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Dostoevskii's Creative Misreading of Hans Holbein's painting of the „Dead Christ“

This paper takes its cue from the role of one painting in Dostoevskii's novel "Idiot" (The Idiot, 1st book publication 1868).¹ I shall then go on to discuss the role of images in this novel in general. Finally, I shall put this into a larger context of temporality, spatiality, salvation and doom.

The painting in question is one rather peculiar work by the German painter Hans Holbein (1497-1543), namely, a painting that is most commonly referred to as "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb" (1521, Oil on wood, 30,5 x 200 cm, Kunstmuseum, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel, Switzerland).



The size of the painting is about 30,5 x 200 cm, that is, about the size of a cross section through an actual coffin. The body shows obvious signs of corruption, especially around the wounds, the face and the extremities. Apart from the stigmata, though, it appears unharmed – there are no signs of the whip, nor of the crown of thorns.² The painting's precise origin and original intention is uncertain; it is possible that it was meant to serve as the predella for an altar, i.e. the base over which the actual altar paintings were displayed. Since, however, the iconoclast storm of the Reformation swept over Basel shortly after the painting was finished, this altar was never completed- so we will never know if the painting had been intended as a piece of an altar and or for individual meditation.³ Another possibility is that it is simply the

¹ I quote the edition in Dostoevskii, F.M.: *Sobranie sochinenii*, M. 1957. Tom 6: *Idiot*. Roman v 4-h chastiakh. All references in the text are to this edition with numbers of part, chapter, and page; English translation of quotes by an unnamed translator from <http://www.online-literature.com/dostoevsky/idiot/> Transliteration of names has been amended.

² Cf. Deborah Caslaw Covino: *Abject Criticism*, in: *Genders* 32 (2000), § 19. I use the online version on http://www.genders.org/g32/g32_covino.txt This may have give rise to the conjecture that Holbein used a corpse drawn from the Rhine as a model (cf. John Rowlands: *Holbein: The Paintings of Hans Holbein the Younger*. New York: Phaidon, 1985, p. 52) – although drowned bodies look far less bony.

³ Victor Stoichita: *Ein Idiot in der Schweiz*. *Bildbeschreibung bei Dostojewski*. In: Gottfried Boehm, Helmut Pfotenhauer (Hrsg.): *Beschreibungskunst – Kunstbeschreibung. Ekphrasis von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. München: Fink 1995, pp.425-444, here: 436

study of a dead man,⁴ without any initial attempt to endow the painting with extra meaning. At any rate, it is clear that the inscription in brush on paper, 'IESUS NAZARENUS REX IUDAEORUM', borne above the painting by angels holding the instruments of the Passion, is a later addition.⁵

Common interpretation today is that the painting depicts a corpse that has been dead for some days. If you accept the body to be Christ's, this means that the painting shows His body immediately before the Resurrection. Thus, art historian John Rowlands looks past rigor mortis and decay: "Far from conveying despair, [the painting's] message is intended as one of belief, that from the decay of the tomb Christ rose again in glory on the third day" (52-3).

Dostoevskii saw Holbein's painting in Basel in 1867. His wife, Anna Grigor'evna, depicts the scene in her diary (entry of 12/24 August 1867), specifying that Dostoevskii had made a detour especially to see that picture, looked at it for some 15 to 20 minutes, even climbed on a chair to examine it in more detail – apparently, it hung quite high upon the wall – and that he appeared on the brink of an epileptic fit when she found him. We may therefore assume that he had quite vivid recollections of the painting when he incorporated it into his novel *Idiot*, on which he was working at that time.

The painting is introduced quite early in the book in Chapter 5 (I, 5, p. 74), but as yet without any description. It comes up again much later, in Part II, Chapter 4 (p. 247), together with the one quote that is most frequently cited. The scene is when Prince Myshkin, the "idiot" and main character of the book, is about to leave the house of his spiritual brother and dark double, Rogozhin:

Over the door, however, there was one [picture] of strange and rather striking shape; it was six or seven feet in length, and not more than a foot in height. It represented the Saviour just taken from the cross.

The prince glanced at it, but took no further notice. He moved on hastily, as though anxious to get out of the house. But Rogozhin suddenly stopped underneath the picture.

⁴ This is the view endorsed by Covino, §15, 17 – but then her whole paper implies that she'd love to see a Man Dead.

