Dostoevsky's Postmodernists and the Poetics of Incarnation

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The Struggle over Aesthetic Ideals

"Alyosha, do you believe than I am not merely a buffoon?—I do believe that you are not merely a buffoon."¹ With these words Dostoevsky undoubtedly anticipated the reader's temptation to view Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov as nothing more than a buffoon, for the characters in the novel, including Karamazov the father himself, and the narrator of *The Brothers Karamazov* frequently refer to Fyodor's scandalous behaviour as buffoonery. I propose, however, to consider Fyodor not only as a traditional carnivalesque fool but as a character who poses questions of modern aesthetics. I interpret his behavior as artifice in the context of Dostoevsky's critique of the modern crisis of artistic representation.

As it has been frequently pointed out, the philosophical thought of Dostoevsky owes a great deal to the Platonic tradition. I suggest that the contradictory aesthetic ideas expressed in *The Brothers Karamazov* reflect the crisis of Platonic aesthetics and of Romantic representation. The "Pro et Contra" of *The Brothers*

1 F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* [PSS], ed. V. G. Bazanov et al. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–1990), 14:123; hereafter cited as PSS by volume and page. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified. In cases when translation may not render some important aspects of the text, the original text will be provided in a footnote. I would like to express my gratitude to Alexandar Mihailovic for his careful reading of this chapter and his invaluable comments and suggestions.

Karamazov is not only the pro et contra of the Grand Inquisitor and Zosima but also the pro et contra of Plato and anti-Plato.

Gilles Deleuze's critique of Platonism could provide a useful tool for considering the aesthetic problematic of *The Brothers Karamazov*, for it addresses the anti-Platonic turn in modern philosophy. Discussing the "overthrowing" of Platonism in modern philosophy in his essay "Plato and the Simulacrum," Deleuze insists that modernity "is defined by the power of the simulacrum": "The problem no longer concerns the distinction Essence/Appearance or Model/Copy. The whole distinction operates in the world of representation. The goal is the subversion of this world."² Jean Baudrillard also succinctly addresses the simulacra's annihilating power to efface the Platonic idea of God:

But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination—the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? This is precisely what was feared by Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today. This is precisely because they predicted this omnipotence of simulacra, the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear—that deep down God never existed, even God himself was never anything but his own simulacra—from this came their urge to destroy the images. If they could have believed that these images only obfuscated or masked the Platonic Idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the image didn't conceal anything at all.³

For both Deleuze and Baudrillard, the simulacrum is either a floating signifier that has been divested of its signified or a referent to an object that does not in fact exist. As we shall see, the postmodern understanding of aesthetics as the study of ossified simulacra—a practice expressing what Baudrillard calls a

2 Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum" (trans. Rosalind Krauss), *October* 27 (Winter 1983): 55, 52–53.

3 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 4–5.

"fascination for desert-like and indifferent forms"⁴—is fully embodied by Fyodor Karamazov's poetics of destabilization and aleatory verbal defilement.

I read Fyodor's behavior as an artifice that reverses the Platonic system of ideas, which may be central to the religious aesthetics of Dostoevsky. Fyodor Karamazov, along with other "adulterers of thought," such as Rakitin and Fetyukovich, and Foma Fomich Opiskin (from *The Village of Stepanchikovo*), are precisely representatives of this new aesthetic trend.

Dostoevsky is acutely aware of the two competing kinds of aesthetics, an aesthetic based on likeness, or similitude, to an Idea (that is, a Platonic tradition that finds its expression in iconicity) and the aesthetics that has no referent but itself. These two kinds of aesthetics are represented by images, such as icons, on the one hand, and by creations-phantasms, on the other. Insisting on Plato's distinguishing between the "*iconic copies* (likeness)" and the "*phantasmatic simulacra* (semblances)" (emphasis in the original), Deleuze explains: "The copy is an image endowed with resemblance, the simulacrum is an image without resemblance. The catechism, so fully inspired by Platonism, has familiarized us with this notion. God made man in His own image and to resemble Him, but through sin, man lost the resemblance while retaining the image. Having lost a moral existence in order to enter into an aesthetic one, we have become simulacra. The remark of the catechism has the advantage of stressing the daemonic character of the simulacrum."⁵ Fyodor pertains to this particular aesthetic existence and exemplifies a type of aesthetics that is also represented by Ivan Karamazov's devil and referred to by Dmitri in his famous opposition of the two types of beauty: the beauty of the Madonna and beauty of Sodom.⁶

Dmitri's words about the ideal of Sodom and the ideal of the Madonna are often interpreted as indication of Dostoevsky's awareness of beauty's ambiguity and his ambiguous attitude toward beauty, but it is also important to consider this opposition as an opposition of two kinds of representational aesthetics. By referring to "the ideal of the Madonna," Dostoevsky uses the term "Madonna" to link

4 Ibid., 160.

5 Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum," 48–49.

