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Dostoevsky's Religion: Words, Images, and the Seed of Charity

To write and then go and dump it all on a passage from the Gospels is awfully theological. Resolving everything with a passage from the Gospels is just as arbitrary as dividing the prisoners into five categories. Why five and not ten? Why a passage from the Gospels and not from the Koran? First you have to make people believe in the Gospels, make them believe that they are the truth, and then you can resolve everything with a passage from them.
(Anton Chekhov)¹

Fyodor Dostoevsky was a Russian Orthodox believer for whom the image of Christ was a “symbol of faith” so powerful that he would choose it over proven truth.² So it would seem surprising that neither Orthodox symbols, dogma, and ritual, nor the iconic image of Christ figure prominently in the writer’s great novels.³ At key moments, the verifiable markers of the Orthodox faith recede and give way to more dangerous elements: Maria Timofeevna Lebiadkina’s occult obsessions, for example, or the pagan motifs surrounding Alyosha Karamazov’s fall to the

¹ Anton Chekhov, writing about Lev Tolstoy’s novel *Resurrection* in a letter to Mikhail O. Menshikov, 28 January 1900. *Anton Chekhov and his Times*, ed. Andrei Turkov; tr. Cynthia Carlile and Sharon McKee (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 313 (Original in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem, Pis'ma*, vol. 9 [Moscow: Nauka, 1980], p. 30.).

² Letter to Fonvizina in January, 1854, in F.M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-90), Vol. 28: 1, p. 176. All references to Dostoevsky’s works cite this edition.

³ See Malcolm Jones, *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), p. 13 and pp. 35-41.

earth. And, when he seems most needed, Christ is absent in image and sign. One might even suggest that when Dostoevsky offers an unambiguous depiction of Christ, as he will in his descriptions of the Holbein painting of Christ in the Tomb in *The Idiot*, it might very well represent an image of death and decay rather than resurrection and life. Dostoevsky's plots lead religious believers into imprisonment (Dmitry Karamazov), prostitution (Sonya Marmeladova), madness (Myshkin), or death (Ivan Shatov). If Dostoevsky is prosthletizing the joys of Christian belief, he is not doing it by direct marketing. The gap between Dostoevsky's proclaimed beliefs and the way he depicts the problem of religion in his novels is our current critical workplace.

Although the big questions of faith, justice, and good and evil dominate in his works, Dostoevsky was a novelist, not a theologian. His religious vision always shares space with other, secular, meanings. We could suggest, then, following Bakhtin, that not just Dostoevsky's verbal discourse, but in fact all the elements in his art, are "double-voiced." His protagonists embody prototypes from the Gospels, the lives of saints, folklore, and patristic literature, but they are also quintessentially mid-nineteenth-century Russians; their plots reenact timeless stories and their settings double as religious spaces, but they are grounded fully in their own historical space and time as well. The message is necessarily bound up in its context—both artistic and historical—and inseparable from it. For that reason, indicators of the Christian answer to the problems of religious faith are themselves veiled and open to multiple interpretations.

Dostoevsky communicates his religious message in ways that are artistically consistent, though complex. A trope of reversal or negation is 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. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, superficial facts such as the elder Zosima's notorious «stink» and Grushenka's reputation as a fallen woman may distract the casual reader from the secret of their basic underlying goodness. Individual elements of Dostoevsky's text—character description or setting or plot or narration or dialogue—may not make sense in context, if taken «straight». Characters run counter to type, for example. In *Crime and Punishment*, Razumikhin bears all the traits of a typical 1860s nihilist, but he represents conservative political views and models altruistic behavior; Sonya Marmeladova, the prostitute, offers salvation. Setting likewise offers distracting surfaces:

a decorous drawing room is the scene for scandal (the vase-breaking scene in *The Idiot*, or the Sunday afternoon uproar at Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina's in *Demons*), and a tavern serves as the backdrop for a sermon (Marmeladov's monologue in Part I of *Crime and Punishment*). On the level of dialogue and narration, what a character says about himself or what others say about him may contradict the facts of his behavior: Svidrigailov's reputation in *Crime and Punishment* as a cold, cynical libertine, for example, contrasts with his many charitable acts. If these paradoxes are to make sense, they must be seen in the context of the interaction of these different elements with one another in the artistic text as a whole. Unless we see a crude tavern (in a village called Mokroe) as not just a tavern, but also as a setting for a miracle, and unless we see Mitya Karamazov as not just a verbose, violent drunken wastrel, but also as a man whose prayers for innocence are miraculously answered,⁴ we will not notice a deeper spiritual truth.