⁵ Possibly to raise its "marketable value"? Cf. Covino, § 17, following Arthur Bensley Chamberlain: Hans Holbein the Younger. London: G.Allen, 1913, p. 102

"My father picked up all these pictures very cheap at auctions, and so on," he said; "they are all rubbish, except the one over the door, and that is valuable. A man offered five hundred roubles for it last week."

"Yes--that's a copy of a Holbein," said the prince, looking at it again, "and a good copy, too, so far as I am able to judge. I saw the picture abroad, and could not forget it--what's the matter?"

[...]

"Lev Nikolaevich," said Rogozhin, after a pause, during which the two walked along a little further, "I have long wished to ask you, do you believe in God?"

[...]

"That picture! That picture!" cried Myshkin, struck by a sudden idea. "Why, a man's faith might be ruined by looking at that picture!"

"So it is!" said Rogozhin, unexpectedly.

Consequently, Prince Myshkin is the only character in the book who has actually seen the original of the painting, as well as the copy. Another 200 pages later, we finally get a description, given by the nihilistic student Ippolit, who wants to anticipate his death from Consumption by ostensibly shooting himself. The attempt fails, but before he draws the pistol, Ippolit reads out a long "Necessary Explanation" of his deed, in which we get the following ekphrasis of the Holbein painting:

I suddenly called to mind a picture I had noticed at Rogozhin's in one of his gloomiest rooms, over the door. He had pointed it out to me himself as we walked past it, and I believe I must have stood a good five minutes in front of it. There was nothing artistic about it, but the picture made me feel strangely uncomfortable. It represented Christ just taken down from the cross. It seems to me that painters as a rule represent the Saviour, both on the cross and taken down from it, with great beauty still upon His face. This marvellous beauty they strive to preserve even in His moments of deepest agony and passion. But there was no such beauty in Rogozhin's picture. This was the presentment of a poor mangled body which had evidently suffered unbearable anguish even before its crucifixion, full of wounds and bruises, marks of the violence of soldiers and people, and of the bitterness of the moment when He had fallen with the cross--all this combined with the anguish of the actual crucifixion.

"The face was depicted as though still suffering; as though the body, only just dead, was still almost quivering with agony. The picture was one of pure nature, for the face was not beautified by the artist, but was left as it would naturally be, whosoever the sufferer, after such anguish.

"I know that the earliest Christian faith taught that the Saviour suffered actually and not figuratively, and that nature was allowed her own way even while His body was on the cross.

"It is strange to look on this dreadful picture of the mangled corpse of the Saviour, and to put this question to oneself: 'Supposing that the disciples, the future apostles, the women who had followed Him and stood by the cross, all of whom believed in and worshipped Him--supposing that they saw this tortured body, this face so mangled and bleeding and bruised (and they must have so seen it)--how could they have gazed upon the dreadful sight and yet have believed that He would rise again?

"The thought steps in, whether one likes it or no, that death is so terrible and so powerful, that even He who conquered it in His miracles during life was unable to triumph over it at the last. He who called to Lazarus, 'Lazarus, come forth!' and the dead man lived--He was now Himself a prey to nature and death. Nature appears to one, looking at this picture, as some huge, implacable, dumb monster; or still better--a stranger simile--some enormous mechanical engine of modern days which has seized and crushed and swallowed up a great and invaluable Being, a Being worth nature and all her laws, worth the whole earth, which was perhaps created merely for the sake of the advent of that Being.

"This blind, dumb, implacable, eternal, unreasoning force is well shown in the picture, and the absolute subordination of all men and things to it is so well expressed that the idea unconsciously arises in the mind of anyone who looks at it. All those faithful people who were gazing at the cross and its mutilated occupant must have suffered agony of mind that evening; for they must have felt that all their hopes and almost all their faith had been shattered at a blow. They must have separated in terror and dread that night, though each perhaps carried away with him one great thought which was never eradicated from his mind for ever afterwards. If this great Teacher of theirs could have seen Himself after the Crucifixion, how could He have consented to mount the Cross and to die as He did? This thought also comes into the mind of the man who gazes at this picture. I thought of all this by snatches probably between my attacks of delirium--for an hour and a half or so before Kolia's departure.