6 On the subject of "two kinds of beauty" in Dostoevsky, see Robert Louis Jackson, *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of his Philosophy of Art* (Bloomington, IN: Phylssardt, 1978), 40–70.

it to the European representational canon.⁷ The “aesthetics of the Madonna” implies that the notions of beauty, goodness, and truth merge; whether this is a Byzantine icon or a Renaissance Madonna, this aesthetics is based on Platonic (or Neoplatonic) representation, that is, on the assumption that a painting represents a visual image of the unrepresentable Truth. Although Plato himself criticized artistic representation as unable to grasp the true reality, later Christian Neoplatonists validated representation based on the idea that there is continuity between God and the world.⁸ For Plato, the object of representation in painting is a copy in respect to the idea of the object, *eidos*, but there is an original behind this copy. The notion that there is an invisible image prototype that can be glimpsed in the icon is central to the theology of the icon and Platonic mimesis. Plato distinguishes between the two types of the art of mimesis: the first one he calls the *art of creating images*, the second one the *art of creating phantasms*. These phantasms, according to Plato, *seem* beautiful but do not stem (emanate) from the beautiful. I suggest that Dmitri’s notion of the idea of Sodom represents this particular kind of aesthetics of phantasm, implying negation of the higher inaccessible truth, which may be found behind the representation. This ideal of Sodom, or phantasm, only seems beautiful, but it does not emanate from the beautiful. As opposed to the beauty of the Madonna that presupposes the existence of an

7 On the subject of Dostoevsky’s choice of “Madonna” rather than “Virgin Mary” (or “the Mother of God”) in this opposition, see Grigorii Pomerants, *Otkrytosť bezdne: vstrechi s Dostoevskim* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990), 178. As has been thoroughly discussed in scholarly literature, the ideal of the Madonna was connected in Russian literary tradition with the Romantic cult of Renaissance paintings of the Madonna, especially Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*. See Andreas Schönle’s discussion of the role of Raphael’s Madonna in Russian romantic imagination in Schönle, “O tom, kak Sikstinskaya Madonna pokrovitel’svovala russkomu romantizmu,” in *Sed’mye tynianovskie chteniia: Materialy dlia obsuzhdeniia* (Riga-Moscow, 1995–96), 135–50. See also Ksana Blank’s detailed overview of “the Madonna cult in Russian literature,” in Blank, *Dostoevsky’s Dialectics and the Problem of Sin* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 85–93.

8 As Tom Rockmore argues, Plato criticized artists for their inability to know what they depict and, therefore, to depict it correctly. Aristotle and later medieval Christian thinkers, however, were anti-Platonic in the sense that they committed to the view of an unbroken continuity between God and the visible created universe; see Rockmore, *Art and Truth after Plato* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). He writes: “The basic claim is the assertion of an unbroken ontological continuity between God and the world, God and nature, a continuity which sustains the characteristic triple cognitive link between human beings who in imitating nature imitate and know God” (104). Rockmore interprets this medieval Christian position as “the anti-Platonic belief that in imitating the world due to God we can reliably claim to know God,” that is, as anti-Platonic only in the sense of art’s cognitive function (ibid.).

original referent, the ideal image of the Virgin Mary, “the ideal of Sodom” does not have this referent, because Sodom is merely a metaphor of sin, of something that does not exist as an entity. The beauty of Sodom then, like simulacrum, is built upon dissimilarity, dissimilitude, perversion, and deviation from true beauty. The beauty of the Madonna may imply a certain similitude; the beauty of Sodom may not. Significantly, in contrast to the very extensive European pictorial tradition of the representation of the Madonna, the iconography of Sodom is very scarce and, for the most part, either does not depict the city of Sodom at all (using representational displacement by focusing on the theme of Lot, his daughters, and his wife) or portrays images of burning and destruction. As opposed to the Madonna, Sodom does not have an ideal form, but represents formlessness.⁹ The aesthetic of Sodom, rooted as it is in fragmentation, results in the disintegration of representation and its possibility. Sodom does not have a claim of the copy and as such resists representation. The ideal of Sodom is therefore the beauty of phantasm or, in Dostoevsky’s terms, the state in which man finds out that “the aesthetic idea got blurred.” Whereas Dmitri Karamazov seems to be torn between the two types of beauty, Fyodor is firmly on the side of Sodom, understood not in the narrow sense as a particular kind of debauchery, but as an aesthetic impulse thriving on phantasms and creating simulacra rather than icons.¹⁰

Fyodor Karamazov’s “Postmodernism”

Fyodor’s blasphemy could be seen as a direct reflection of his rejection of Platonic representation and an embracing, instead, of the “aesthetic existence” of simulacrum. Angered by his wife’s piety, he spits at the icon of the Virgin Mary: “I’ll

9 For an illuminating discussion of the paradox of the form of formlessness in Augustine and in Dostoevsky, see Robert Louis Jackson’s presentation in chapter 9 in this volume.

