Dostoevsky's Angel—Still an Idiot, Still beyond the Story: The Case of Kalganov

Michal Oklot

What is a seraph? Maybe a whole constellation. And maybe that whole
constellation is just some chemical molecule.¹

—Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Have the angels turned discreet!²

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Vergers*, 22

Jacob's Dream

In his essay “The Multi-visage Icon” (“Mnogolichnaia ikona,” 1900), Akim Volynsky (1865–1926) exercises a reading of the first of a number of scandal

1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* [PSS], ed. V. G. Bazanov et al. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–90), 15:85–86 (BK, 651); hereafter PSS by volume and page. The page numbers in parentheses refer to the English translations Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 2003), and *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), abbreviated *Idiot* and *BK*, respectively.

2 *The Complete French Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. A. Poulin Jr. (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1986), 151.

scenes in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1881), explicating it as an *ekphrasis* of a peculiar icon devoted to the theme of life as *theophilia*.³ Fyodor Dostoevsky's "icon," he writes, does not represent so much a divinized figure in a frozen image as it does a figure present in its full vividness. His images are woven into the dynamic fabric of the realist narrative. In the background of this "dramatic icon," as he called the scene at Zosima's cell, Volynsky distinguishes two silent novice figures, Alyosha and Porfiry, whom he calls "angel-like young men,"⁴ as if they had entered the narrative having stepped down from the lowest step of Jacob's ladder to make a detour in their eternal journey between the earth and heaven. So, perhaps, demons are not the only intermediary creatures—or rather, half-creatures—that populate Dostoevsky's worlds. Those worlds are also inhabited by angels—accidental guests, confused and lost in their earthly (or narrative) detours. They may, for instance, take the disguise of an idiot, like Prince Myshkin, or a jaded melancholic, like Pyotr Fomich Kalganov, a marginal character in *Brothers Karamazov*, who puzzles the reader with his discreet, hardly noticeable presence. But let us look at this analogy not through the ethical problem of humans' capacity for good and evil, which is usually provoked by the allusion to the demonic and the angelic, but rather through the angelic ontology, so to speak. The analogy can be understood through three concepts: transitoriness, incompleteness, and surplus. Each of these concepts also gestures at certain distinctive qualities of Dostoevsky's text, in both narrative and ideological dimensions. Following this discussion, now equipped with the conceptual framework the second part of this essay will take a closer look at Kalganov and his role in the novel.

Balzacian Trope

First, we must ask if we can find evidence of Dostoevsky's interest in angels in his own readings. One of the possible paths of such an inquiry can lead through Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), for it is impossible not to pass under an angel's wing when reading Swedenborg. Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) was the first who experimented with a more comprehensive reading of Dostoevsky in

3 See Akim Volynsky, *Dostoevsky*, ed. V. A. Kotel'nikov (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2007), 281.

4 *Ibid.*, 297.

the context of Swedenborg,⁵ following a trace left by Leonid Grossman, who, in his reconstructed library of Dostoevsky, put on the shelf A. N. Aksakov's translations of Swedenborg's works and his two brochures devoted to Swedenborg's exegeses of the Bible.⁶ Yet, we do not need to look at the works of Aksakov from the 1860s to establish such a parallel. A more natural lead takes us straight to the Romantic reception of Swedenborg, especially in one of Dostoevsky's "teachers," Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) and his *Études philosophiques—Seraphita* (1834), *Louis Lambert* (1832), and *Exiles* (1831). Balzac develops his theme of the evolution of the spirit, moving from the natural to the divine world (not unfamiliar to Dostoevsky's readers) in his trilogy precisely through angels—and not figurative ones but actual ones (if this modality applies to angels at all), as in the angelological treatises of Swedenborg. The angels in Balzac (and Balzac's Swedenborg) unveil certain limitations of Enlightenment reason, which is incapable of comprehending the infinity of the divine intellect. This is also a lesson hidden behind Dostoevsky's narratives, and, in particular, *Brothers Karamazov*. So this theme alone, shared with Swedenborg's Romantic disciple, Balzac, can justify our search for angels in Dostoevsky.

Transitoriness: D. H. Lawrence's Problem with Dostoevsky's Angels

In searching for angels in Dostoevsky, we can also experiment with the perspective of modernism, especially with one of the modernists' "angelologists," D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930), who was interested in an ontological dimension of the angelic in literature. In a letter to his friend S. S. Kotliansky—a translator of Russian literature—Lawrence expresses his irritation with the omnipresence of the fallen angel theme in Dostoevsky: "I could do with Dostoevsky," he writes, "if he did not make all men fallen angels. We are not angels. It is a tiresome conceit. . . . It doesn't matter what Stavrogin does. . . . It is his affair. It bores me. People are *not important*: I insist on it. Let them die."⁷ Here, one can easily

5 See Czesław Miłosz, "Dostojewski i Swedenborg," in *Rosja: Wiedzenie transoceaniczne*, vol. 1, *Dostojewski – nasz współczesny*, ed. Barbara Toruńczyk et al. (Warsaw: Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich, 2010), 115–31.

6 N. F. Budanova et al., *Biblioteka F. M. Dostoevskogo: Opyt rekonstruktsii. Nauchnoe opisanie* (Moscow: Nauka, 2005), 132–35.

7 George J. Zytaruk, ed., *The Quest for Ranim: D. H. Lawrence's Letters to S. S. Kotliansky* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1970), 68; emphasis in original.

sympathize with Lawrence's irritation, and his call for a broader, ontological understanding of the angelic; and indeed, it might be good hermeneutical advice to avoid reading Dostoevsky's characters—"silly blighters, fools, and two-penny knaves"⁸—through their capacity to fall. This rings especially true when bearing in mind that Dostoevsky himself was rather skeptical about the "fallen angel," the troublesome Byronic heritage of Russian literature. Further into *Brothers Karamazov*, it is none other than the infernal phantasmagoric guest of Ivan Karamazov's who will be as suspicious of a fallen angel as Lawrence.