"Can there be an appearance of that which has no form? And yet it seemed to me, at certain moments, that I beheld in some strange and impossible form, that dark, dumb, irresistibly powerful, eternal force.

"I thought someone led me by the hand and showed me, by the light of a candle, a huge, loathsome insect, which he assured me was that very force, that very almighty, dumb, irresistible Power, and laughed at the indignation with which I received this information. In my room they always light the little lamp before my icon for the night; it gives a feeble flicker of light, but it is strong enough to see by dimly, and if you sit just under it you can even read by it. I think it was about twelve or a little past that night. I had not slept a wink, and was lying with my eyes wide open, when suddenly the door opened, and in came Rogozhin. (III, 6, 463-465)

In the descriptions quoted above, both by the narrator and by Ippolit, there is absolutely no doubt that the body on the painting is actually the dead body of Christ, and that it had only just been taken off the cross. Even the words are almost identical: The narrator describing Myshkin's experience speaks of "[Kartina] izobrazhala spasitelia, tol'ko chto sniatogo so kresta" (II, 4, 247). Ippolit writes "Na kartine ètoi izobrazhen Christos, tol'ko chto sniatyi so kresta", and even repeats and italicizes this phrase (III, 6, 463). This runs counter to the actual state of the body, which suggests that Christ had already been dead for three days and was about to rise again.

Ippolit goes on to describe the disfigurements of the body and "this face so mangled and bleeding and bruised". These disfigurements, however, exist only in his own imagination. Even though the face is not a pretty sight, it is in fact strangely unharmed, as is the body. (Even the side wound seems strangely out of place and insignificant.) On the other hand, Holbein's painting contains nothing of the "living, warm, as yet not hardened" features which Ippolit discerns.⁶ It's hard to make out the source of light in this burial chamber, but wherever it comes from, it does not illuminate the face. The face is green in colour, the eyes half open and twisted, the mouth open. According to biblical testimony, Jesus died at three o'clock in the afternoon and was laid in his grave in the evening, i.e. around six. Ippolit as a nihilist has figured out "himself" that Christ had hung on the cross for six hours, surely he could have figured out that he must have been dead three hours before he was even taken off the cross, or

⁶ This, too, is noted by Corvino, § 21, who wonders why nobody ever noted this discrepancy, but, following a different agenda, does not really elaborate on it.

laid in his grave. As a nihilist, he was interested in medicine, and could have noticed that rigor mortis must have set in by then, starting in the face.

If he chooses to ignore this, then this is in order to stress the complete absence of Divine beauty in the face of Holbein's Dead Christ. By stressing that Christ had "only just been taken off the cross", so that the face still retains traces of the sufferings and has not been "beautified by the artist" "litso niskol'ko ne poshadeno" (III, 6, 463), Ippolit highlights Christ's humanity and rejects his divine status even in life. "Tut odna priroda", he says, and this, of course, refers both to the naturalistic representation and to the dogma of Christ's dual nature, "Truly God and Truly Man".⁷

It is in this formula that we find the clue to Dostoevskii's creative misreading of Holbein's painting. By letting Ippolit echo the exact words of the narrator, which Ippolit, of course, does not know, Dostoevskii endows his description with extra authority – it comes straight from the author's mouth, as it were. Dostoevskii presents this Renaissance painting by an acknowledged master of linear perspective and naturalist representation against the tradition of the Orthodox icon.⁸ The Orthodox viewers in the novel have immense difficulties coming to terms with this. Still, somewhat contrary to the title of my paper, I wish to make clear that it is the characters, not the author himself – whatever personal problems Dostoevskii might have poured into his novel – who misunderstand the painting, thereby giving birth to a whole tradition in the reception of this particular painting.

Dostoevskii does his best to place Holbein's painting into the context of the Orthodox Theology of Icons. Firstly, in Rogozhin's house he confronts Rogozhin and Ippolit with a copy of the original. Both Rogozhin and Ippolit experience their religious qualms over this copy, whereas Myshkin, who has seen the original, keeps his faith in spite of his famous exclamation. The capacity for reproduction is of course one distinctive feature of the icon over the painting. A copy of a painting never possesses the auratic powers of the original,⁹ while a copy of an icon participates in its transcendental prototype as much as its model. Rogozhin himself is from the outset portrayed as a backwards Russian *kupchik*, a stronghold of Old Belief. His father actually adhered to the Old Faith, there are *skopcy* living in his

⁷ Curiously, it takes a fairly obscure web page to notice this: Jonathan O'Brien : "Truly God and Truly Man". <http://www.newchristendom.com/issue9/incarnation.htm>.