10 Lev Karsavin argues that Fyodor Karamazov is susceptible to pure beauty and, therefore, is capable of love; see Karsavin, “Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov kak ideolog liubvi,” in *Russkii eros ili filosofii liubvi v Rossii* (Moscow: Progress, 1991), 350–63. Indeed, Fyodor is sensitive to various kinds of beauty, including the “innocent beauty” of Alyosha’s mother, but Fyodor’s response to beauty, and probably pure beauty, especially, is destructive. Pure beauty only ignites in him the desire to profane and to destroy it. Although Karsavin is right in pointing out that “the very desire to defile is understandable only on the basis of a very acute sensitivity to that which is being defiled,” it is obvious that Fyodor derives aesthetic pleasure primarily in the acts of pollution and distortion. His aesthetic impulse is based on perversion and the pleasure of defilement. By the turn of the century, Fyodor Sologub would pick up on this new type of aesthetics in his portrayal of Peredonov in his novel *Petty Demon*.

knock that mysticism out of her, thought I. ‘Here,’ I said, ‘here you see your holy image. Here it is. Here I will take it down. Look then, you believe it’s miraculous, but here, I’ll spit on it in front of you and nothing will happen to me for it!’” (PSS, 14:126). Iconic representation is based on the assumption that an icon is a visual image of the unrepresentable Truth. By rejecting the image as likeness, as a referent to an idea, or an original, Fyodor also implicitly rejects iconic aesthetics. Since Fyodor does not believe in God, he views icons, church, and the institution of religion as simulacra of sorts. For an atheist, icons (viewed as icons rather than merely works of art) are offensive not only because icons claim to represent Christ’s divine nature, which cannot be circumscribed (a heresy that, according to the iconoclasts, represents idolatry), but also because they pretend to refer to something that does not exist. By spitting at the icon, he does not simply commit an act of profanation, but he also questions Christian aesthetics (which are central to iconic representation), that is, questions the existence of proto-image behind the image, of the original behind the copy, that is, image as likeness.

The world for Fyodor appears as a vertigo of images without any foundation behind them. His discussion of the “hooks” in hell is indicative of this view:

And so I wonder: hooks? Where would they get them? What of? Iron hooks? Where do they forge them? Have they a foundry there of some sort? In the monastery, the monks probably believe that there’s a ceiling in hell, for instance. Now I’m ready to believe in hell, but only without a ceiling ... And then if there’s no ceiling there, there are no hooks either. If there are no hooks it all breaks down, which is again improbable: who would then drag me down to hell with hooks, for if they don’t drag me down, what will happen then, what justice is there in the world? *Il faudrait les inventer*, those hooks, on purpose for me alone. (PSS, 14:23–24)

By paraphrasing Voltaire’s words, “If there were no God, one would have to invent Him,” Fyodor seems to insist that God, devil, and hell do not exist but are merely simulacra. An image for him does not have any proto-image or original: “Yes, yes, only the shadows of hooks. I know, I know. That’s how a Frenchman described hell: ‘J’ai vu l’ombre d’un cocher, qui avec l’ombre d’une brosse frottait l’ombre d’une carrosse’” (PSS, 14:24).

The world for Karamazov the father is a shadow of the shadow of the shadow, or a copy of the copy *ad infinitum*, so that it is impossible to find the original in an infinite recession of seemingly isomorphic units. Even when he

speaks about the shadow of the shadow, he turns to literary texts that he consciously distorts, as if in demonstration of defilement as the last refuge of true agency. The referenced text is the parody of the sixth song of *Aeneide* written by Charles Perrault and his brothers, which was frequently assigned to Paul Scarron, the author of *Le Virgile travesti*.¹¹ Thus, Fyodor's speech represents infinite production of copies of copies completely obscuring the original.

Fyodor Karamazov is a performer, and the main strategy of his performance is defilement and the destabilization of meaning. One of the best examples of his creative simulation is his behavior in Father Zosima's cell and his absurd story about von Sohn (from German for "son"). The story of von Sohn referred to a man who existed in reality and who was murdered in St. Petersburg; this story was also used as a parody of one of the hypostases of the Trinity and of the resurrection of Christ. By using the name of von Sohn in reference to Maksimov, Fyodor explains:

Your reverence, do you know what is von Sohn? There was a famous murder case: he was killed in a house of harlotry—I believe that is what such places are called among you—he was killed and robbed, and in spite of his venerable age, he was nailed up in a box, locked, and sent from Petersburg to Moscow in the luggage compartment with a number attached. And while they were nailing him up, the harlot dancers sang songs and played the harp, that is to say, the piano. So this is that very von Sohn. He has risen from the dead, hasn't he, von Sohn? (PSS, 14:81)

However, this story does not merely travesty the resurrection of Christ. Karamazov the father creates a simulacrum of sorts, a story that has no basis underneath it and has no original source—this is merely a copy of a nonexistent copy, which he confirms himself. Likeness is merely a simulation:

—"He is like von Sohn," Fyodor Pavlovich said suddenly.

—"Is that all you can think of? [...] How is it that he is like von Sohn? Have you ever seen von Sohn yourself?"

—"I've seen his photograph. It's not the features, but something indefinable. He's a purest second copy of von Sohn."

(PSS, 14:34)¹²

11 See editorial comments in Dostoevsky, PSS, 15:526.

12 [...] shall indicate suspension points in the original.