Declaring that people (meaning their psychological and ethical motivations) are *not important*, the mystical materialist Lawrence was referring to the general ontological and cosmogonic perspective that he developed extensively in his *Study of Thomas Hardy*. In the chapter titled "Work and the Angel and the Unbegotten Hero," Lawrence sees the angel as a "more perfect being than ourselves with more extended knowledge of that which is not ourselves."⁹ For him, an angel is a trace of individuality, sheer distinctiveness of "a complete melody or a pure color" in the "utterly homogenous infinity, a great non-being, at once a positive and negative infinity."¹⁰ Lawrence's discreet angel is also a vector of "some reaction, infinitesimally faint, stirring somehow through the vast homogenous inertia"¹¹ in the process of liberation of life from matter. However, in his literary iconography, he, like Dostoevsky, sticks to the conventional Christian imagination: "My Angels and Devils," he writes in a letter to E. M. Forster, "are old-fashioned symbols for the flower into which we strive to burst. . . . I am just in love with medieval terms, that is all—Fra Angelico and Cimabue and the Saints."¹² Not accidentally, Lawrence's novel *Rainbow* (1915)—which, next to *Women in Love* (1920), and *Plummet Serpent* (1926) could be read as a part of novelistic triptych concerning the mystic ontology of life not far from that of Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919)—is populated by Fra Angelico's angels, vectors of the "progress of life" and the emergence of nonselfish individuality.

8 Ibid.

9 D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Stelle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 42.

10 Ibid., 43.

11 Ibid., 42.

12 George J. Zytaruk and J. T. Boulton, eds., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, vol. 2, June 1913–October 1916 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 275.

Having in mind Balzac's Romantic angel, which unveils the invisible, and Lawrence's modernist angel, let us look at Dostoevsky's own thought on angels (and demons). While experimenting with Stavrogin's unstable, transitory ontology in one of the manuscript sketches of conversations between Stavrogin and Shatov titled "The Fantastic Hour," Dostoevsky has Stavrogin utter the famous "fantastic" thought about potentiality as the fundamental modality of human existence, unveiled to the broader reading public by Rozanov. "Certainly, we are transitory creatures [*shushchestva perekhodnye*]," Stavrogin says:

and our existence on earth is, certainly, the uninterrupted existence of a chrysalis, transforming into a butterfly. Remember the saying: "the angel never falls, the demon has fallen earlier before, so it has been always lying fallen, the man always falls and rises." I think, people become demons or angels. . . . But the earthly life is a process of transformation. . . . Also do not forget that "there will be time no more," as the angel [of the Apocalypse] swore. . . . It is impossible to die. Being is, while nonbeing is not.¹³

This passage does not necessarily concern our condition of a fall. Reading Dostoevsky through Stavrogin's thought we may say that Dostoevsky's novelistic characters are somewhat suspended between two antipodal types: the angelic Myshkin and the demonic Stavrogin (a particular kind of an angel). Both emerge and disappear among the mountain ranges of the Swiss Alps: Myshkin in the bright, blue infinite of the sublime; Stavrogin in the negative infinity of the dull place, a ravine cramped by the mountains. Let us note that the finale of their earthly trajectory is almost the same. They both lose themselves—Myshkin "in his own light,"¹⁴ and Stavrogin in his own darkness—in two infinities, as Lawrence would say in his aforementioned angelic digression. And it is precisely these two characters, dissolved in two infinities, who determine the two directions of man's "incomplete entelechy." The fantastic lepidopter thought that Stavrogin utters in this moment of brilliance—an interruption of his manic-depressive trajectory of the demonic, in the angelic key—demonstrates the need of these subtle half-beings to understand our own ontological position of *transitoriness*—our source of hope for nontranscending

13 PSS, 11:184.

14 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, ed. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1996), 80.

immortality—which could be yet another formulation of one of the main themes in Dostoevsky.

The anthropological dimension of such an understanding of the angelic is not far from Russian Orthodox theological interpretations. To stay in the context of devoted readers of Dostoevsky, in Sergei Bulgakov's (1871–1944) sophiological angelology, angelic love is a form of metaphysical abjuration—not only of one's own wealth but also of anything that is one's own. This character of angelic love is manifested negatively in the image of the fall of the fallen demons, who desired precisely their *own*: demanding to establish their kingdom with the prince of this world. The “good” angels abjured this wish, “and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Rev. 12:11).¹⁵ The life of the Holy Trinity, Bulgakov writes, is characterized by the mutual self-exhaustion of the divine hypostases, which have their lives not in themselves but in *the Others*: the Father in the Son and the Spirit, the Son in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit in the Father and the Son.¹⁶ The angel's life, then, is, in a sense, a potential life. An angel, Bulgakov writes, is the other (*drugoi*) and a friend (*drug*). Thus, as Andrei Pleșu noted in the spirit of Bulgakov's writings, angels are our “identical otherness,” “our latent openness,” “the surplus negating a possibility of finding our own identity.”¹⁷ An angel stands for everything that is different in us and, yet, is not different, at the same time, since, to put it oxymoronically, its identity is in its impossibility; as Pleșu argues, it teaches us a radically different anthropology from that of the concept of identity that is hysterically reinforced in contemporary art and the humanities.

Incompleteness: Life in “unfinished half-tails . . .”

If we project Dostoevsky's angels onto Pseudo-Dionysius's celestial hierarchy, and while considering their roles in the narratives, they would belong to the lowest rank of ordinary angels: those closer to the world and in charge of revelation; those that take care of our own hierarchy so that the uplifting return toward the Principle of principle, God, might occur.¹⁸ An example of such an

15 Quoted in Sergius Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder: On Angels*, trans. Thomas A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 162.

16 See *ibid.*, 162–63.

17 I am referring to the Polish translation from Romanian: Andrei Pleșu, *O aniołach* [*On Angels*], trans. Tomasz Klimkowski (Krakow: Universitas, 2003), 17.

18 See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1987), 170–71.

angel, a messenger lost in his otherness, is Prince Myshkin. By taking a closer look at him, we can see how his angelic role is related to Dostoevsky's angelic ontology and narrative topography.

