

Till They Have Faces - The Missing Icons in Dostoevsky

Scris de D.C.C.

Luni, 20 Martie 2023 09:43



Dostoevsky said that 'beauty will save the world.'... When these words were spoken, Russia did not yet know what artistic treasures it possessed.... [Yet, our ancient] icon painters saw this beauty, by which the world will be saved, and immortalized it in paints." ([E. Trubetskoj](#), 1915; machine translation)

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If there is in Dostoevsky a longing for the incipient appropriation of the gifts of the Resurrection even in this life, for the transcending of any merely created, or rather, of any merely naturalist, finite, and therefore ultimately boring and recurrently self-immolating kind of "beauty", that would be unworthy of our author's own dictum (quoted by Trubetskoi), then the following makes sense. Indeed, it could be quite close to what he himself might have said, had he lived to see the recovery of the splendor of the old Russian icons, at the turn of the century. And to witness the synergy (cooperation without confusion or contradiction) of [uncreated grace and nature](#), so perfectly expressed and

[embodied](#)

in them. (As

[previously](#)

[noted](#)

, the cleaning of old Russian icons by expert-restorers, and thus their literal rediscovery, was a momentous process begun soon after Dostoevsky's repose, soon to be followed by the rediscovery of the Palamite vocabulary, that was best fitted to express it...) If such a longing existed, if it was even a strong, manifest quest for the real Russian (Orthodox) icon of the inner faces and likenesses of our author's beloved Russian (Orthodox) people, then, in a way, he already "saw" what the best ancient hesychast iconographers saw, better than the toll that he sometimes payed to the still Raphaelite/naturalist fashion of his day would otherwise let us guess:

□ "□ The characterization afforded in the [Kolomna hagiographical icon of St. Boris and St. Gleb with Scenes from Their Lives](#).[...] There is nothing here to disturb the spiritual accord that they have attained or to deter them from their resolution to embrace every trial and ordeal, even anticipation of impending death from their brother Sviatopolk. Only St. Gleb's bearing, his slightly overcast, heavy face will perhaps betray that he has yet to betray a certain degree of weariness. Note that the style also reveals many archaic elements, such as the by no means traditional proportions of the figures, with their low-hung hips, or the flat representations of the hagiographical border scenes. However, the sparse composition, the refined brushwork and, chiefly, the type of saints, indicate that the said icon could not have been painted earlier than the end of the fourteenth century. The ideal expressed in the icon is one confidently and calmly discharging one's spiritual duty, of overcoming the fear of agony and torture, of displaying merciful compassion and infinite, patient love for mankind. These characteristics of the two saints fully accord with those quotations from the scriptures that are repeated time and again in the legend about the two saints, namely: "perfect love casteth out fear" (1 John 4:18) and

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"Vanity of vanities; all is vanity, and we commend ourselves by the innocence of our behaviour, our grasp of truth, our patience and kindness" (after Eccl. and 2 Cor.)

The face of St Boris on the Kolomna icon is one of the finest creations of early Russian painting. A true blue-eyed blond Slav, he seems porcelain-fragile, almost ethereal. The sensitiveness and humility, the inspired love that his features convey are all facets of the Russian national ideal as evolved in the culture of Moscow. The salient feature of this image is the heightened emotional quality, contrasting with the refined intellectuality of the Byzantine type. The artist who painted the Kolomna icon, though hardly aware of the then innovative stylistical concepts of Byzantine culture, which the leading workshops of Moscow were themselves only too familiar with, was nevertheless able to display rare vision in communicating the very essence of the [hesychast] spiritual ideal of the time. The face reveals something that raises above the vicissitudes of the contemporary artistic trends. This portrayal is a forerunner in a way of the major characters in modern Russian culture, characters that were representative of a similar ideal, such as Dostoevsky's philanthropic Alexei Karamazov and Prince Myshkin...

Artistically, the [Kolomna Descent into Limbo](#), along with the hagiographical icon of St. Boris and St. Gleb, best accord with that spiritual mood which St. Sergius of Radonezh introduced into Moscow culture by his teaching.

(Engelina Smirnova, Moscow Icons: 14th - 17th Centuries, Aurora Art Publishers, Moscow, 1989, pp. 16, 19)

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