Ultimately, Dostoevsky's texts will yield their secrets to readers whom Frank Kermode identifies as "insiders." Quoting the baffling lines from Mark 4: 11-12 ("To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven"), Kermode suggests that the religious message of a text will come to those «who already know the mysteries. [...] There is seeing and hearing, which are what naïve listeners and readers do; and there is perceiving and understanding, which are in principle reserved to an elect.»⁵ The former interpretive strategy is "carnal" and focuses on the parts (the facts); the latter is "spiritual" and focuses on the whole (the Truth). It is the reader's choice whether or not to commit to the "suspension of disbelief"—or, to put it more strongly, to the *belief*—that allows a text, be it artistic literature or scripture, to do its work. An approach to reading that relies on a leap of faith entails a particular set of dangers, of course, but in the quest to "perceive and understand," we may find the risk worth taking.

It has been noted that interpretations of Dostoevsky's works tend to follow either word-oriented or image-oriented (iconic) approaches.⁶ That

⁴ See my "The Passion of Dmitrii Karamazov," *Slavic Review* (Fall, 1999): 584-99, pp. 596-8.

⁵ Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 2-3.

⁶ Caryl Emerson, "Word and Image in Dostoevsky's Worlds: Robert Louis Jackson on Readings that Bakhtin Could Not Do." In *Freedom and Responsibility in Russian Literature:*

is, readers may choose to focus on the “word:” dialogue, argumentation, discourse, denotation, and narrative; or they may seek meaning in the image: non-verbal, symbolic images presented through implicit or explicit *ekphrasis*. Mikhail Bakhtin is the most famous discourse-oriented critic. In his famous formulation of the chronotope, the horizontal axis represents linear temporality—the things of this world—;⁷ one might suggest that «word-focused» readers seek primarily horizontal meaning, and tend to find ethically loaded, if symbolically uncomplex, messages. Readers following an image-based approach such as that of Robert Louis Jackson or Vyacheslav Ivanov will find deeply layered symbolic messages, which transcend what is to be found on the discursive level of the text; their focus, then, is on the vertical axis. These critical traditions are so different as to seem mutually exclusive, but if we keep in mind that no single approach will provide a complete answer, we can benefit from taking them—word and image—in dialogue. Ultimately we will discover another dimension of Dostoevsky's religious message in a third element—action. If arguments and dialogues never lead to the truth, and if images offer a mystical vision of faith that cannot be explained, the reader still craves a solution to the «big questions» of good and evil in God's world. Dostoevsky offers the hint of such an answer in examples of modest but meaningful action, specifically *acts of charity*.

First, though, about words. Dostoevsky's reluctance to offer the Christian message “straight” leads to an emphasis on those atheistic and argumentative characters whom Malcolm Jones identifies as the “mutinous crew.”⁸ The surface of the text—the arguments of these doubters—leads away from the truth of religious experience. In order to gain access to this truth, the reader must recognize the profoundly apophatic nature of Dostoevsky's art. In the Eastern tradition, apophatic theology proceeds on the premise that God transcends any attempt to capture his essence in human language. God retains the last word—and remains silent. The novels enact a drama of the struggle between faith and disbelief. The author's, and God's, silence also reflects the hesychast spiritual tradition, with its emphasis on internal wisdom and insight. In order for God to be felt, characters must stop talking. Jones, a Bakhtinian

Essays in Honor of Robert Louis Jackson, ed. Elizabeth Cheresch Allen and Gary Saul Morson (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1995), pp. 245-66; p. 250.

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and the Chronotope.” In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

⁸ Jones, pp. 14-15.

reader, examines Dostoevsky's religious message as a dynamic quest that unfolds within the novels, and even continues beyond their boundaries. Although Dostoevsky's novels "are not permeated with the spirit of Orthodoxy, they do all, in their different ways, show the presence of new shoots of faith appearing in the atheistic gloom" (152). In Jones's reading, the writer cannot depict the contours of the new religion; it takes the form of a promise.