In a memorably insignificant scene at the beginning of *The Idiot*, Myshkin takes a thick leaf of white, blank, richly textured paper and begins to write separate phrases, playing with various types of handwriting from both old and new times, as if, to use Volynsky's observations once again, "merging with everything that has lived and still lives on the earth."¹⁹ As a result, some sort of "parallel world begins to emerge,"²⁰ Volynsky writes. This world, enclosed in the trajectories of characters and spaces between them, is so much richer than the one that surrounds Myshkin, flattened by his idiocy. This act of copying handwriting styles creates an impression of Myshkin trying on various costumes or masks, as if he were experimenting with the possibilities of living in various forms of human life (which brings to mind the dark experiments with masks and life scenarios of another tenant of intermediary space, the demon Stavrogin). Volynsky, summing up his analysis of the calligraphy passage, writes that Myshkin "is playing with various individual characters with the discrete smile, as if he was some bodiless angel."²¹

The confusion starts when the idiot, Myshkin, tries to enter the story. Not having a life of his own, he tries on several roles that he does not understand. Here, he loses himself in grandiose gestures, which do not communicate anything in particular, and experiments with various lives, trying them on like his all-too-fashionable clothing. In so doing, he always looks awkward (he is not as experienced with borrowed lives and ideas as is his evil twin brother, Stavrogin). So he becomes a radical Slavophile, a suitor from Nikolai Gogol's (1809–52) *Marriage* (1842), a husband, a prophet, a "millionaire-philanthropist," a player in a banal love triangle. Later in the novel, Aglaya will capture Myshkin's lack of qualities by comparing him to Pushkin's "Poor Knight" (1836), which we may also interpret in an angelic key as the poetic portrait of anonymity, a face upon which one can imprint anything. Unlike a true calligrapher, whom Myshkin describes in his calligraphy demonstration, he makes attempts at extra flourishes, "unfinished half-tails," from which "the whole military

19 Volynsky, *Dostoevsky*, 120.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

scrivener's soul is peeking out of it."²² What is Myshkin showing us, then, when he adds such a "half-tail" of his assumed individuality? Behind the chaos of his grandiose gestures, the broken lives and Chinese vase, we see the idiot's (the modern angel's) quality: facelessness. Angelic, faceless individuality can only be perceived beyond a temporal order—once Myshkin is thrown back into the chronology (the story), he returns to his clinical idiocy. We may say that Myshkin experiences an experimental world, the world as possibility, which in actuality leads to disappointment, a melancholy of fulfillment. In the rare moments of assuming his true identity, he plunges back into the infinite beyond the horizon line, losing consciousness. Myshkin aligns with himself only during an epileptic fit.

But what would his angelic message be after all? Peter Sloterdijk gives an ambiguous answer, which could be reconciled with the theological ontology of an angel. For Sloterdijk, Myshkin the idiot is "an angel without a message—an undistanced, intimate augments of all coincidentally encountered beings."²³ Moreover, Sloterdijk sees Dostoevsky's theological and philosophical brilliance precisely in his recognition of "the chance to shift the focus of Christology from angeletics to idiotics and thought it through to its limits"—"the crises of sender metaphysics."²⁴ The idiot, a modern angel, does not invoke "transcendental radiance," Sloterdijk argues, but "naïveté and disarming benevolence in the midst of a society of role players and ego strategists,"²⁵ leading his life as the main character in his own story; exchanging places with his afterbirth, he "make[s] space for its being-in-the-world as itself"²⁶—emerging life, in Lawrence's vocabulary. To translate this argument back to Bulgakov's angelology, Myshkin lives only outside himself, in others' lives, in metaphysical self-exhaustion, being just an angel, sheer capacity, no less, and no more. Myshkin's angelic quality, or rather its lack, is ontological poverty and emptiness: he is a *half-being* (*polu-bytie*), in Bulgakov's terminology, which, through its *incompleteness*, gives us ontological hope for immortality, for that which is not complete cannot die. As Ernst Bloch, another modernist student of Dostoevsky,

22 PSS, 8:29 (*Idiot*, 34).

23 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres, Vol. 1: Bubbles*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 473.

24 Ibid., 472.

25 Ibid., 473.

26 Ibid., 475.

would say in the spirit of Stavrogin's angelic thought, our kernel of existence, being never actualized, transcends death without resorting to metaphysical transcendence.

Surplus: The Case of Kalganov

So, then, we might ask what happened to Dostoevsky's angel (or demon) after his misadventures in St. Petersburg, Pavlovsk, and Skvoreshniki, and beyond the limit of the Alpine arête. In *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky's summa and his return to the native flatland of the Mother-Moist Earth (*Mat' syra zemlia*), Myshkin's life in potentiality becomes actualized in Alyosha's body; faceless Myshkin-Stavrogin finds a face (not a mask)—the lively, healthy, full-blooded face of Alyosha. Still, he is not fully actualized in the plot. Alyosha retains the role of messenger, carrying letters and notes in a world devoid of face-to-face communication, one enmeshed in "the crises of the sender metaphysics." He remains at the threshold: between the monastery and "our town," in intermediary space. If Myshkin preserves his marginal status, occupying the center of the novel, Alyosha seems to lose his transparency, gradually materializing in the *fabula*.

Instead, let us take a closer look at a marginal character, Kalganov, who consistently preserves his status of marginality throughout the novel. In many respects, he could be representative of the collection of characters that populate the margins of Dostoevsky's novels, who never try to move to the center like Prince Myshkin. To be more precise, Kalganov belongs to a peculiar cluster of marginal characters that include young, good-looking men who do not have any specific role assigned to them in the plot, whose novelistic existence is episodic, and whose absence would not disrupt the narrative flow. Their origins are unclear: they wander without any specific goal, precisely like Kalganov; they may spread gossip or carry messages, like Rakitin or Perkhotin, also from *Brothers Karamazov*; or even engage in blackmail, like Trishatov from *The Adolescent*. Their status is often morally ambiguous. Trishatov is a perfect example of this moral and narrative suspension. He is a member of the blackmailers' gang and, at the same time, helps save Versilov from committing murder and suicide.²⁷ These men often wander in pairs, for example, Trishatov with Andreev, and Kalganov with Maximov, Rakitin, or Alyosha.