⁸ This has been noticed by Stoichita 433, who contrasts Dostoevskii's ideal of beauty with Holbein's stark naturalism without going into theological detail.

⁹ Cf. Stoichita 432

house. It may be important in this context that one sect of Old Believers even rejected icons of the crucifixion because that would signify Christ hanging from the cross eternally.¹⁰ By stressing Rogozhin's poor education, Dostoevskii makes it clear that this embodiment of Old Russia had no chance of understanding this painting.

Ippolit fares little better. His ekphrasis starts with the comparison of Holbein's painting to the "usual" way of portraying Christ's divine beauty even in death. However, this is the "usual" way only for Russian icons. Whereas depictions of the suffering Christ on the cross, the man of Sorrow, and Holy Graves are quite frequent in Catholic churches, in Orthodox iconography there is not even a tradition of painting the Dead Christ in his tomb.¹¹ Against this backdrop, the sheer naturalism of Holbein's picture makes it all the more striking. Ippolit's description abounds with the use of the term "obraz", meaning of course "icon", and culminates in the sentence "Mozhet li mereshchit'sia v obraze to, chto ne imeet obraza?" (III, 6, 464) – "Can there be an appearance of that which has no form?", or rather, "Can one depict in a picture what has no image?"¹² This sentence may be formulated only within the framework of the Orthodox icon, where any *obraz* refers to its transcendental *proobraz*. Finally, Ippolit wakes up from his Holbein nightmare to the light underneath the icon in his room – only to see it illuminating Rogozhin's spectre.¹³

By contrast, Myshkin fares much better. After viewing the Holbein copy at Rogozhin's, he not only comes out with his faith intact, but also with a distinctly contemporary Orthodox three-finger blessing by Rogozhin's demented mother. It is fair to assume that he, having been educated in Switzerland, is far better versed in Western painting and its conventions than his counterparts. He discusses several paintings right at the outset of the novel – one Swiss landscape he finds in General Epanchin's study, which he instantly recognizes, as well as the *sujet* he gives to Adelaida Epanchina, the General's daughter, for the painting of an executioner's face. In these cases, Myshkin is aware of the difference between the media of painting and icon, as well as the underlying concepts – in particular, the fact that a painting captures but one, albeit essential moment, of a narrative, while an icon participates in it and by its very existence testifies to its transcendental truth.

¹⁰ cf. Boris Uspenskij, Zur Semiotik der Ikone. In: Karl Eimermacher (Hrsg.): *Semiotica Sovietica*. Bd. 2, S. 755-825, here: p. 790

¹¹ These is the Descent into Hell, the Oplakivanie, the "Mother, don't cry", but no Pieta, no interment. See Konrad Onasch, Annemarie Schnieper: *Ikonen. Faszination und Wirklichkeit*. Freiburg: Herder 1995, p. 113.

¹² This is pointed out in detail by Stoichita, 436-437

¹³ Therefore, the icon allusion possesses none of the salvific attributes Stoichita (p. 437) ascribes to it.

Myshkin's media competence is less pronounced in the case of the other important image in the novel, namely, the photograph of the heroine, Nastasia Filippovna. Photography, as Andrew Wachtel has pointed out in a recent essay, has many common points with icon painting – e.g. the fact that the image is produced not through human hands, its capacity for infinite reproduction and so on.¹⁴ When Myshkin first sees Nastasia's photograph, he is not only smitten by her beauty, but performs the quintessential act of icon veneration – he kisses her image. What he finds most striking in the photograph is precisely what Ippolit misses in the painting – the beauty of the face. I shall discuss the specifications of the various media in a minute. Right now, I'd like to remind you that in both cases, the pictures are mistaken for what they are not – icons.

There is another quality of the image that attracts Myshkin to the photograph, much as it drives Rogozhin and Ippolit off the painting – its immutability and stability, its exemption from the flux of time. Readers of Dostoevskii frequently stress that the absence of narrative time in Holbein's painting accounts for “Dostoevsky's [...] saying, after seeing Christ eternally, identically the same in his death on Holbein's picture, without any transcendental hope, that ‘one can lose faith watching this picture.’”¹⁵ Dennis P. Slattery maintains that “It is in the timeless and stable qualities of the photograph that Myshkin is best able to deal with the real, sensate world.”¹⁶ Intriguingly, this quote stems from a paper on a completely different feature of the *Idiot*, namely, the discussion of the structural role of epilepsy.