In interpreting the moments when Dostoevsky's characters stop talking, Grigorii Pomerants takes a daring step Eastward. Analyzing the writer's wordiest character—the Underground Man—Pomerants proposes an analogy to the koan of Zen Buddhism:

"The disciple is given a problem [a koan] that is [...] is insoluble and absurd from the point of view of 'Euclidian' reason, but at a higher level of reason it can be solved [...]. Ultimately the disciple is seized by a 'great doubt'. In despair, as though indeed over a real abyss, he finally tears himself away, falls—and at the most terrifying moment realizes that reason and the question he has been asked are mutually absurd, and if the question (in spite of all evidence) does indeed have an answer, then what is absurd (in certain respects) is in fact Euclidean reason."⁹

The analogy of the Zen koan is applicable to the case of the Underground Man, whom Dostoevsky does not offer an epiphany, for he is trapped within the riddle. In the great novels to follow, though, the writer will offer clues for a religious interpretation of the moments when his characters' rational minds relinquish control. Specifically, he adds hidden quotations from religious texts, veiled iconic images, and examples of righteous behavior—always "double voiced."

Another discourse-oriented scholar, Steven Cassedy, elucidates the ways Dostoevsky dramatizes the question of religious belief through "Kantian antinomies." Whereas Kant's antinomies serve to demonstrate the powerlessness of reason to resolve larger questions, for Dostoevsky, argues Cassedy, the point is the process, not any ultimate resolution.¹⁰ Hence Dostoevsky's presentation of conflicting arguments in dramatic form. Cassedy links this artistic method to the internal dynamics of Dostoevsky's own personal faith. Here again, the process, not the solution, is the point: words cannot provide an ultimate answer.

⁹ Grigorii Pomerants, *Otkrytost' bezdne. Etiudy o Dostoevskom*. New York: Liberty 1989, pp. 64-5. Here and unless noted, translations are mine. — CA.

¹⁰ Steven Cassedy, *Dostoevsky's Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 95.

Even subtle discourse-oriented readings lead to truths that remain elusive. Dostoevsky's intellectual atheists may be his most memorable characters, but words can only go so far, and logical argument is not his only, or even his most significant discursive strategy. Other talkers lead even deeper into the mysteries of the spirit. Here, double-voicedness is key. Characters speak their own message using the words of others, and by doing so they transcend their own isolation. Readers can join in the dialogue by recognizing the quoted texts and retrieving their meanings in their new, novelistic context.¹¹ Marmeladov's confession in the tavern, for example, is almost entirely based on hidden quotations both from the Old and the New Testaments.¹² As Anna Gumerova demonstrates, the Biblical elements in this scene resonate with those in the scene of Marmeladov's wake, echoing the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22 and Luke 14, and in spite of the despair and squalor that dominate in both scenes, convey a coded religious message through intertextuality.¹³ Olga Meerson illuminates a similar narrative strategy at work in *Notes From Underground*, where Dostoevsky's narrator quotes from the Psalms.¹⁴ And, as Robin Feuer Miller has recently shown, in *The Idiot* the hidden religious message takes the form of a series of parables (following the Biblical model), which yield their ultimate meaning only when taken together as a whole and in the context of the novel's drama of faith and fallenness.¹⁵

Even as he tests words to their limit through rhetoric and argument, or by quoting the gospels, the church fathers, folklore tales, and apocrypha, Dostoevsky must at the same time account for the image. Eastern Orthodoxy, of course, gives primacy to the icon as a conduit to religious experience. Icons in Dostoevsky's works can appear unmediated, as themselves, as, for example, when an icon is desecrated in *Demons*. But, just as in the case of discourse, when mediated and parodic language

¹¹ Nina Perlina's exploration of Dostoevsky's use of quotation in *The Brothers Karamazov* remains the key reference on the subject. See her *Varieties of Poetic Utterance: Quotation in "The Brothers Karamazov"* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

¹² See Boris Tikhomirov, "Bibliia, zhitiia sviatykh, narodnaia religioznost' (tsitaty, alliuzii, parafrazy)," *Dostoevskii: Dopolneniia k kommentariu*, ed. Tatiana Kasatkina (Moscow: "Nauka," 2005), pp. 128-77, pp. 130-39.

