

“And suffering appeared on their faces”:
Dostoevskyan Apocalypse, Dostoevskyan Paradise

In all of Girard’s work on Dostoevsky, he identifies with great rigor the mimetic structures found in Dostoevskyan psychology and which also act as a foundation for what Girard identifies as the Dostoevskyan apocalypse. The increasing loss of identity, the loss of difference, the rapid exchange of diachronic dichotomous positions (model/imitator, admiration/disdain love/hate, teacher/pupil, master/slave), and a hellish mixture of the inside and out (of a given community and/or social hierarchy) map out for the reader the mechanism of mimetic violence and its potential cure. A bookend to his apocalyptic imaginings, Dostoevsky develops a palpable sense of the paradisiacal, not in some far away utopian land, not in some distant future, but in the here and now. For Dostoevsky, the horizon of a “new heaven and earth” inhabits the eschatological, Incarnational, Eucharistic space of the “already not yet,” a vertical, transcendent gesture borne out within the horizon of history itself, yet free from its pollution. In all of his “paradisiacal” imaginings there stands the threat of the apocalypse, a fear of sameness, of a war of all against all, that Russia will inherit the diseases of the West (utilitarianism, rational egoism, socialism, Catholicism, etc.) and will implode or cannibalize itself. How then does one read Dostoevsky’s troubling slavophilism when it manifests itself as anti-western or anti-Catholic?

My paper will investigate the ways in which Dostoevsky envisions both an apocalyptic unfolding of history (from a Girardian understanding) and a continual, infinite paradisiacal rupturing of that history (from a perspective of Dostoevsky’s Orthodox eschatology). Within his apocalyptic imagination, one sees Dostoevsky potentially succumbing to his own apocalyptic rhetoric in his anti-western, anti-Catholic polemics; the West and its various ideologies, institutions, and persons (he doesn’t always keep these categories separate) become potential scapegoats for Dostoevsky. And yet when he imagines the paradisiacal, he eschews ideology altogether and focuses primarily on personhood, on the human face, the face which has no social status, no country, no ideology, no religion, but simply bears all the marks of human suffering—a suffering, a la Father Zosima, for which “each of us is responsible” but “I more so than the others.” Here, then, we find an inclusiveness predicated upon an asymmetrical reciprocity (a charitable gesture which may or may not be reciprocated), named specifically as my own responsibility which exceeds that of my neighbor; indeed, in Zosimas’ world, I am responsible even for my neighbor’s responsibility.

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