Thus, Maksimov as von Sohn is a verbal simulacrum, created by Fyodor, “the purest second copy” having no semblance or likeness and taken not from a real prototype, but from a photograph of someone Fyodor never saw. Fyodor creates untranslatable neologisms but these words have no referents, they are signifiers without the signified: “‘There, didn’t I say he was von Sohn!’ cried Fyodor Pavlovich, enraptured. ‘He is a real von Sohn, risen from the dead! Why, how did you tear yourself away from there? What did you *vonsohn* there and how could you get away from dinner?’”¹³ (PSS, 14:84). Similarly, his neologism, *naafonit’*, a word derived from the name of the holy Mount Athos but turned into a verb form prefixed with *na*, implying intense cumulative action, suggests activity resulting in a negative outcome, such as in the words *nadelat’*, *natvorit’*, *nakhuliganit’*, *nabedakurit’*, thus completely subverting the metaphorical meaning of Mount Athos, which stands for monastic holiness, and turning it in its very opposite: “I’ve pulled off plenty of pranks [*naafonil*, literally “athosized”] in my time”¹⁴ (14:125). His lies and slanders are not merely false and misleading statements intended to damage someone’s reputation, not merely untruths (which presuppose the existence of truth), but verbal simulacra ungrounded in reality; they are the actualizations of something in itself incommunicable and nonrepresentable. The destabilizing discourse of Fyodor’s garrulous buffoonery is based on a hodgepodge of distorted quotations, which stand on their own without reference to the thing they have originally represented. Karamazov’s witticism, “Credo, but I don’t know in what” (14:124)—the words that he absurdly and maliciously attributes to Father Zosima and that travesty the Orthodox Symbol of Faith (Nicene Creed) beginning with the words “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth”—targets the transcendental Signified by implicitly denying the existence of God. As a “sponger” (*prizhival’shchik*) and similar to Ivan Karamazov’s devil (also referred to as a “sponger”), Fyodor is a “sponger” on someone else’s word, an aesthetic sponger of sorts.

Speaking about his own buffoonery, Fyodor emphasizes the aesthetic motivation of his behavior: “Yes, exactly, I have been all my life taking offense

13 “—Ну не говорил ли я,—восторженно крикнул Федор Павлович,—что это фон Зон! Что это настоящий воскресший из мертвых фон Зон! Да как ты вырвался оттуда? Что ты там нафонзонил такого и как ты-то мог от обеда уйти?”

14 “Наафонил я, говорит, на своем веку немало.”

for the pleasure of it, taking offense on the *aesthetic* grounds, for it is not so much pleasant as *beautiful* sometimes to be insulted—that you had forgotten, great elder, it is *beautiful!*”¹⁵ (PSS, 14:41). Moreover, this “beauty” and this peculiar aesthetic sense are based not on likeness but on falsehood, and they are explicitly linked to demonism by Fyodor Karamazov himself:

But I have been lying, lying decidedly my whole life long, every day and hour of it. Truly I am a lie and the father of lies! But probably I am not the father of lies, I am getting the texts mixed up, but then at least the son of lies, and that will be enough. (PSS, 14:41)

Lies are understood here not merely as misinformation, false logic, or appearance, but as ontological lies, which question the very relation between the image and the original. The reference to the “father of lies” points to the demonic nature of the phantasms, created by Karamazov the father. Fyodor’s buffoonery, his sophistry, his language-making, produce, indeed, a “reverse Platonism” by generating verbal simulacra and by making them affirm their rights among authoritative scriptural word. Fyodor erases the distinction between truth and falsehood, denies the difference between the original and the copy. He discovers the lure of the false, the intoxicating power of lies and the aesthetic pleasure of creation that obliterates any sense of reality. Father Zosima criticizes Fyodor’s “drunkenness and incontinence of speech” and explains his behavior by a perverse aesthetic pleasure of lying:

It is sometimes very pleasant to take offense, isn’t it? A man may know that nobody has insulted him, but that he has fancied the insult himself and lied for the beauty of it, that he has exaggerated all to create a picture, has caught a word at a word and made a mountain out of a molehill—he knows that himself. (PSS, 14:41)

Thus, Fyodor appreciates a particular kind of aesthetic sense that leads to the creation of images (*kartiny*) based not on reality but on lies, or the beauty of phantasms. Indeed, Fyodor lies for the “beauty of it” and creates a mountain out of a molehill. The “father of lies,” he is an artist of simulacra, as his stories

15 “Именно, именно, я-то всю жизнь и обижался до приятности, для эстетике обижался, ибо не токмо приятно, но и **красиво** иной раз обиженным быть;—вот что вы забыли, великий старец: **красиво!**” (my emphasis).

about von Sohn and about Diderot's visit to the Russian Metropolitan Platon signify. His story about Diderot's "christening" is an improvisation based on phantasmal logic, continuously affirming that there is no logic, no foundation to this verbal creation, which is merely a figment of his imagination:

Did you ever hear, Your Reverence, how Diderot the philosopher came to the metropolitan Platon during the reign of the Empress Catherine? He entered and said straight out: "There is no God." To which the great prelate lifted up his finger and answered, "The fool has said in his heart there is no God." And he fell down at his feet on the spot. "I believe," he cried, "and accept christening." And so he was baptized on the spot. Princess Dashkov was his godmother, and Potemkin his godfather [...] ... Great elder! Forgive me, the last story about christening of Diderot I invented just now, this very minute, just as I was telling the story, but I never thought of it before. I made it up for the piquancy of it. (*PSS*, 14:39)

Fyodor's aesthetics with its complete obliteration of the real and its disconnect between essence and appearance defies the concept of representation. Distorted quotations, references to the nonexistent originals, deconstruction of the cultural intertext, hypertextuality, signifiers separated from the signified, the substitution of the beautiful with the witty, the vertigo of performance and provocation—all these features link Fyodor's behavior to postmodern aesthetics. Fyodor rejects images/icons and fabricates verbal simulacra, such as his stories about von Sohn or Diderot; he creates signs that merely dissimulate the absence of the signified.