¹³ A. Gumerova (Moscow, IMLI RAN) "Evangel'skii fon romana 'Prestuplenie i nakazanie:' na primere stseny pominok po Marmeladovu". *Dostoevskii: Dopolneniia k kommentariu proizvedenii*, ed. Tatiana Kasatkina (Moscow: "Nauka," 2005), pp. 274-7.

¹⁴ Olga Meerson, "Old Testament Lamentation in the Underground Man's Monologue: A Refutation of the Existentialist Reading of *Notes From Underground*," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 1992): pp. 317-322.

¹⁵ Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 68-85.

offers deeper meaning than logical argumentation, icons work most effectively when masked—or rather, embodied or doubled in “living” characters. In the epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*, for example, Sonya Marmeladova’s appearance in the form of an icon of the Mother of God triggers Raskolnikov’s epiphany:

Suddenly Sonya appeared beside him. She had approached almost without a sound and had sat down next to him. It was still very early, the morning chill lingered. She was wearing her poor old pelisse and the green shawl. Her face bore the traces of her illness, it had become thin and pale, and her cheeks were sunken. She gave him a joyful, welcoming smile, but, as usual, stretched out her hand to him timidly. [...]

How it happened, he himself did not know, but suddenly it was though something seized him and cast him down at her feet. He wept and embraced her knees [...] (6: 421)¹⁶

Such iconic images can be found at the epiphanic moments of all of Dostoevsky’s great novels. The starving peasant mother and child who trigger Dmitry Karamazov’s “Baby” dream, for example, offer an image of the Mother of God. And as Susanne Fusso has shown, Ivan Shatov’s wayward wife in *Demons* also appears as an icon, in this case operating intertextually with Dostoevsky’s beloved image of the Sistine Madonna to trigger Shatov’s epiphany.¹⁷

In order to do their work—to unite spirit and flesh—these images must offer at least two layers of meaning. On the surface of the novel, they are mimetic, representing fictional characters leading their physical lives on earth, but at the same time they embody timeless, divine images. A very interesting example appears in *Notes from the Dead House*. In the novel, traditional institutions of religion seem powerless, and indeed, Dostoevsky’s depiction of fallen humanity in the novel seems at odds with his own professed faith in a Christianity rooted in the Russian *narod*.¹⁸ At Christmas, for example, the priest comes to the prison to bless

¹⁶ Tatiana Kasatkina has written eloquently about the workings of iconic images in Dostoevsky’s fiction. See her “Ob odnom svoistve epilogov piati velikikh romanov Dostoevskogo: *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*”, *Dostoevskii v kontse XX veka*. Sostavitel' i redaktor Karen Stepanian. Moscow: “Klassika plius,” 1996.

See also her “Istoriia v imeni: Myshkin i ‘gorizontal’nyi khram,” from *O tvorishchei prirode slova: Ontologichnost' slova v tvorchestve F.M. Dostoevskogo kak osnova “realizma v vysshem smysle”* (Moskva: IMLI RAN, 2004).

¹⁷ Susanne Fusso, “Maidens in Childbirth: The Sistine Madonna in Dostoevskii’s *Devils*,” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 261-75.

¹⁸ “*Notes* lacks the faith in the Russian people that Dostoevsky acquires later; any kind of regeneration with them or for them seems unlikely due to their depravity. Evidence that the people are so fallen that even Christ’s intervention is ineffectual is preponderant in several

the prisoners, but rather than elevating their spiritual state, the service leads to vice, sin, and evil: immediately after the priest leaves, the convicts plunge into wild, drunken debauchery (4:109-16). As elsewhere, when Dostoevsky offers his images “straight”—in this case, the figure of the priest and the description of the church ritual,—they seem to lead away from the truth. The surface is literally a lie and a betrayal: “All of these poor people wanted to enjoy themselves, to celebrate the great holiday in a spirit of joy, but, Lord! How oppressive and sad was this day for almost every one of them; each spent the day as though some hope of theirs had been betrayed” (4: 111).¹⁹