²⁷ In a chapter devoted to Trishatov, Susanne Fusso—pursuing the argument of her book, summarized by its title, *Discovering Sexuality in Dostoevsky*—gives enough evidence for a

Certainly from the perspective of the ostensible themes and motifs in Dostoevsky's novels, Kalganov might be seen as a literary portrait of a typical young man of the 1870s, one with no ideological or spiritual spine, the son of liberals of the 1840s, an incurable melancholic—the “dreamer”—or a dandy, an echo of Onegin; perhaps he is a candidate for suicide, a literary double of Alexander Herzen's daughter, as if he just stepped from the pages of the *Diary of the Writer*. Perhaps Kalganov carries some dark secret, as do Dostoevsky's other ambiguous characters Svidrigailov, Stavrogin, and Verkhovensky. Seen from the latter perspective, he might also be a double of nihilistic Smerdyakov, the dramatized “contemplator,” as represented in a famous painting by Ivan Kramskoy.

Who or what else might this fair creature with Prince Myshkin's blue eyes be, “with the strange fixity in [its] gaze”? Victor Terras, a devoted reader of Plotinus—a philosopher who inspired many medieval and modern era angelologies—classifies Kalganov as typical for Dostoevsky—“unnecessary,” “extra,” “a trademark” of Dostoevsky's art.²⁸ He is unrelated to anything in the book, like some sort of a narrative surplus. Following this hint, but stretching our imagination a bit further by putting into movement a chain of literary associations, we may consider Kalganov to be a close relative of a certain young dandy in white pantaloons who passes like a ghost through the opening pages of Gogol's *Dead Souls*. If this is the case, he can be a figure of a narrative detour, first giving us flickering hope for the possibility of the story and then bringing us back into an entangled assembly of empty sets, leaving behind only a narrative surplus, the logic of which is described so well by Nabokov in his playful study of Gogol. This choice could be explained by the realist narrative itself, which demands an excess of random details and a procession of so-called flat characters. Nonetheless, for our purposes here, we can focus more closely on the anagoric dimension of this character.

Robert Belknap finds for Kalganov a well-defined role within the structure of the novel, suggesting that his presence could be explained on the level of the inherent structural relationships in the text, as an “installed” “reminder,” whose

desexualized reading of this puzzling character, especially in the section devoted to Trishatov's imaginary project of the operatic transposition of Goethe's *Faust*. See Fusso, *Discovering Sexuality in Dostoevsky* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 42–68.

28 Victor Terras, *A Karamazov Companion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 142.

role is to recall Alyosha and his states.²⁹ As in the case of Terras's observation, we might also develop Belknap's thought, stretching it beyond the structural. Indeed, it is hard to resist the impression that Kalganov is a substitute for Alyosha in two of the most important scenes of the novel, both of which are structurally and ideologically significant. Kalganov, as Terras also notes, "keeps turning up on the fringes of the novel."³⁰ These are the places that frame the story beyond the ostensive *fabula* with their two gestures: Zosima's prophetic bow to Dmitri, and weeping Kalganov's farewell to the arrested Dmitri.

Kalganov's indifference to carnal passions and our inability to catch him *in flagrante delicto* with a woman might prompt some eager scholars to build a case for his having a homosexual orientation. Perhaps yes, perhaps no. The problem with this approach, putting aside its interpretative value, is that he is not caught *in flagrante* with a man either. Should the enigma of Kalganov be hidden in his sexuality? As a twentieth-century admirer of Dostoevsky, one of the melancholic ghosts of European twentieth-century literature, Emil Cioran (1911–95), once said, "Sexuality is a great leveler; better, it strips us of our mystery."³¹ So let us not consider urgent the question of the sexual preferences of Dostoevsky's characters in order to leave the question open for yet another interpretation.

Still, if we insist on looking at Kalganov through his sexuality, there is another option—impotency, which also constitutes a great enigma. Cioran noted in regard to Gogol's "secrets" that "no flow isolates more." "Impotent, a man possesses the inner strength that makes him singular, inaccessible," Cioran writes.³² And this is what we may also say about Kalganov, a temporary protector of another marginal character, Maximov—an orphaned, old-fashioned landowner, who himself, in the potent space of Mokroe, conjured up another layer of surplus, phantom characters from *Dead Souls*, as if resurrecting them. The impotence (or sexual indifference) of Kalganov as a key to the enigma of his appearance in the novel could be a promising interpretative hypothesis, if understood precisely beyond the leveling sexuality, perhaps in the sphere of—and this is the point—the angelic.

29 See Robert Belknap, *The Structure of "The Brothers Karamazov"* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 55–56.

30 Terras, *Karamazov Companion*, 363.

31 Emil Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Quartet Encounters, 1987), 184.

32 Ibid.

Dostoevsky inserts the portrait of Kalganov in the novel twice. In both, he appears as a financially independent, melancholic, beautiful man. He is a relative of Miusov and “friendly with Alyosha.” Yet, the reason why he enters the plot is unclear. The narrator describes him in short, precise sentences, as if painting a portrait. For example, at the very beginning of the novel, we meet Kalganov in the first of the scandalous conclaves, which puts into motion the tragedy of transfiguration. We see him for the first time at the beginning of the scene, on his way to the elder Zosima’s cell—he is giving a handout to the beggars, but he is not doing so spontaneously, rather, it is as if he were fulfilling some script, seeming embarrassed, and not without some unexplained irritation.³³ In the cell of the elder Zosima, he stands out from the rest of the characters by forgetting to join the theater of bows: “Kalganov was so confused,” the narrator writes, “that he did not bow at all.”³⁴ Later, Kalganov witnesses the elder Zosima’s prophetic bow—one of the most important gestures of the entire novel. He also prompts the rhetorical question that Dmitri automatically utters, which later will become one of the “proofs” of his guilt, as if directing Dmitri toward the trajectory of sin and redemption.