Realism and the Aesthetics of Incarnation

In pondering the problems of aesthetics and striving to create his own "realism in the higher sense of the word" or "fantastic realism," based not on surface semblance, but on spiritual likeness, on the reality of ideas, that is, realism in the medieval scholastic sense of the word, Dostoevsky acutely sensed the pending crisis in the aesthetic and religious consciousness of modernity. For Dostoevsky, this crisis consisted more specifically of a fully articulated rupture with the epistemological foundations of the Platonic tradition, later so poignantly discussed by Deleuze and others. While polemicalizing with the naturalistic understanding of realism, Dostoevsky critiques this realism for merely touching the surface and limiting itself to the

exterior similarity. Let us recall how Dostoevsky describes the portrait of his narrator in "Bobok":

I think that artist painted me not for the sake of literature, but for the sake of the two symmetrical warts on my forehead: a phenomenon, he says. They have no ideas, so now they exploit phenomena. Well, but how well he painted my warts—just like life! That's what they call realism. (PSS, 21:42)

In other words, Dostoevsky is skeptical of art based merely on the depiction of phenomena and strives for the type of art that would be able to penetrate into the world of ideas (*noumena*) and would be based on images referring to ideas. Plato, as we recall, presupposed three levels of reality: the ideal forms, the visible objects (which are "shadows" of ideal forms), and images that comprise the mimetic arts. Although a direct literary imitation is located two steps below the essential nature of things, Dostoevsky wanted to grasp the more genuine reality of ideal forms, without bypassing, however, the realm of sensible reality. He was equally suspicious of naturalism without "ideas" and of the art of simulacra (of the kind that Fyodor Karamazov practices, playing with phantasms disconnected from the realm of sensible reality).

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky implicitly juxtaposes two types of realism by making Ivan Karamazov's devil proclaim that he loves "earthly realism" but suffers from the fantastic: "Just like you, I suffer from the fantastic, that is why I love your earthly realism. Here with you, everything is circumscribed, there is a formula, a geometry, while we have nothing but indeterminate equations" (PSS, 15:73).¹⁶ The "earthly realism" about which the devil is so nostalgic is the material world, the world of phenomena. Being himself an "ideal form" or, rather, a "fallen ideal form, he "suffers from the fantastic," as he puts it, and, therefore, rebels against this "fantastic realism" of immaterial existence. His greatest envy is precisely embodiment, enfleshment, incarnation: "My dream is to incarnate—but only irrevocably and decidedly—in some kind of fat two-hundred-fifty-pound merchant's wife" (15:73–74).¹⁷ An "impure form,"

16 "Ведь я и сам, как и ты же, страдаю от фантастического, а потому и люблю ваш земной реализм. Тут у вас все очерчено, тут формула, тут геометрия, а у нас все какие-то неопределенные уравнения!"

17 "Моя мечта—воплотиться, но чтоб уж окончательно, безвозвратно, в какую-нибудь толстую семипудовую купчиху."

so to speak, he feels doomed to be merely a “sponger” (*prizhival'shchik*), an imposter, an impersonator deprived of its own independent phenomenal existence. Ivan continuously reminds the devil that he lacks material existence, that he is merely his fancy, a phantom: “Never for a single minute have I taken you for reality [*real'nuiu pravdu*],” Ivan cried with a sort of fury. “You are a lie, you are my illness, you are a phantom [*prizrak*]. ... You are the incarnation of myself, but only of one side of me [...] of my thoughts and feelings, but only the nastiest and the stupidest of them” (15:72). As an “idea,” he could inhabit, take possession of someone, but only temporarily, always in fear of being exorcised.

This kind of “fantastic realism” is his curse, for he is yearning to be also part of the “earthly realism” similar to Christ with his two natures, human and divine. The devil, however, can only pretend to have two natures without ever achieving their unity, as follows from his peculiar theological non sequitur: “Satan *sum et nihil humanum a me alienum puto*” (PSS, 15:74).¹⁸ His failure to achieve the unity of the dual nature of Christ is exposed in his incompatible combination of Russian and Latin in one sentence, with “satanic” and “human” natures being rendered by two distinct languages. He flaunts his logical blunder, distorting Terence’s famous quotation and insinuating the identity of the demonic and human natures. The devil, as he admits, “suffers,” but does not “exist”: “I am suffering, but nevertheless I do not exist. I am an X in an indeterminate equation” (15:77).¹⁹ His suffering consists precisely in the fact that he lacks sensible material existence and has only the “reality” of an idea. He is a concept (a universal) without material embodiment in the particular. It is not surprising, then, that he considers realism in opposition to materialism: “I want to join the society of the idealists, create an opposition among them: that is, I am a realist, not the materialist, ha-ha” (15:72).