Conversely, a profound sense of freedom and joy comes not through religious ritual, but through a different kind of performance in the prison, one that appears on the surface to be fully secular. The transfigurative moment comes at the end of Part I of *Notes from the Dead House*, in the dark depth of winter, at the very center of the book. On the third day of the Christmas holiday, as they recover from their hangovers, the prisoners stage a theatrical performance. As elsewhere at epiphanic moments in his works, Dostoevsky offers an elaborate, and distracting, frame. The performance takes place in the same military barracks where the priest had conducted his apparently impotent Christmas service, and many details echo the horrors of the novel’s bathhouse scene, which famously presents an image of hell (the heat, the crowded space, the same cast of characters). The prisoners have stitched a multitude of filthy rags together to form a strange curtain:

The curtain was such a luxury that it was really something to behold. In addition, it had been painted with oils, depicting trees, pavilions, ponds and stars. It was made of all kinds of scraps of cloth, old and new, whatever people had donated, old foot cloths and shirts belonging to the prisoners, sewn together into a single large panel, and where they had run out of cloth, part of it was simply patched with paper that had been begged, sheet by sheet, from various offices and departments. Our prisoners had taken great care and had done the painting themselves, among them our own Briullov-inspired genius, A-v. The effect was astonishing. The prisoners loved it; when time came for the show to

ways.” Susan McReynolds, *Redemption and the Merchant God: Dostoevsky’s Economy of Salvation and Antisemitism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008, p. 95.

¹⁹ Although the Lenten ritual in the town church calls up tender memories and emotions in the prisoners, and although the novel as a whole utilizes the paschal trope of resurrection to convey the hope of freedom and grace, the Easter holiday as depicted in the “Summertime” chapter resembles that of Christmas in its effects on the prisoners’ behavior: “The priest came again with his cross, again the officials came to visit, again the greasy cabbage soup, again drunkenness and loafing around—everything was exactly the same as at Christmas, except now it was possible to walk outside in the prison yard and bask in the sun” (4: 177).

begin, they all became like children, not only the enthusiastic and impatient ones, but also those who were generally the most gloomy and demanding (4: 120-21).

The curtain, made from dirty rags and portraying a landscape, is the product of collective labor and of materials donated by the entire prison community—prisoners and officials alike. The performance brings everyone together, both guards and guarded, along with free spectators from the town. The prisoners, who hours before had been plagued with hangovers and remorse from their Christmas debauch, are now like innocent children, gazing at the curtain blissfully, in wonder (4: 122). The narrator, himself a prisoner, watches them through the dim light provided by a few short tallow candles, and for the first time since his arrival sees through the ugly surface to the prisoners' inner goodness (a perception which will figure powerfully in Dostoevsky's later religious worldview).²⁰ Using his key metaphor for religious faith, he writes, "All you have to do is remove the external, superficial crust and take a long, close look at the seed itself, without prejudging it, and you might see things in the common people, the likes of which you would never have guessed" (4: 120-21). The prisoners go home from the theater that night happy, satisfied, and at peace with themselves: "We all went back to our barracks in a joyful mood, satisfied [...]. There were no fights. Everyone was unusually satisfied, even happy, and they went to sleep not in their usual manner, but in nearly calm in spirit [...]. And this is not something I made up. It is the actual Truth" (4: 129-30). In sleep the prisoners are innocent children of God, free of the the guilt that brought them to the prison. Their souls all find expression in the "calm child's face" of the sleeping Alei, the young boy from Dagestan—suffering for the sins of his brothers. Here, as the prisoners dream, the truth of the prison barracks mixes inextricably with the greater truth of revelation. The theatrical performance, with all its profane trappings,²¹ has wrought the spiritual cleansing that the priest's service, with all of its Russian Orthodox trappings, has failed to provide.

²⁰ Many critics have addressed the importance of Dostoevsky's encounter with the common people in the *Dead House* in the development of his mature religious vision. For two excellent new treatments, see Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey*, pp. 1-43, and Linda Ivanits, *Dostoevsky and the Common People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Susan McReynolds's new book argues a contrary view, that Dostoevsky's depiction of the common people is at odds with his assertions about their religious belief.

