamazov*.¹² Although in "The Peasant Marei" Dostoevsky presents both the recollection and the recalled incident as fact, he provides the work with an extremely elaborate layered narrative structure. First, he reminds the readers of *The Diary of a Writer* that it is his discussion of the Russian common people that has brought on the recollection. Then he takes them back to the Siberian prison that was the setting of his *Notes from the Dead House* (1861). Here he dispenses with what was in that work a thin fictional frame, offering his recollection as factual. It was Easter week, and the prisoners had been drinking, brawling, and carousing – bringing on a feeling of disgust and hatred in the convict-observer (Dostoevsky). With these words echoing in his ears, "Little by little I sank into reverie and became imperceptively immersed in recollections" (Мало-помалу я и впрямь забылся и неприметно погрузился в воспоминания [47]). Here, as at other pivotal moments in his works – such as with Dmitry's dream of the baby in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky situates his character's moral awakenings in a dream. The references to violence, sin, and death in the frame underline the moral urgency of the episode and prepare the reader for the awakening to come. The location of the scene, and of the work as a whole, within the depths of the "Dead House" is highly symbolic of that peculiarly Russian spiritual darkness (*mrak*) that is associated with it. Other signals of urgency in the frame include the temporal setting at Easter; a description of a scene from nature (a boy in the woods) – quite rare in Dostoevsky's poetics; the use of archaic vocabulary; and the repetition of key details.

The *siuzhet* of "The Prophet Marei" can be summarized as follows: In the depths of the Dead House, far from home, depressed and preoccupied with problems of crime (his own and those of others), the narrator-convict-sinner Dostoevsky feels alone, isolated from human company, and in a metaphorical sense, dead (as his so-titled habitat would suggest). He has nothing in common with the people who surround him; the only human link

¹² "Akulka's Husband," which according to Robert Louis Jackson serves as the moral center of *Notes from the Dead House*, is another example. See his 20-32. Nancy Ruttenburg also gives a subtle analysis of narrative framing and its aesthetic significance in "The Peasant Marei." See her 76-82.

is hatred and spite (expressed by a fellow political prisoner, a Pole, in a foreign language: “*je hais ces brigands!*” [46]). Suddenly a memory from childhood comes to him. He is nine years old, back in his home village. As he walks near a patch of bushes on his family’s property, the child imagines that he hears someone crying out: “A wolf is coming!” (Волк бежит! [48]). He is frightened, and the peasant of the title comforts him. The plot is simple; the drama is prosaic, moral in nature, and profound. The experience of this contact with the peasant is described as a miracle that changes everything for the convict Dostoevsky: “By some kind of miracle, all of the hatred and spite in my heart disappeared completely” (каким-то чудом, исчезла совсем всякая ненависть и злоба в сердце моем [49]). His wording here anticipates that of Ivan Karamazov, who calls love for others “a miracle impossible on earth” (невозможное на земле чудо [14: 216]); indeed, no higher order of miracle than love for one’s fellow man is possible in Dostoevsky’s works. The underlying plot of resurrection developed in *Memoirs of the Dead House*, and surely recalled by Dostoevsky’s readers in the 1870s, reinforces this message.¹³

Nothing unusual happened. There was no wolf, just a dog nearby with a wolfy name (*Volchok*); the child was never in any danger. There was no violence, no noise, no outcry. The only things that were real were the child’s fear and his brief encounter with a simple peasant. But for whatever reason, this encounter, and the recollection of it twenty years later (as recounted twenty-six years after that), changed everything. The power of the story rests, in my opinion, not simply on the fact that Dostoevsky says it’s important, and not simply on his depiction of the Peasant Marei as a representative of the Russian common people. It derives equally importantly from the dialogue it is conducting with its poetic and biblical predecessors.

In Pushkin’s poem the future prophet is making his way through a gloomy “desert” (Духовной жаждою томим//[...] в пустыне мрачной я влачился), when suddenly, at a crossroads, a seraph appears to him. The seraph leads him through a terrible, painful ritual initiating him into the sacred role of prophet. By touching the poet’s eyes and ears he awakens his senses to hitherto inaccessible mysteries (моих зениц коснулся он//[...] моих ушей коснулся он). The seraph then tears out the poet’s “sinful tongue” and replaces it with the stinger of a wise serpent; he cleaves his chest and replaces his heart with a burning lump of coal. The poem ends

¹³ The theme of resurrection at the heart of *Memoirs from the Dead House* is Robert Louis Jackson’s focus of his analysis of that work in his *The Art of Dostoevsky*.

with the seraph's famous exhortation: "Arise, prophet, and see and hear// and traversing the seas and lands// burn the hearts of men with your word" (Восстань, пророк, и виждь, и внемли, // Исполнись волею моею, // И, обходя моря и земли, // Глаголом жги сердца людей).