Dostoevsky himself, as we remember, juxtaposes his own realism (and idealism) to materialism. Contrasting himself to conventional realists (or “earthly realists,” in the devil’s terms), Dostoevsky writes in his letter to A. N. Maikov (December 11, 1868):

I have an entirely different notion of reality and realism from those of our realists and critics. My idealism is more real than theirs. My God! If you only render sensibly that which we, Russians, have lived through in our spiritual

¹⁸ “Сатана *sum et nihil humanum a me alienum puto*.”

¹⁹ “Я страдаю, а все же не живу. Я икс в неопределенном уравнении.”

development, would not the realists scream that this is a fantasy? Meanwhile, this is an original, true realism. This is precisely realism, only a more profound one, while their kind is merely on the surface. ... With their kind of realism you cannot explain so much as a hundredth part of the real facts, which have actually occurred. But with our idealism we have even prophesied facts. (PSS, 28(2):329)

Dostoevsky's realism, therefore, strives not merely at representation of the phenomenal material world but also at revealing the very essence of reality. It is for this reason that Dostoevsky views Christ as both an aesthetic and moral principle, for Christ's human nature coincides with his ideal form, and his "reality" is not bound by "earthly realism" of material facts and "truths," but at the same time he is fully palpable, visible, embodied, and, therefore, representable. The rivalry of the devil with Christ is the rivalry for incarnation, and, therefore, for the legitimacy of representation. Characteristically, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, both Christ and the devil are creations of Ivan's mind. However, though Christ is granted the status of real personality and has an embodied existence in Ivan's narrative, the devil remains merely his hallucination, or a phantasm.

Dostoevsky formulates his religious and aesthetic Christological creed in his oft-quoted letter to Natalia D. Fonvizina (January 1854):

This creed is very simple. Here it is: to believe that there is nothing more beautiful, deeper and more sympathetic, more rational, more manly and more perfect than Christ. And I say to myself with jealous love that not only is there no one else like him, but that there could be no one. Moreover, if anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth *in actuality* were outside Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ, rather than with truth. (emphasis in original) (PSS, 28(1):176)

The view of God (in the Christian tradition, of Christ) as the supreme beauty is hardly new, and the roots of it go back at least as far as Plato. What is important, however, about Dostoevsky's "creed" is his insistence on the particular aesthetic value of Christ's earthly, material existence, for such words as "sympathetic" (*simpatichnyi*) and "manly" (*muzhestvennyi*) could refer only to Christ's human hypostasis, that is, God incarnate. Significantly, in the Christian iconographic tradition, pictorial representation of Christ was justified by his incarnation. As Jeremy Begbie explains, "It is especially instructive to notice that those who

were reluctant to accept that Christ was God incarnate were also often opponents of icons.”²⁰ Iconophiles insisted that it was possible to “circumscribe” Jesus because of the Incarnation. Jaroslav Pelikan summarizes the Byzantine argument in favor of the iconic representations of Christ as follows:

The dogma of the person of Jesus Christ, as this had been codified by the ecumenical councils and the creeds, was to supply the fundamental justification for the Christian icons in the church. . . . Thus the incarnation of Christ as divinity made human did make it possible for Byzantine theology to affirm the validity of aesthetics and of representational religious art, but in the process it also transformed both art and aesthetics into something that had never quite been before.²¹

It is not a coincidence that Dostoevsky refers to his proclaimed ideas about the beauty and perfection of Christ as his creed. Christ’s divinity made human is precisely what provides an aesthetic justification for his realism. We recall that Ivan’s devil, on the other hand, is jealous of Christ’s incarnation and, therefore, jealous of his “earthly realism.” Since the devil cannot incarnate, there is no possibility for his consistent representation either, for he inhabits or “possesses” various human and animal forms, depending on “aesthetic preferences” of his audience. Not surprisingly, as opposed to the Madonna or Christ, there is no consistent iconographic representational tradition of the devil (just as there is no consistent representational tradition of Sodom). The devil is an aesthetic “sponger” and as such he could appear with horns and claws to please “the spiritualists” (as Ivan’s devil mockingly refers to those seeking “material proof” of his existence) or in the guise of Mephistopheles, in the Romantic rebellious splendor or, finally, according to the aesthetic preferences of nineteenth-century naturalism or realism, as a gentleman in a worn-out jacket and soiled underwear. Ivan’s devil explains his own sponger nature: “C’est charmant, a sponger. Yes, I am in my natural shape. For what I am on earth if not a sponger?” (PSS, 15:72). The Incarnation gives Christ the legitimacy of representation. The devil, by contrast, is doomed to the representational uncertainty because of his lack of embodiment. It is through Christian theology and aesthetics that

20 Jeremy Begbie, ed., *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 87.

21 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 77.

Platonic dualism is overcome, that the intrinsic goodness of the created world (held in question by Plato) is reaffirmed, for incarnation creates a possibility of continuity between the absolute ideal form and the sensible world. Although rooted in the Platonic tradition, Christian aesthetics validates representation on the basis of continuity between the unrepresentable divinity and the world of phenomena, justified by incarnation.²² The incarnation of God is what constitutes for Dostoevsky the highest beauty (letter to S. A. Ivanova, January 1, 1868): "In the world there is only one positively beautiful person—Christ, so that the appearance of this immeasurably, infinitely beautiful person is already an infinite miracle" (28, 2: 251).