²¹ Traditional Russian Orthodoxy disapproves of secular forms of theatrical entertainment.

Here the reader has a choice: to interpret the entire scene «straight» or to read behind the primitive facts of the text's surface. The first approach views the convicts' drunken debauchery and violence as a direct result of the religious service, thus identifying an entire class of people as outside the reach of God. This approach sees spiritual peace as the product of an exclusively aesthetic experience. The second approach respects the nature of Dostoevsky's novelistic and *apophatic* religion, and yields a deeply veiled metaphorical message of faith which cannot be communicated directly, and which is *inseparable* from aesthetic experience. The latter reading allows us to see the patchwork curtain as a homemade—collectively created—*iconostasis*; the performance itself as a veiled *church service*; and the face of the innocent, sleeping, *non-Christian* (Muslim) Alei as an icon of the infant Christ. Dostoevsky's method is enigmatic and indirect. But by taking all elements of the text in dialogue with one another, the insider reader discovers a message of revelation in a scene that lacks *denotative* clues to its religious meaning.

At this point we can consider a third element that contributes to the religious message of Dostoevsky's texts: his depiction of action. His works, of course, abound in action; each of the mature novels center around a violent, criminal act. Like the verbal and visual elements in Dostoevsky's novels, the crimes depicted in them pose questions that interpretation must try to answer. Lurid, sensational, fascinating, they distract the reader's attention from possible examples of goodness in the same way Ivan Karamazov's legend of the Grand Inquisitor holds our attention when its «answer», the life and teaching of the elder Zosima, often does not. However, Dostoevsky does provide an answer to the crimes he depicts, in the form of what we might call «counter-actions». These actions are modest, unpretentious and unpremeditated acts of charity that take place in the background of scenes where our attention is directed elsewhere. In a powerful new book, Linda Ivanits demonstrates the centrality of the charitable impulse in Dostoevsky's novels and traces its roots to the religion of the common people. In her discussion of the values of the common people in *Crime and Punishment*, Ivanits shows how popular notions of charity provide an answer and an alternative to the delusive social theories that led Raskolnikov to commit his crime.²² In her reading, the novel draws not only upon the famous Biblical story of the resurrection of Lazarus that Sonya reads to Raskolnikov, but also on a

²² Ivanits, pp. 41-43; 45-48. For more on almsgiving, see Richard Peace's forthcoming "One Little Onion and a Pound of Nuts: The Theme of Giving and Accepting in *The Brothers Karamazov*".

folk retelling of the parable of the beggar Lazarus, which emphasizes the importance of almsgiving (63). As the novel and its folk antecedents demonstrate, receiving alms with gratitude is just as important as giving without calculation; both serve to counter the utilitarian valuation of the self that has infected Raskolnikov.

The act of giving or receiving charity, then, completes the circle of Dostoevsky's religious vision. In some cases, one can see the act of charity as the "seed," the origin for a fictional plot. For example, in "A Centenarian," ("Stoletnaia") in the *Diary of a Writer* for March, 1876, Dostoevsky mentions a factual incident: one day his wife Anna Grigorovna gave five kopecks to an old woman. He then expands this event into a short fictional sketch: the woman goes home to her family and mentions the five kopecks, which she would like to use to buy gingerbread for her grandchildren, and then dies. The author concludes this modest vignette with a kind of disclaimer, calling it a "light and plotless little scene:" "Indeed, you intend to recount something more entertaining from among the things you've heard during the course of the month, but when you set down to work, it turns out to be either impossible, or irrelevant, or 'you shouldn't tell everything you know' and ultimately, only the most plotless things remain" (22: 75-79). Dostoevsky's claim that his story lacks a plot is disingenuous; in an important sense it tells the author's master plot, showing the real, human connections that develop through a selfless act of giving (and receiving). "The Centenarian" develops precisely out of an act of charity and communicates in its modest way Dostoevsky's refutation of the seductive but delusive arguments of his atheistic and rebellious characters.²³ Readers will naturally tend to focus on the disturbing fact of the old woman's death, but in fact the charity is the point.