If Ippolit and Rogozhin are tormented by the finality of Christ's death that seemingly breaks off the *heilsgeschichte*, Myshkin, too, is tormented by lacunae in time. In the description of the time leading up to his epileptic fit, Myshkin mentions that just before the fit, he experiences a moment of ecstasy where he understands the biblical (apocalyptic) word that “time shall be no more”. Wachtel in his essay ascribes this suspension of time to photography and points out several other incidents where the description of incidents and scenes virtually

¹⁴ Andrew Wachtel (Эндрю Вахтель): «Идиот» Достоевского. Роман как фотография. NLO Nr. 57 (2002); russian translation of: Wachtel Andrew. Dostoevsky's “The Idiot”: The Novel as Photograph // History of Photography. Vol. 26. № 3. Autumn 2002. P. 1—10. Unfortunately, Wachtel's essay suffers from over-generalization as much as from factual inaccuracies – unlike Nastasia Filippovna, Christ did not die from the stab of a sharp object in His breast (the wound was afflicted after his death), and there is an icon being mentioned in *Idiot*.

¹⁵ Dragan Kujundzic: Boris Groys and the Specters of Marx. <http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/2/kujundzic1.html> - only, of course, it is Myshkin who says this.

¹⁶ Dennis Patrick Slattery: Seized by the Muse: Dostoevsky's Convulsive Poetics in *The Idiot*. Literature and Medicine 18.1 (1999) 60-81, here: p. 65
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/literature_and_medicine/v018/18.1slattery.html

suspends time – the Chinese vase crashing in one of Myshkin's fits, and finally the tableau of Rogozhin and Myshkin waking by the dead Nastasia Filippovna. I don't want to play out one reading against the other, since they both agree on one central point - the suspension of time.

Where there is no time, there is space. Time and space stand in an intricate relationship in Dostoevskii's novels. In a recent essay, Caryl Emerson has contrasted the two main apologetes of time and space in Dostoevskii, namely Bakhtin's concept of Dialogism, which she takes as entirely oriented towards Time, and Robert Louis Jackson's writings on "Dostoevskii's Quest for Form",¹⁷ i.e. his use of the concept of "*obraz*" and "*bezobrazie*" as the two extremes between which Dostoevskii is torn.

It is commonplace that a picture says more than a thousand words. R. L. Jackson puts this commonplace to use in his discussion of Dostoevskii's works when he contrasts the role of the image, *obraz*, to the endless dialogue that looms so large in Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevskii. In Jackson's opinion, Bakhtin relies far too much on dialogue, and effectively ignores the power of the image to convey more than words. By its very stability and immutability, the image stands outside dialogue. One can talk about an image, one can even address it, but one cannot lead a dialogue with it. Instead, it demands an instant reaction, an irrevocable decision, a "leap of faith" beyond the world of relative, temporal dialogue, into another, absolute, possibly higher reality. Thus, the temporal quality of dialogue is punctured by the spatial quality of the image.

Myshkin, Rogozhin and Ippolit all fall prey to the same misconception. They regard an image that is not an icon as an icon. I'd like to comment on some implications of this error.

As regards the relationship towards time, an icon is a window into eternity, while a painting or photograph captures the moment. Both eternity and moment are essentially timeless. But their spatial structure, as represented in these media, is quite different.

It is obvious that in any picture, the space within the picture is organized largely in reference to its frame.¹⁸ The frame delimits the picture from its surroundings as well as from the viewer,

¹⁷ This is the title of his major work (Robert Louis Jackson: *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of his Philosophy of Art*. Pittsburgh: Physsart² 1978). Unfortunately, I was as yet unable to get hold of a copy, so I have to take Emerson's and others' words on it.