Pushkin's "Prophet" only speaks to readers of "The Peasant Marei" when considered as part of a dynamic, three-way conversation with the Isaiah passage. Our first task, then, is to establish a link between these predecessors and Dostoevsky's work, for the reference is not direct. After all, what possible connection can there be between a filthy Russian peasant and a fabulous six-winged angel delivering a message of divine inspiration to the Romantic poet – not to mention a Biblical prophet? A surface reading of the texts yields only differences: poetry-prose; heaven-earth; poet of genius-frightened boy; seraph-dirty peasant. The link lies in key details, and in the overall trajectory of the plots. Pushkin's poet's "dark desert" (в пустыне мрачной) is the prison where the convict Dostoevsky is undergoing his spiritual trials; the six-winged seraph bringing a message from another world is Marei; and the actual textual link is the action at the center of all three works: the moment when the messenger touches the future prophet's/ future poet's/ future prose writer's lips. Pushkin's frightened eagle (у испуганной орлицы) is echoed laterally in the boy's fright (от испуга; испужался). He is comforted by a representative of the people, of the same people who surrounded and frightened the convict Dostoevsky in prison. Here the gesture is important: "The corners of my lips trembled, [...] he quietly extended his thick finger with its black fingernail, soiled in dirt, and quietly touched my trembling lips" (Углы губ моих вздрагивали, [...] он протянул тихонько свой толстый, с черным ногтем, запачканный в земле палец и тихонько дотронулся до вспрыгивавших моих губ [48]). It is by means of this gesture, and of his blessing invoking the name of Christ, that the peasant relieves the boy's fear. Here Dostoevsky's distinctively paradoxical poetics is at work; the references work by contrast. The peasant's gesture and his kind words change the boy's perceptions; instead of hearing what is not there (the "cry wolf"), he now knows "that there was no wolf" (48). The scene differs in many details from Pushkin's but the key elements are in place. The contrasts are significant: the seraph descends from heaven; the peasant rises from the earth (he has been plowing). The peasant's fingers are covered in dirt – not just any dirt, but Russian black earth, the focus of Dostoevsky's philosophy of *pochvennichestvo*. In Pushkin's poem the seraph's fingers are holding a burning coal, black product of the black earth. Dostoevsky emphasizes the link between the two texts through repetition: after the boy

goes home, he does not speak of the incident and forgets it. But when he grows up and the moment comes, he suddenly remembers the encounter, particularly the detail of the peasant's dirty finger: "And especially that thick finger of his, soiled in the earth, with which he quietly and with timid tenderness touched my trembling lips" (И особенно этот толстый его, запачканный в земле палец, которым он тихо и с робкой нежностью *прикоснулся* к вздрагивавшим губам моим [49] [*my emphasis. – CA*]). Repeating the detail in this way Dostoevsky heightens the link to his prophetic predecessors by replacing the neutral Russian word *дотронулся* with Pushkin's, and Isaiah's more poetic *коснуться* – Pushkin: "моих зениц коснулся он"; Isaiah: "коснулся уст моих."

First let us look at the details of the act of touching itself. In Pushkin's poem the seraph touches the poet's eyes with "fingers light as a dream (*перстами легкими как сон*)". Dostoevsky's peasant touches the boy's lips "quietly; quietly and timidly" (*тихонько; тихо и робко*). When the seraph turns his attention to the poet's heart and his tongue, however, his actions become violent and cruel. Here Pushkin's representation of the poet's calling as difficult and painful reflects Romantic tradition. Dostoevsky's image, by contrast is prosaic; instead of the seraph's violence, Dostoevsky presents the peasant's kindness and mercy. He focuses on the young boy's new awareness of a deeply tangible, Russian reality, one that can be found not only outside the prison that will later confine him but also within his soul. Dostoevsky's plot resolves the convict's guilt into a feeling of charity and love (*caritas*) for the prisoners who surround him; this new feeling dispels his fear. In this profound yet prosaic vision, the writer offers his "realism in a higher sense," a realism that is available to all, not just a chosen few.

In "The Peasant Marei," Dostoevsky cites details from the Isaiah text, not present in Pushkin's poem, which heighten his prosaic message. Pushkin and Isaiah's messengers both hold a coal; Dostoevsky's messenger has a finger with a rough finger, whose nail is blackened with earth. Whereas Pushkin's seraph plants the burning coal not in the poet's mouth, where the serpent's sting is implanted, but in his chest, Isaiah's seraph and Dostoevsky's peasant touch the prophet's lips.¹⁴ In Dostoevsky, this

¹⁴ Here a fascinating digression is possible. Whereas in English and Russian, language is associated with the "tongue," and in fact the latter is often used as a synonym for language, in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, that meaning – language – is conveyed by the word for "lip." *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century* 136.

moment represents the boy's initiation into his future role as the prophetic prose writer.