This principle—charity providing an alternative to the fallen world depicted on the surface of Dostoevsky's fiction—can be seen at work in the great novels. As always, the message is easy to miss; unlikely characters serve as conduits for goodness. *Crime and Punishment's* Svidrigailov—the ostensible villain whose charity saves Sonia Marmeladov's orphaned step-siblings—is one example. *The Idiot's* bitter, dying rebel Ippolit Terentev is another. Despite his relatively minor role in the plot, Ippolit is, in the author's words, «the axis of the entire novel» (9:

²³Gary Saul Morson argues that this little story represents a Dostoevskian example of prosaic values. See Ivanits, p. 151 and Gary Saul Morson, "Introductory Study: Dostoevsky's Great Experiment," in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, 2 vols., trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), Vol. 1, pp. 1-117, p. 17.

277). Ippolit's "Necessary Explanation" represents a verbal challenge to religious faith, one that corresponds to the print of the Holbein dead Christ painting that hangs in Rogozhin's house, which poses the challenge visually, through ekphrasis. But at the very heart of his rebellious confession, Ippolit offers "insider" readers a parable depicting a spontaneous act of charity,²⁴ which, in accordance with Dostoevsky's distinctive religious vision, offers the potential for salvation.

The message is embedded in an elaborate narrative frame. Ippolit is lying sick at the Lebedevs' dacha, where guests have gathered to celebrate Prince Myshkin's birthday. As Ippolit falls asleep, Lebedev holds forth about the Apocalypse. Ippolit awakens and recites his "Necessary Explanation," with its message of despair, to the assembled guests. In the middle of his grim confession, Ippolit tells a story from his own experience. One day, while walking on the street, he encountered an impoverished man from the provinces, insulted and injured in the classic pattern, who has come to the capital seeking justice. The man drops his wallet on the street, and instinctively Ippolit picks it up. Instead of stealing its contents as the laws of nature and self-interest would require, he follows the man to his home. There he encounters the kind of squalor that often signals Dostoevsky's coded images of grace: a squalid garret with its impoverished family, the apparently drunk man on the bed, the rickety furniture piled with rags, the teapot, the crumbly black bread, the ever-present candle, the pale, sickly woman, the downtrodden husband, the toddler, *the newborn baby*. With this tableau as a backdrop, Ippolit performs his spontaneous act of charity: he *returns the man's wallet*. After hearing the man's terrible tale of injustice, without calculating the cost to himself, Ippolit sets out to make things right. His story becomes a sermon, remarkably like Zosima's in content, about the value of charity and, yes, the parable of the seed: "[...] In scattering your seed, in offering your "charity" and your good deed in whatever form that might be, you give over a part of your personality and receive a part of the other's into yourself; you mutually commune with one another [...]; all of your thoughts, all of the seeds that you scatter, even those that you might have forgotten, will come into flesh and will grow [...]. (8: 336). Ippolit's story, embedded at the center of his manifesto of despair, tells of the mystery of faith and charity that the ego feels but does not recognize intellectually.

²⁴ I offer an extended version of this interpretation in my book *Dostoevsky's Secrets: Reading Against the Grain* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), pp. 93-103.

Dostoevsky's troubled characters ask the big questions of faith, justice, and good and evil. Their arguments lead not to any explicit answer, but to moments of silence. Intellectuals—the Underground Man, Ivan Karamazov, Kirillov—generally remain trapped in the hell of their isolation. Dostoevsky's texts model the full weight of the world's sinfulness, but occasionally, to characters ready to relinquish their rational preoccupations or their need for justice, he offers an image of hope. The troubled character has a dream, or experiences a vision. The image triggers an epiphany, as in the case of Raskolnikov, Ivan Shatov, Dmitry Karamazov and his brother Alyosha. As they release themselves from the cruel calculus of self-interest, the characters become able to perform acts of charity: they forgive their wayward wife, they take on the sins of their brothers, or they embark on a mission of lifelong service to others. At these moments, the religious vision—mystical in nature—spills over into action and takes on ethical significance. The lurid facts of Dostoevsky's fallen fictional world—characters in despair, squalid settings, violent crimes—distract our attention, but the message of hope and faith inheres there, awaiting a receptive reader.