If we consider the importance of the concept of incarnation for Christian aesthetics, then Dostoevsky's complex and much discussed response to Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* might elucidate his concept of realism in art. Arguably, Holbein's painting does not portray Christ's dual nature, or the Word made flesh. It is realist only in the "earthly" sense. Some would claim that it destroys continuity between the realm of "universals" and "particulars" ensured by incarnation. Thus, Anna Grigorievna Dostoevsky's reaction to the painting is similar to the one of Prince Myshkin, who in Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* asserts that one could lose one's faith from looking at this painting. According to this interpretation, Holbein's Christ pertains only to sensible reality, abjuring the ideal of absolute beauty. He is not God incarnated. This view is implicitly echoed in Julia Kristeva's analysis of this painting. She claims that the image transmits the new vision of mankind and that Holbein's representation is anti-iconic in the sense that it is void of transcendence and contains no promise of resurrection: "The unadorned representation of human death, the well-nigh anatomical stripping of the corpse conveys to viewers an unbearable anguish

22 The aesthetics of Russian icon art have been widely discussed by scholars and theologians who insisted that the "reverse perspective" of the icon gives the illusion of our standing inside the scene portrayed before us. The icon is not so much an artifact that is mimetic of reality as it is a portrayal of our participation in it; it creates, therefore, the opportunity of achieving direct contact with the Platonic *eidos*. See Pavel A. Florenskii, "Obratnaia perspektiva (1919–1922)," in *Filosofia russkogo religioznogo iskusstva XVI–XX vv* (Moscow: Progress: 1993), 247–64. Florenskii points out that the iconic representation only "signifies, points to, hints at, leads to the idea of the original, but by no means reproduces this *image* in some *copy* or *model*" (259). See also Boris A. Uspenskii, "Semiotika ikony," *Semiotika iskusstva* (Moscow: Shkola "Iazyki russkoi kul'tury," 1995), 221–303.

before the death of God, which here is mingled with our own death because there isn't the slightest suggestion of transcendence."²³

However, Dostoevsky's own approach to Holbein's painting is much more complex and is not dismissive of the painting's power of transcendence. Obviously, Dostoevsky would not have called Holbein a "remarkable artist and poet" if he did not see in the artist artistic qualities that were congenial to his own view of "realism in a higher sense." Robert Louis Jackson is undoubtedly right when he insists that Dostoevsky's references to Holbein as "a remarkable artist and poet"

are foundational for any understanding of his response to Holbein's *Dead Christ*. They constitute the highest praise he could offer any painter or writer. The word "poet" is sacred in his vocabulary. It embodies not only the notion of inspiration, but imagination and insight, vision and prophecy, elements central to his concept of fantastic realism.²⁴

Even though one of the characters of *The Idiot*, Ippolit Terentiev, seemingly critiques Holbein's painting and does not see it as a work of art, he points out to some crucial aspects of Christ's artistic representation:

There is not a trace of beauty in Rogozhin's picture [that is, a copy of Holbein's painting]; this is a full representation of the corpse of man who has endured endless torments even before crucifixion—wounds, torture, beatings from the guards, beatings from the people when he was carrying the cross and fell beneath it, and finally, the passion of the cross lasting six hours (according at least to my calculations). True, this is a face of man, *just* taken down from the cross, that is, a face that preserves a great deal of its liveliness and warmth; nothing has had time to stiffen, so that the face of the dead man still expresses suffering, as though it were still being experienced (this is very well captured by the artist); but still this face has not been spared in the

23 Julia Kristeva, "Holbein's Dead Christ," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body: Part One*, ed. Michael Feher, Ramona Naddaf, and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone, 1989), 241. In her account of Kristeva's interpretation of Holbein, Sara Beardsworth elaborated upon this perception: "The image of flesh caught between a wounded body and decomposition transmits a feeling of permanent death. The effect is compounded by other features of the painting, for Holbein has voided it of any representation of transcendence. No vista stretches out behind the dead Christ to link him to the beyond, and no mourners tie him to the human realm"; Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 146.

24 See Robert Louis Jackson's brilliant study in the present volume, chapter 9.

slightest; this is bare nature, and indeed this is how the corpse of man must look, whoever it may be, after such tortures. I know that the Christian church decreed in the very first centuries that Christ's passion was not figurative, but actual, and that his body on the cross must have been, therefore, wholly and entirely subject to the laws of nature. In the painting, this face is terribly mangled by blows, swollen, with terrible swollen, bloody bruises, the eyes are open, the pupils are askance; the whites wide open, gleaming with a kind of deadly, glass-like lustre. (PSS, 8:338–39)

Of particular importance here are Ippolit's words about theological interpretation of Christ's passion as an actual, rather than a figurative or symbolic, event. The triumph of Christian representation is precisely in the humanness of the divine.