More strikingly, Pushkin's and Isaiah's seraphim command their listener to speak. Pushkin's seraph says "burn the hearts of men with your word", and Isaiah's seraph says "go and tell this people." The peasant Marei, by contrast, touches the boy's lips quietly; this gesture can be interpreted as a sign to the boy to *be silent*. Here, Dostoevsky offers an answer to his prophetic predecessors, through the Tiutchevian principle of "be silent, conceal yourself, and hide" (молчи, скрывайся и таи) rather than a Pushkinian principle of "noise and ringing" (шум и звон). Dostoevsky thus invokes Isaiah's poetic vision, for Isaiah writes of the long time that will ensue, during which people will not understand the prophet's vision: "Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed" (6:9-10).¹⁵ And the boy obeys; he keeps his silence. Only when Dostoevsky grew up, only after he had a chance to read the works of Pushkin and the other poets, only after he had gone through the temptations of revolutionary thought and the ordeal of crime and punishment, was the writer ready to remember the incident from his childhood. And even then, even as he wrote *Memoirs from the Dead House*, he kept his silence. A full quarter of a century would elapse between the recollection and its appearance in writing. From the initial inspiration to the expression of the experience in words forty-five years would pass.

One could suggest that Dostoevsky the writer acts here in accordance with a moral law, according to which poets and prophets initiated into the mysteries of the word must keep their silence and purify themselves before they are worthy to speak their thoughts openly. This would certainly accord with the prison setting and Dostoevsky's own experience of crime – the crime of speaking wrong thoughts – and punishment. The words of the prophets, spoken prematurely, would not be understood in any case.¹⁶ The

¹⁵ I cite the King James Version for its poetic value, though it is less literal a translation than others.

¹⁶ A prophet is never understood in his own land. "To be party to the word of God may lead to an inability to communicate effectively with society, an experience echoed in the lives of the great biblical Prophets." "Commentary to the Book of Isaiah," 201. The editors of the PSS cite Zosima's words: "The human race does not accept its prophets and torments them, but people love their martyrs and honor those whom they torment" (14: 292). PSS 25: 408.

point here is that by holding his silence for so long (twenty-six years were to pass between Dostoevsky's experience of the memory and his recording it in writing), Dostoevsky was following the path of the prophets as they kept silence and purified themselves. In her analysis of the theme of prophecy in the Russian poetic tradition, Pamela Davidson, citing Gogol, presents this idea as follows: "For those who possess the 'gift of the word,' the voluntary adoption of a 'long silence' provides an important purifying discipline, in much the same way as a period of abstinence can serve to regulate the appetites of the body" (Davidson 508).

The effect of the seraph's visitation on Pushkin's poet is immediate and acute: the poet gets through the ordeal, and he may go forth. Prose writers have a different path; their genre – narrative – develops its moral message through the passage of time. At the beginning of "The Peasant Marei", Dostoevsky notes that he spent his four years in prison continually going over his memories of the past:

It would begin at a certain point, a small thing, often imperceptible, and then would expand into an entire picture, into a single strong and integral impression. I would analyze these impressions, adding to them new features from experiences I had been through long before, and, most importantly, I would correct them, constantly correct them [...] (47)

Although Dostoevsky presents this process purely within the context of his prison memories, his references to "analyzing" (анализировал) "correcting" (поправлял) and embellishing (придавал новые черты») strongly suggest the creative process of writing fiction, a process by which a memory¹⁷ is shaped, through intense and concentrated analysis and revision, into a prose composition.

According to Davidson, as the ancient prophets are invoked in the Russian poetic tradition, they lose what was primarily a moral focus; she shows that Isaiah lacks the Pushkinian element of intensified perception and feelings; that is an addition by the Romantic poets (Davidson 497). That is, in Russian poetry, prophecy is associated with clairvoyance in its literal sense denoting clarity of vision beyond the moral liberation that we see when Isaiah's seraph touches the prophet and releases him from *sin*: "And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips;

¹⁷ Some critics see the workings of memory to be one of the most important features of Dostoevsky's prosaic poetics. See, for example, Thompson.