Yet, before he disappears from the story, Kalganov makes one more gesture. He takes with him the landowner Maximov, who is wronged and humiliated not only by his two wives and Ivan Karamazov but also, as we learn from him later, by the character of the Gogolian surplus, Nozdrev, the demon of chaos from Gogol’s novel. So we may say that this originary scandal ends with a departure of those two enigmatic Gogolian characters, Kalganov and Maximov, whose actions proper may take place only in the surplus.

Being absent for more than three hundred pages of the novel, Kalganov reappears in book 8: we find him in Mokroe, on the sofa next to Grushenka, who is clutching his hand. Kalganov remains “somehow insensible” to her caresses, as the narrator reports. From the previous pages, we know of Grushenka’s inclination toward angels, and toward men. (Later, Dmitri will also hold Kalganov’s hand in his joyful greeting; in Mokroe, as in the earlier, infernal part of book 8, each grotesque gesture, each instance of verbal excess, each act of buffoonery has emblematic significance.) We learn that Kalganov and Maximov

33 See PSS, 14:33 (BK, 35).

34 PSS, 14:36 (BK, 39).

turned up in Mokroe by sheer chance. While Trifon Borisich is reporting to Dmitri on the situation at the inn and the available possibilities of entertainment, he cannot even recall Kalganov's name. The narrator—perhaps assuming that the reader, too, has also forgotten about this taciturn and giggly melancholic—inserts the same portrait of Kalganov, as if by mistake. Yet, if we agree that the proper space for Kalganov is in the narrative surplus, this repetition, which creates some sort of a rhyme, is perfectly justified.

There are, however, some changes in the second portrait, but it would be an exaggeration to say that these changes indicate a “development” of the character; it is rather a matter of accents and angles from which we look at him. Is it Kalganov's double, the second identical-looking angel? This reinsertion of Kalganov's portrait makes an impression, as if Dostoevsky were trying to lead our gaze twice toward the same place of this peculiar icon. When we meet Kalganov for the second time in Mokroe, he is perhaps more capricious, even inexplicably irritated, filled with disgust for the world, as if it had deeply disappointed him; he is bored and tired with it. His melancholic gaze makes an impression, “as if he soiled himself with something.”³⁵ He also loses interest in Maximov, or, perhaps, this time he is just focused on Dmitri and his coming “transformation.” Perhaps it is just a coincidence, but the fact that in the absence of Gypsies, Borisich sends for Jews to play at “Rozhdestvenskaia” (Christmas might have a symbolic meaning similar to that of the Jewish constable who meets Svidrigailov before the latter's last journey in *Crime and Punishment*, to which another angelologist of Russian literature, Rozanov, once turned our attention.

Initially in this scene, Kalganov still accompanies his Gogolian protégé, Maximov, hysterically laughing at his braggadocio. But, perhaps, his laughter is supposed to turn Dmitri's attention away from the crime he was about to commit—the most terrible, irredeemable crime in the spiritual jurisdiction of Christendom. Let us note that the angelic character from *The Adolescent*, Trishatov, explicitly prevented a suicide. The world of Dostoevsky's last novel is assembled much more subtly, so Kalganov, a peculiar guardian angel—“a benefactor,” as Maximov calls him—also assists Dmitri, the central actor of the pagan-Christian drama, but in more trivial tasks, as, for instance, in helping

35 PSS, 14:392 (BK, 434).

him open a bottle of wine. It is as if Dostoevsky, in parody, wanted to present the drama of a modern guardian angel, but one who is unable to actively protect us. He then tries to prevent Mr. Musialowicz and Mr. Wroblewski from cheating at cards. Kalganov is a much subtler and more discreet angel than the unleashed Prince of Lightness, Myshkin, whose marginality takes over the center. So, finally feeling somehow estranged from the entire scene, Kalganov falls asleep: "But he was not merely drowsy from drink," the narrator comments, "he felt suddenly dejected, or, as he said, 'bored.'" "What a dear, charming boy he is!" Grushenka will say looking at him. We then hear the distorted verses from Pushkin's "The Prophet" from Dmitri, the words anticipating his transformation, which could only be made with the help of the Six-Winged Seraphim, grotesquely distanced from its parody—the impotent Kalganov. Once Dmitri has chosen new, vivid life in the embraces of Grushenka, Kalganov exits the scene: "'Well, now I really shall leave,' thought Kalganov, and going out of the blue room, he closed both halves of the door behind him,"³⁶ as if disappearing behind the panels of the iconostas.

In the following sequence of Dmitri's three ordeals, titled, nonaccidentally, "The Soul's Journey through Torments," Kalganov returns to testify in Dmitri's favor, but not without indignation. Kalganov then gives him his clothes. This Christian gesture is also distorted: the clothes are too tight, exposing Dmitri's excessive, grotesque carnality. The sequence ends with Kalganov running out of the inn and, following Dmitri to the carriage, exclaims ardently, "Farewell, you dear man, I won't forget this magnanimity!" "The bell jingled—Mitya was taken away." Here we stay with Kalganov, sitting down in a corner of the front hall, "ben[ding] his head, cover[ing] his face with his hands, and [beginning] to cry."³⁷ After Dmitri has been taken away, we may assume that the crying and disoriented Kalganov has been prefigured in the fable of Grushenka, which ends with the exit of the weeping angel: "And the woman fell back into the lake and is burning there to this day. And the angel wept and went away."³⁸ Kalganov also brings to mind the Archangel Michael, who assisted the Virgin Mary in her descent to hell, from the formal and ideological prototype of Ivan's poem,

36 PSS, 14:398 (BK, 441).

37 PSS, 14:461 (BK, 511–12).

38 PSS, 14:319 (BK, 352).

especially if we take into account the titles of the chapters that narrate the interrogation—the torments of the soul.