¹⁸ For the theoretical base of the following, cf. Ju. M. Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte (Struktura khudozhestvennykh tekstov)*, München 1989, S. 300-311.

and therefore serves to create a relationship between the two. The icon frame, however, differs structurally from the frame of an easel painting or a photography. In the latter, the frame is the barrier that separates viewer and object, as well as indicates that the picture itself is merely the result of a quite subjective gaze determined by the painter's resp. photographer's contingent point of view. At the risk of over-simplifying:¹⁹ a photograph as well as a painting is always part of a larger story that lies behind the frame. On the other hand, an icon does not cut off the viewer from the world inside the image, but connects them. An icon's viewer is ideally able to enter the icon and move freely around in it thanks to the "inverted perspective" in which objects are presented. The sujet of the icon is not represented through a painter's subjective filter, but presents his insight into eternal truth. The inverted perspective, which assumes no fixed point of view, constructs an entirely different conception of time. This is certainly not our everyday, linear time. It is eternity, an abundance of time, as contrasted to the mechanical fixation of the moment in a photo, or the artistic condensation of a narrative into a moment in a painting.

In an icon, there is always the whole story laid out before the viewers. Their task is not to construct a narrative around the focal point of the image, but to recognize the story that is always already known. Ippolit does just that when he describes the wounds and bruises that simply are not there in Holbein's painting.²⁰ What he fails to reconstruct is the promise of resurrection. This failure is of course due to the complete absence of Divine beauty in Christ's face. The Divine beauty that permeates Christ's features even in the cruellest of moments guarantees His Divine nature, its absence signifies "odnu prirodu", one nature alone. The irritation of the Holbein painting lies not only in its depiction of the most horrifying part of the story, but in the fact that the rest of the story lies beyond the frame. Ippolit's question "Supposing that the disciples, the future apostles, the women who had followed Him and stood by the cross, all of whom believed in and worshipped Him--supposing that they saw this tortured body, this face so mangled and bleeding and bruised (and they must have so seen it)--how could they have gazed upon the dreadful sight and yet have believed that He would rise again?" arises precisely from this omission.

¹⁹ There are of course many divergences between photograph and painting precisely in their relationship towards time and the subjectivity of the painter / photographer, but we cannot dwell on these here.

²⁰ On another level, Dostoevskii (or his narrator) does the same when he instantly identifies the body with that of Christ. Stoichita (p. 427) notices this, but cannot make out the reasons.

The depiction of the whole story within the icon leads to an effect that I would like to call a “framing from within”. An icon’s viewer is constantly aware of the fact that the story told by the icon is, in all its presence, already over and closed for good. No elements are left out for the viewers to supplement. The icon’s narrative time lies completely within its frame, it is spatialized, eternal. A perspective image, in contrast, is framed from without and structured by the artist’s contingent point of view, not by the image’s inherent truth.²¹ It is the suspension of time in a moment, masking as suspension of time in eternity.

Of course, exactly this is at issue in *Idiot*. We have already seen the way in which the suspension of time works. And nowhere is the “leap of faith” from time into space better exemplified than in the case of the Holbein painting. It does indeed demand – or command – a reaction to it, and it is instructive to compare the various reactions.

The one character whose reaction is the most eloquent, Ippolit, never really takes the leap. Following his “Necessary Explanation”, Ippolit doesn’t shoot himself, and it is clear that he prepared for this. Still, his proposed suicide is the most imminent and drastic reaction, as well as the most clearly justified. His suicide is a protest against the cruel forms of nature that crush even the supreme being, Christ. Rather than being crushed, he’d rather crush himself and elevate himself over brute nature.

Myshkin, upon encountering the painting, wants to talk about it, too. At the first chance at the Epanchins’, he seizes the opportunity, but is cut short by the Epanchin daughters. After seeing the painting again in Rogozhin’s house, he talks his way around a clear answer to Rogozhin’s question “Do you believe in God?” Interestingly, he contrasts the painting with four short anecdotes. True, all of these may be regarded as structurally analogous to an Ekphrasis, since they reject formal reasoning in favour of vivid images.²² Still, it is striking that Myshkin calls these anecdotes “vstrechi”, stressing their dialogic nature. These narratives, then, may be regarded as countering one image with others, i.e. the attempt to draw images into dialogue.

²¹ This is one of the major objections to Western perspective that Pavel Florenskii voices in his seminal essay “Obratnaia perspektiva”.