and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." Though present, the moral element is underemphasized in Pushkin's poem (through the reference to "my sinful tongue" [грешный мой язык]). Pushkin focuses on what and how the prophet sees and hears, and on the source of his power and inspiration to give voice to his perceptions. Dostoevsky, too, writes of this effect on the senses, but only insofar as they clarify his moral state: "When I came down from the bunk and looked around, I recall that I suddenly felt that I could look at all of these unfortunate men with a completely different point of view, and all my hatred and spite had disappeared completely, by a kind of miracle" (49). Where Pushkin's poet sees and hears mysteries of a world previously inaccessible to him, Dostoevsky's child-convict-writer gains a clear view of *what is already there*, of the prosaic world of the Russian peasant as part of Russian society as a whole, of the people's grounding in the earth itself. There is no wolf, no danger; all the convicts are unhappy and deserving of pity – even the detested Pole. So although Dostoevsky stresses the Pushkinian elements of heightened sense perception in the child as a result of his encounter with the peasant (and later, of the convict's heightened understanding from the memory of the encounter), he also retains – or rather retrieves and strengthens – the moral elements prominent in the Biblical text: "all my hatred and spite had disappeared" (49). In other words, he follows in Isaiah's footsteps: "thine iniquity [sin] is taken away" (греш твой очищен). Here we see a pattern that we have seen before (Shatov) and will see again (Dmitry Karamazov): at a climactic moment, the hero's spite and hatred for others is transformed into an ability to empathize and love, because he experiences the miracle of a new perspective on the world. Whereas Pushkin the poet glosses over the didactic element in Isaiah's text, Dostoevsky the prose writer finds the essential core of meaning in its moral.

Dostoevsky is drawn to the prophet when he is surrounded by sin and lawlessness, when he finds himself in the depths of his own sin, in a state where the heart of the people was "fat;" their ears "heavy"; their eyes "shut," "lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed." (Isaiah 6:10) Dostoevsky writes not metaphorically, but literally (as Pushkin put it elsewhere) "in the depths of the Siberian mines (во глубине сибирских руд)" literally from the depths of the Russian earth, from the depths of his own sin. "The Peasant Marei" is a small but powerful work that offers a message not only about the writer's own creative path and life philosophy, but also about the unique capacity of earthy prose to serve as a vehicle for bearing quintessentially moral values.

Пророк

Духовной жаждою томим, В пустыне мрачной я влечился,— И шестикрылый серафим На перепутье мне явился. Перстами легкими как сон Моих зениц коснулся он. Отверзлись вещие зеницы, Как у испуганной орлицы. Моих ушей коснулся он, — И их наполнил шум и звон: И внял я неба содроганье, И горний ангелов полет, И гад морских подводный ход, И дольней лозы прозябанье. И он к устам моим приник,	И вырвал грешный мой язык, И празднословный и лукавый, И жало мудрыя змеи В уста замершие мои Вложил десницею кровавой. И он мне грудь рассек мечом, И сердце трепетное вынул, И уголь, пылающий огнем, Во грудь отверстую водвинул. Как труп в пустыне я лежал, И бога глас ко мне воззвал: «Восстань, пророк, и виждь, и внемли, Исполнись волею моею, И, обходя моря и земли, Глаголом жги сердца людей»
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Книга пророка Исайи

¹ В год смерти царя Озии видел я Господа, сидящего на престоле высоком и превознесенном, и края риз Его наполняли весь храм. ² Вокруг Него стояли Серафимы; у каждого из них по шести крыл: двумя закрывал каждый лице свое, и двумя закрывал ноги свои, и двумя летал. ³ И зывали они друг ко другу и говорили: Свят, Свят, Свят Господь Саваоф! вся земля полна славы Его! ⁴ И поколебались верхи врат от гласа восклицающих, и дом наполнился курениями. ⁵ И сказал я: горе мне! погиб я! ибо я человек с нечистыми устами, и живу среди народа также с нечистыми устами, — и глаза мои видели Царя, Господа Саваофа. ⁶ Тогда прилетел ко мне один из Серафимов, и в руке у него горящий уголь, который он взял клещами с жертвенника, ⁷ и коснулся уст моих и сказал: вот, это коснулось уст твоих, и беззаконие твое удалено от тебя, и грех твой очищен. ⁸ И услышал я голос Господа, говорящего: кого Мне послать? и кто пойдет для Нас? И я сказал: вот я, пошли меня. ⁹ И сказал Он: пойди и скажи этому народу: слухом услышите — и не уразумеете, и очами смотреть будете — и не увидите. ¹⁰ Ибо огрубело сердце народа сего, и ушами с трудом слышат, и очи свои сомкнули, да не узрят очами, и не услышат ушами, и не уразумеют сердцем, и не обратятся, чтобы Я исцелил их.

Isaiah 6 (King James Version)

¹In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. ²Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. ³And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. ⁴And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. ⁶Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: ⁷And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. ⁸Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?

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