In the remaining sections of the book, Kalganov will reappear twice more: first in a fantasy of Lise, “the little devil” (*besenok*), as one of her imaginary suitors, and a man who lives as if in a dream. Here, allegedly, he says, “Why live in reality, it’s better to dream. One can dream up the gayest things, but to live is boring.”³⁹ Yet, he is making a Gogolian marriage proposal, like his twin brother, the idiot. Next, we see him for the last time at the trial of Dmitri, during which he testifies in favor of Dmitri, confirming the dishonesty of the “infernal” Poles. (In Dostoevsky, Catholic Poles always signify “fake” Christians, who need some rationale for their faith, be it historical or messianic.) So, even if he is a creature of the margin, Kalganov is still the only character in *Brothers Karamazov* who is present in both scenes: during the prophetic bow—a prefiguration of Dmitri’s transformation—and at the pagan-Christian passion in Mokroe.

Therefore, perhaps, the decision of the directors of the various cinematic adaptations of *Brothers Karamazov*—from Fyodor Otsep, to Richard Brooks, to a recent Russian television soap-opera-style adaptation—to remove Kalganov to focus on the commercial success of their films tells us something important about Kalganov. Although Kalganov interacts with the main characters of the novel, and is even related by blood to one of them (Miusov), he remains mysterious, as if living on the *parergon* (“subordinate activity or work”) not able to become actualized in *the story*, understood as a chronological sequence of narrative events. The promise he brings into the narrative is never fulfilled on the novel’s narrative plane. Certainly, he reemerges from the narrative fog in Mokroe, but only by chance, as he readily admits. Moreover, this scene belongs to a different order than that of the ostensive narrative—it belongs to the visionary. It is hard to resist the impression that by introducing Kalganov, Dostoevsky was carrying the Gogolian surplus into his last novel, as he did with his first major works. Kalganov’s case, however, might help us better understand the meaning of this Gogolian (or angelic) surplus, leading us through the anagogic detour.

39 PSS, 15:22 (BK, 581).

Resorting to the terminology of medieval exegetes, we may say that Kalganov belongs to *parergon*, “which gives meaning to the very way that the pictorial signs shift in work, become *translata*.”⁴⁰ So, perhaps the marginal presence of Kalganov can be interpreted on the anagogic level. As Massimo Cacciari noted, “In guiding from visible things to invisible ones, the Angel is the figure of the *anagogy*, of the *sensus anagogicus*, that pertains to future life and heavenly things . . . can lead *hic et nunc* to a sort of vision of the eschaton, ad *contemplanda caelestia*,”⁴¹ unlike the demons that bind us to fate. Anagogia, one of the extensions of the spiritual meaning of history (the story)—in scholastic exegetic practices, as Georges Didi-Huberman reminds us—designates the ultimate of tropological conversions, the meaning of Scripture viewed from the eschatological perspective, constituting the theological, and the theological atmosphere, of meaning *par excellence*.⁴² Thus the narrative surplus on the anagogic level can be interpreted as the modality of the angel. As Michel de Certeau wrote in his remarkable essay “Angelic Speech,” the angel is “the signature of an excess (even when it is the index of a different “order” of things), and by a ‘more’ or a ‘too much,’ he opens a horizon of “sublime” that overflows, and must overflow, the common rules of veridiction.”⁴³

The Sistine Madonna: “Das Unbeschreibliche/ Hier ist’s getan . . .”

The theme of angels in Dostoevsky was introduced in this chapter through Volynsky’s analogy of the arrangement of Orthodox icons to the literary conclaves of *Brothers Karamazov*. Let us close with a brief visit to the Old Masters Gallery in Dresden, taking a closer look at Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*, one the most important paintings not only for Dostoevsky but for modern aesthetic reflection, in general. It was discussed most notably by Johann Winckelmann, and from then on by almost every major European writer and philosopher.

40 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 31.

41 Massimo Cacciari, *The Necessary Angel*, trans. Miguel E. Vatter (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 4.

42 Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, 40–41.

43 Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 2, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 170.

In addition to Dostoevsky, the list of admirers of the *Sistine Madonna* includes Goethe, Balzac, Wagner, Nietzsche,⁴⁴ and Heidegger, to mention just a few.⁴⁵

We should not be surprised, then, at seeing its copy, which Dostoevsky received from Vladimir Solovyov, hanging over the sofa in Dostoevsky's reconstructed study room in the Dostoevsky Museum Apartment in St. Petersburg. Dostoevsky's copy, however, is just the cropped, central fragment of the entire composition, featuring St. Mary with the child. Further, we may have the impression that in his novels that refer to the *Sistine Madonna*—*The Idiot*, *Demons*, and *The Adolescent*—Dostoevsky seems to be focused just on the central Madonna, not noticing the drama of representation (a significant portion of the composition) or the cherubs, who rest on the represented frame of the painting, long fascinating so many art historians and writers. Obviously, Dostoevsky saw the original painting in Dresden, so we are fully justified to look for allusions to this painting in *Brothers Karamazov*. Moreover, the absence of direct references to Raphael in this novel may imply a subtler and more discreet presence, one not reduced to a discussion of the eternal beauty embodied in the Madonna, as in the previous novels.

The Romantic viewers of the painting shifted their critical attention from the central Madonna to the background and margins of the work, provoking questions concerning the tension between reality and artificiality, and the limits of representation. As Hans Belting argues, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Raphael's vision has been imagined in the topos of the dream—as mirage-playing tricks in the imagination of a modern artist. It became the paradigmatic work for the Romantic point of view, in which artistic contemplation replaced religious practice. Heidegger, as Belting reminds us, compared the Dresden picture to the sacrament, in which the bread is transubstantiated into the body of art.⁴⁶ In a way, Belting argues, this painting shows “the ambivalence between work and idea,” which liberates “every painted image from its externality and transform[s] it into an internal image.”⁴⁷

44 Like Dostoevsky, Nietzsche also received an engraving of the *Sistine Madonna* to be hung “above the sofa.” See Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, trans. Helen Atkins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 66.