The prescience of Dostoevsky's characterization of the crucifixion as an apotheosis of the ontological notion of divine materiality—in which the phenomenal and noumenal are brought into their necessary correlation—can be seen in the work of any number of contemporary theologians. Hans Urs von Balthasar elucidates the significance of Jesus's passion and death on the cross for Christian aesthetics:

This law extends to the inclusion in Christian beauty of even the Cross and everything else which a worldly aesthetics (even of a realistic kind) discards as no longer bearable. This inclusiveness is not only of the type proposed by a Platonic theory of beauty, which knows how to employ the shadows and the contradictions as stylistic elements of art; it embraces the most abysmal ugliness of sin and hell by virtue of the condescension of divine love, which has brought even sin and hell into that divine art for which there is no human analogue.²⁵

Dostoevsky saw in Holbein this type of “inclusive” Christian aesthetics that was beyond the “worldly aesthetics” of conventional “realists,” an aesthetic that was justified by the divine incarnation and could, therefore, embrace even the ugliness of the corrupted flesh. Holbein's Christ might very well evoke not divine but mundane and material prototype. However, this proto-image does not need to be that of God, who is uncircumscribable, but could be simply that of a dead man whose divinity is always a matter of faith and cannot, therefore, be

25 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 124.

shaken by any “material proofs.”²⁶ Admiring Holbein as an “artist and poet,” Dostoevsky viewed this painting not as simulacrum (in modern parlance), but as an iconic representation, evoking a prototype through its glaring absence within this particular representation. It is iconic in a sense that the representation of the dead Christ is, in fact, an image referring to a proto-image. However, even though the human nature of Christ is representable, the divine nature is unrepresentable and unportrayable. In this sense Holbein’s painting exemplifies the main challenge of Christian representation based on the dialectic of the Incarnation. Pelikan explains the Iconoclasts’ argument with the Iconodules as stemming from their emphasizing “one polarity of this dialectic of the Incarnation at the expense of the other: ‘Christ,’ they said, ‘is uncircumscribed and incomprehensible and impassible and immeasurable.’”²⁷ Iconoclasts, in a sense, dismissed the “earthly” Christ, for they believed that his human nature was also uncircumscribable and unportrayable. By contrast, the Iconodules believed that “the flesh was circumscribed, as it was seen upon earth during the years of Christ’s life on earth, and therefore it was legitimate to iconize it now.”²⁸ Seen from the point of view of the Iconodules’ logic, then, Christ’s flesh, even if it is a flesh of a dead Christ taken down from the cross, can be legitimately represented. Not only could it be represented, but even the corruption of the flesh cannot deny Jesus’s divine nature because Jesus’s human nature can never exist alone but must be the total divine-human person of Christ. As Kristeva reminds us, Holbein’s painting does not have the “slightest suggestion of transcendence.”²⁹ While there is certainly *mimesis* here—the scrupulous copying of an object—the real subject of the painting may very well be of the transformation to come, which is in no direct way suggested by the tableau that we see before us. The miraculous nature of the imminent resurrection is vividly communicated to the viewer by means of this appalling spectacle, of the body of Christ in its inert, scarified, and grotesquely cadaverous state. That is precisely why, so it seems,

26 We recall how Dostoevsky mocks the search for material proofs in the matter of faith through the ironic words of Ivan’s devil and through his “theological” interpretation of St. Thomas the Apostle’s faith: “Besides, no proof is of any help to faith, especially material proofs. Thomas believed not because he saw the resurrected Christ, but because he wished to believe, even before he saw” (PSS, 15:71).

27 Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, 78.

28 Ibid., 79.

29 Kristeva, “Holbein’s Dead Christ,” 241.

Dostoevsky both admires Holbein's painting and finds it profoundly disturbing: this image does evoke a prototype, but a very uncertain and highly ambiguous one—it could either affirm or destroy faith, depending on the position one takes in respect to the Incarnation. Dostoevsky was fascinated by Holbein's Christ as an image that refers to an event (the Resurrection) without attempting a direct representation of it. Like Russian icon art that Fyodor Karamazov scorns in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the painting is not so much a copy of the real—or, for that matter, a simulacrum untethered from any actual object—as it is a specular access point for encountering it.

In his own art, Dostoevsky strove to convey the inner likeness of humans to an idea, but he felt that contemporary art chose a different path by completely separating image from the proto-image and paying tribute only to the outer semblance. For him, Holbein's humanist painting was, as it were, on a threshold of modernity. The next logical step would be a complete disappearance of the original or proto-image. In the postmodern world this kind of aesthetic is linked to the triumph of simulacrum, which destroys hierarchy and denies any privileged point of view. Fyodor Karamazov, with his ontological disorder, his buffoonery, and destructive behavior, which eliminates the distinctions between the originals and copies, with his speech generating infinite phantasms, is a harbinger of this seductive new world of simulacra. And so is Ivan's devil, longing nostalgically for incarnation. Dostoevsky's own "realism in a higher sense" is rooted in the aesthetics of incarnation, an aesthetic that dissolves the Platonic severance between the world of forms and the world of appearance, and affirms the unbroken continuity between God and the world. Dostoevsky's aesthetics is close to Balthazar's "theological aesthetics" in its inclusiveness of worldly ugliness in the Christian beauty. This was Dostoevsky's powerful, although desperate, attempt to defend Neoplatonic representation in the wake of the new wave of iconoclasm, to which Jean Baudrillard refers in his *Simulacra and Simulation*.