²² Cf. Robin Feuer Miller: *Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981, p. 184-185. The anecdotes are: the description of an atheist he had met on the train, the account of a murder – one peasant had killed his friend uttering the sentence “God forgive me, for Christ's sake! {before} he cut his friend's throat like a sheep” (II, 4, 249). Third and fourth are the description of a mother whose infant smiled at her for the first time and who experiences “a mother's joy when her baby smiles for the first time into her eyes, so is God's joy when one of His children turns and prays to Him for the first time, with all his heart!” (II, 4, 250) and of a drunkard who may be the father of that very baby, who sells his cross to Myshkin and goes to drink away the money.

Anyway, Myshkin's conclusion is that "Yes, Parfen! there is work to be done; there is work to be done in this Russian world!" (ibid, 250f.) He, for one, has made a decision, if in reaction to other images.

At this point I wish to counter Jackson's reading with my own. I have pointed out elsewhere that Bakhtin never ignores the image. His *Problems of Dostoevskii's Poetics* use the word "obraz" on every other page, but in two distinctly different meanings – one is fixed, stable, "framed", "perspectivic", if you wish, the object to another subject; the other is open, dialogic, iconic. While Dostoevskii in Bakhtin's reading rejects the stable image – analogous to Western linear perspective – as being inadequate for a portrayal of living people, he counters it by a conception that is analogous to the icon.

"And this is [...] also the dominant governing the author's construction of [the hero's] *image (obraz)*. [...] The author constructs the hero not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definitions; he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact he constructs no *objectified image* of the hero (*ob"ektnyi obraz geroia*) at all, but rather the hero's *discourse (slovo)* about himself and his world."²³

In the later parts of his book, Bakhtin differentiates little between *golos*, his ostensibly central term, and *obraz* in the second meaning. Bakhtin even equates the two in one telling passage:

"The image of the ideal human being or the image of Christ represents for [Dostoevskii] the resolution of ideological quests. This image or this highest voice (*etot obraz, etot vysshii golos*) must crown the world of voices, must organize and subdue it."²⁴

The word is the image, the image is the word – true to Orthodox theology, which regards both icons and *logos* as incarnations of Divinity.

One could go on speculating about the relation of the Holbein painting and Myshkin, who is by common consent a Christ-like figure, as being analogous to the dead and living Christ. One might also consider the reaction of the other characters in the novel towards Myshkin,

²³ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. and trans. C. Emerson; Intr. W.C. Booth; Theory and History of World Literature, 8; Minneapolis, London: Univ. of Minnesota, 1984), p. 71

²⁴ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. and trans. C. Emerson; Intr. W.C. Booth; Theory and History of World Literature, 8; Minneapolis, London: Univ. of Minnesota, 1984), p. 130

who is the organizing figure of all dialogue that takes place, and also seems to command a leap of faith in the final confrontation of the two rivals, Nastasia Filippovna and Aglaia. By the way, a closer reading shows that the catastrophe is not due to the women reacting to him, but him reacting to the women, i.e. showing compassion to Nastasia Filippovna when he should have declared his love for Aglaia. And after this fatal confrontation, when Myshkin confesses himself guilty to Evgenii Pavlovich, he nevertheless wishes for dialogue to resume. (quote?)

But to sum up, we have to take a last look at the third man, Rogozhin. For he is the one to make a final, and fatal, decision. At Myshkin's exclamation "Why, a man's faith might be ruined by looking at that picture!" Rogozhin simply answers "So it is!" („Propadaet i to"). And in the end, it is clear that Rogozhin takes the leap into death. His murder of Nastasia Filippovna ends the novel, but it also ends dialogue. The purported leap of faith, or rather of disbelief, leads not to salvation from dialogue's quagmire, but to a kind of *tableau morte*, with Myshkin and Rogozhin both unable to communicate any more.

In the *Idiot*, space is indeed played out against time, to the disadvantage of time. In the novel's catastrophe space wins over time, immutable image over living dialogue. Time minus space equals endless procrastination and indecision, as exemplified in the many instances where Myshkin's good-will reaction causes further complications, and ultimately in the final confrontation of the novel's heroines that leads up to the novel's catastrophe. But the *tableau morte* at the end testifies that space minus time equals death. A true "tableau vivre" would be the one in which time is suspended, "aufgehoben" in space.

Stephan Küpper, Berlin

Send comments to [soldat.kuepper \[a\] gmx.de](mailto:soldat.kuepper@gmx.de)