45 For a discussion of the critical and philosophical reception of this painting, see *ibid.*, 50–70.

46 *Ibid.*, 50, 67.

47 *Ibid.*, 63.

Taking into account the Romantic interpretations of the *Sistine Madonna*, we may risk the hypothesis that its themes are also present in *Brothers Karamazov*, and not only those concerning the question of beauty but in the structure of the entire novel, or, at least, in its spiritual and aesthetic center—the scene in Mokroe, anticipated earlier in the novel in “The Confessions of the Passionate Heart.” The questions formulated from the Romantic point of view could also be related to one of the central problems for Dostoevsky—who belonged [to] the Romantic generation, after all—and to *Brothers Karamazov*: the possibility of the narrative to capture the moment of the embodiment, the ineffable moment of suspension between the possibility and the actuality of the Incarnation. If *The Idiot* is an apocalyptic experiment with the image of the world after the crucifixion of Christ and the impending Second Coming, *Brothers Karamazov* might pose questions on the Incarnation and on the possibility of its representation related to the question of realism in art.

In Raphael's painting, the Madonna is not represented as an actualized vision. As Christian Kleinbub writes, Raphael “dramatizes, as if in an *istoria*, the transient moments when the vision is coming into being, when the invisible is becoming visible, grasping the cloak of materiality and clothing itself in phenomenal form.”⁴⁸ Kleinbub goes on to write that Raphael's composition indicates “that if we might only see a little further or make out the emergent form of a cloud putto, we might glimpse what it means to ‘see’ beyond seeing itself.”⁴⁹ Thus stated, the painting, unable to present a natural phenomenon, instead offers “a virtual apparition staged according to the rules of Aquinas's theory of the physical visionary. In this sense it is truly a simulacrum.”⁵⁰ Viewed in this way, it is about the materialization of the vision and its rendering in art. The theatricality of the painting stresses its focus on the accommodation of the invisible in a visible medium, which is done, as Kleinbub argues, by “maintaining in precarious balance the irreconcilable dialectic of bodily and spiritual seeing, a balance that could slip dangerously

48 Christian Kleinbub, *Vision and the Visionary in Raphael* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 44.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

close to the total materialization, and thus banalization, of the invisible divine.”⁵¹

In “The Confessions of the Passionate Heart,” Dmitri—as if paraphrasing Stavrogin’s fantastic thought quoted above—also situates us between two winged creatures: insects and angels, the “storm” of sensuality and corruption.⁵² This “fantastic” anthropology leads Dmitri to the question of spiritual transformation, and to eternal beauty and its visibility: “Beauty is a fearful and terrible thing! Fearful because it’s indefinable, and it cannot be defined, because here God gave us only riddles. Here the shores converge, here all contradictions live together.”⁵³ Rainer Maria Rilke’s poetic rhyme to this thought in *Duino Elegies* seems to be most appropriate in the context of Dmitri’s thought, for he relates the question of the terror in beauty (*das Schöne ist nichts als des Schrecklichen Anfang*) directly to the question of the angel (*Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich*). Rilke’s angel, like that of Dmitri’s, makes us aware of our spiritual task, that is, our transformation of the phenomenal world (of Sodom and “Bernardy,” of lust and modern science) through spiritual value, through pure inwardness, as unveiled by the angel. At the same time, the angel also unveils the terrifying truth that hope within the visible is unattainable. Following the angelic vector, we must do some work of the heart (*Hertzwerk*) that aims at the most radical renunciation—a more active renunciation than any monk has ever imposed upon himself—however, as we learn from Rilke’s angels, this is not about transcendence: nowhere can the world exist but within. The knowledge of the internal, Rilke would say, is beyond the visible. Thus, this is the angel’s horrifying truth. Commenting on the opening verses of Rilke’s “First Elegy,” Robert Vilain writes, “Beauty may be seen as the visible world that has been (trans)formed and shaped . . . ,

51 Ibid., 45.

52 In Fyodor Tiutchev’s translation of “Ode to Joy,” quoted by Dmitri, this metaphysical suspension of man between angels and insects is strengthened by the symmetry of the translated verses: “To insects—sensuality / Angel—stands before god” (*Nasekomym—sladostrastie / Angel—bogu predstoit*) (PSS, 14:90). What is more, in Tiutchev’s version, “der Cherub” is translated as “an angel,” prompting the reader to go back to this passage when encountering other angelic motifs. Both nuances are lost in Pevear and Volokhonsky’s translation, which relies on a standard English translation rather than rendering into English the Russian version of Schiller’s poem.

53 PSS, 14:100 (BK, 108).

whilst dread is the invisible that has yet to be transformed.”⁵⁴ And in a letter to Witold von Hulewicz, Rilke writes that the “Angel of the Elegies is that being which guarantees the recognition of a higher degree of reality in the realm of the invisible.—It is therefore ‘terrible’ to us because we, who love and transform it, still cling to the visible.”⁵⁵ In Dostoevsky, this realization of the ambiguity of beauty, formulated explicitly for the first time by Dmitri during his “fantastic hour” in his mono-mystery-drama, performed in front of his “angelic” brother, Alyosha, takes us to the pagan rites in Mokroe, where he begins his *Hertzwerk*, the legacy of Doctor Hertenstube, another angelic visitor, a foreigner as lost in the Russian language as Kalganov is in the reality of everyday Russia. However, as we learned from the Romantic reception of the *Sistine Madonna*, it is not only the internal affairs of the figures represented in the work of art but also those of the observer—in this case, the reader; the image must come to life “within the observer himself.”⁵⁶ This is also a lesson of *Duino Elegies*.⁵⁷

Encouraged by Rilke’s sense and intuition of the angels’ presence in Dostoevsky, we may wish to glimpse Raphael’s painting once more, and, in particular, its lower section, occupied by the famous twin angels. What is their role in the entire composition? They are not simply ornamental surplus, and even if this were the case this angelic ornament would not escape from the regime of the anagogic content of the painting. The physicality of putti and their status—God’s creations, but still not men—gesture not so much toward the transubstantiation of the divine, which is still suspended between the visible and the invisible at the center of the painting, as toward our bodily creature’s own transformation, directed inward, still invisible; Madonna and the *babe* are still floating in the clouds as a dream or an idea, while the putti, embodied as the vision, rest on the solid frame. Kalganov’s status is similar. We barely notice him and his role in the narrative, and yet we cannot forget his two elaborate physical descriptions. He feels uncomfortable in his body, almost embarrassed by his own physical presence; his melancholic gaze

54 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, trans. S. Ranson and Marielle Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 304.

55 Quoted in Rilke, *Selected Poems*, 304.

56 Belting, *Invisible Masterpiece*, 63.

57 Ibid.

arrests the world in half-comprehension and half-actualization—the world seen through his gaze does not constitute a coherent structure. Yet, his physical image, and at the same time, narrative discreetness, situates the frenzied rioters on the threshold between the visible and the invisible. Kalganov (or the two identical Kalganovs—one from the scandal scene and one from Mokroe), resting on the lintel of the novel's narrative frame, like Raphael's two angels, might be a vector pointing at the space between the representation of the frame and the material frame. Similarly, Maximov, coinciding with neither the diagetic nor the extradiagetic world, nor even with his own phantasms, brings forward the issue of the materiality of truth and vision, or its parody, by "resurrecting" Gogol's characters (as if responding to Smerdyakov, who was famously concerned with the untruth in Gogol, as during the dispute at Fyodor Pavlovich's home over cognac).

Thus, if we read the book through the analogy of Raphael's painting, in the Mokroe sequence, the novelistic translation of the center of Raphael's work—which Dostoevsky began in "The Confessions of the Passionate Heart"—becomes complete: the telluric, almost pagan Madonna, as Winckelmann noted, is holding the *babe*, the embodied God. But she is still on the threshold, of the visible and the invisible; the babe in Mokroe is still a vision. In Dostoevsky's eclectic fresco, the *babe* belongs to a dream, so we can say that the entire composition is suspended between vision and artistic realization, just as we find in Raphael's painting. The movement of the scene in the book, and, indeed, in the entire novel, seems to lead from the material of the narrative toward its spiritualization. Dmitri is standing naked, as if ashamed of his body with all its details; and our gaze, directed by the narrator and the investigators, is fixed on those material details. Dmitri is also distracted by the material excess of the scene. This excess of materiality, or "realism," as Dmitri would say, is narrative surplus that counterbalances Dmitri's spiritual visions, or, perhaps, the realization of his singularity, his nonselfish self, to use Lawrence's terminology. As he exclaims at one point during the interrogation, "This time it's not a dream! Realism, gentlemen, the realism of actual life!"⁵⁸ as if he is saying that there are two orders of reality. Not only does Dmitri dream in this novel, but so do Ivan and Alyosha. Kalganov, as we know from Lise and the narrator, actually lives in the

58 PSS, 14:425 (BK, 471).

dream, disgusted with actual life. And by the end of the Mokroe sequence, the whole composition is completed in the ambiguous miracle of transubstantiation, the vision is fulfilled in Dmitri's dream, just as with the Romantic interpretations of Raphael's painting.

It is not an accident that in *Brothers Karamazov*, the word "angel"—the expectation of some angelic role to be fulfilled, the need of an angel—emerges from the chatter of the characters throughout the entire novel. Here, we may risk a fantastic hypothesis in order to have our own "fantastic hour": that is, that no one notices the "true" angel, Kalganov, who, disoriented in his mission, and with no clear message, turns our attention to the event of the self-transformation of Dmitri, like angels in Goethe's *Faust, Part Two*, which "lift up the immortal part of Faust to a celestial apotheosis that reunites him with Gretchen."⁵⁹ As at the end of *Faust, Part Two*—a poetic response to Raphael's painting⁶⁰—at the end of the Mokroe sequence, which arguably should end the anagogical dimension of the novel, the idea of redemption also brings the apprehension of the absolute in art. We find that Dmitri's ecstasy in the apprehension of Madonna from the beginning of the novel precisely anticipated the coming transformation in Mokroe. This incredible sequence of iconic arrangements in Mokroe could easily have ended with the verses of the closing stanza of Goethe's *Faust*, chanted by the "mystical chorus":⁶¹ "What is ineffable / Here is accomplished." Thus, what is also at stake in Mokroe, and in the entire novel, is the embodiment of religious vision.

As Pleșu notes when referring to the writings of the Church Fathers, after the Incarnation, humans know more about the divine than the angels do; people better know the depth of the divine, which becomes obvious and, in a way, visible after the Resurrection.⁶² Quoting Dumitru Stăniloae, Pleșu writes that man preserves the image of God better than the angels, which are messengers, servants, assistants, or, sometimes, just spectators. So, the true angel of the world, in waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of the Second Coming, would be more like Myshkin's relative, a pale

59 Belting, *Invisible Masterpiece*, 66.

60 For the discussion of the *Sistine Madonna* and *Faust, Part Two*, see *ibid.*, 63–66.

61 Quoted in *ibid.*, 64.

62 Pleșu, *O aniolach*, 29.

Kalganov, and not Alyosha, to whom most of the characters explicitly prescribe the angelic role. As we see in Dostoevsky's synthetic vision, which combines the Gospel with the realist narrative, and where all the events are in the midst of the interaction of three biblical planes—heaven, earth, and hell—the angelic allusions, as in the Bible and Patristic literature, hint at the possibility of mediation among all of these planes. Thus, the characters of *Brothers Karamazov*, who are looking so desperately for their guardian angels, need them not so much for protection as for mediation. Kalganov, in his marginal presence in the crucial scenes of the novel, could be the bearer of such a mission, showing just such a direction, or, rather, its trace, having in mind that he is a modern messenger, capricious and indecisive in his melancholy. To again use Pleșu's symbolic vector graphics and his distinction between angels and humans, we find that the angel, Kalganov, is a trace of the vector, while the man, Dmitri, is the cross.