



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY  
**STUDIES IN RUSSIAN  
PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE,  
AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT**

*Volume 1 (2024)*

ISSN 3065-0755

**Northwestern**  

---

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

**Every Blade of Grass:  
The Divine Language of Nature in Dostoevsky**

*by Amy Singleton Adams*

**Abstract**

This essay shows how Dostoevsky's ideas about the natural world before and during his Siberian exile develops into an eco-aesthetic theology in his literary work and later informs his understanding of the ways in which art and artists perceive and represent the sacred in nature. It argues against misperceptions that nature plays no role in Dostoevsky's work and points out key moments where the natural world becomes the setting for heightened religious experiences. Approaching the phrase "blade of grass" as shorthand for complex ideas about the divine language of nature, this study investigates Dostoevsky's engagement with the Church Fathers (particularly St. Isaac the Syrian and Maximus the Confessor) in the period that began immediately after his release from prison. It examines how patristic thought about creation and the logoi of being are expressed starting with Dostoevsky's early works like "The Little Hero" and continuing through his novels. The essay also contextualizes Dostoevsky's understanding of nature as revelation and redemption within the thought of his European and Russian contemporaries—with special focus on the work of landscape painters Carl Gustav Carus and Alexandre Calame—who were also exploring the importance of noetic perception and approaching nature as a sacred, theophanic text.



**Keywords:** Dostoevsky, Siberia, nature, divine language, patristic texts, Church Fathers, The Little Hero, Zosima, Carus, Calame



# Every Blade of Grass

## The Divine Language of Nature in Dostoevsky

Amy Singleton Adams

*Эти бедные селенья,  
Эта скудная природа,—  
Край родной долготерпенья,  
Край ты Русского народа!  
Не поймет и не заметит  
Гордый взор иноплеменный,  
Что сквозит и тайно светит  
В нагоме твоей смиренной.*  
Fedor Tiutchev, 1857

Swiss pastoral novelist Charles Ramuz once observed of Dostoevsky that "[t]here is no writer who shows greater poverty in 'landscapes' (*paysages*). Nature is missing altogether from his works."<sup>1</sup> Some readers since then have acknowledged the importance of the natural world in Dostoevsky as an indicator of thematic structures, psychological states, moral vision, and even social status.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, almost one hundred years later, Ramuz's observations are still widely shared. But such persistent misperceptions about Dostoevsky and the natural world risk fundamental misreadings of his work's religious and philosophical foundations. Instead, it is important to observe how, in his novels, stories, and essays, nature provides the setting and sometimes the catalyst for heightened and revelatory religious experiences. For

---

1. Charles Ferdinand Ramuz, « À propos de Dostoïevski », *Aujourd'hui*, Lausanne, 13 novembre 1930, 291–292.

2. For examples, see the following: Dmitrii S. Likhachev, *Poeziia sadov. K semantike sadovo-parkovykh stilei. Sad kak tekst* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1982); Iurii M. Lotman, "Obrazy prirodnykh stikhii v russkoi literatury (Pushkin—Dostoevsky—Blok)," in *Biografiia pisatelia; stat'i i zametki, 1960–1990* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 1995), 814–820; I. V. Gracheva, "Floristika v romanakh F. M. Dostoevskogo," *Russkaia slovesnost'*, no. 6 (2006): 20–26; R. Kidera, "Zvezdy i tsvety v romane F. M. Dostoevskogo 'Brat'ia Karamazovy,'" *Voprosy russkoi literatury* 78, no. 21 (2012): 106–113; L.V. Timerbaeva, "Floristicheskie obrazy v povesti F. M. Dostoevskogo 'Belye nochi,'" *Mezhdunarodnyi studencheskii nauchnyi vestnik* 1, no. 5 (2015): 28–30.

instance, the dynamics of these spiritual epiphanies are evident in Dostoevsky's vision of the peasant Marei in the field, Raskolnikov's conversion experience on the Irtysh, Father Zosima's vision of paradise in the garden before his duel, and the star-gazing Alyosha Karamazov's realization about the profound unity of heaven and earth. The natural world also becomes the setting for the kind of spiritual struggle and striving we see in Myshkin's tearful "biblical" episode in the Swiss Alps or in the ways Versilov and the Ridiculous Man grapple with the limited promises of the Golden Age as earthly paradise.<sup>3</sup> Given the widespread resurgence of discussion and discovery of patristic Christian texts during Dostoevsky's lifetime and his demonstrated interest in the works of the Church Fathers, it is also not surprising to find their ideas about the sanctity of the natural world in the words of characters like Father Zosima and the wanderer (странник) Makar, who both perceive the "mystery of God" as manifest and intelligible in every part of the natural world, even in "every blade of grass" (в каждой былинке, всякая-то трава).<sup>4</sup>

But these major themes come later, after Dostoevsky's imprisonment and exile in Siberia, where his understanding of the natural world as a divine language took shape and where, by 1856, he had already formed a vision of what he called "the mission of Christianity in art."<sup>5</sup> The present study traces the beginnings of what might be called the eco-aesthetic theology in Dostoevsky's work to his early understanding of the natural world that is based in engagement with certain patristic texts and ideas. It considers how the Church Fathers like St. Isaac of Syria, Maximos the Confessor, Gregory Palamas, and their proto-hesychastic predecessors informed Dostoevsky's view on the way art and artists perceive and represent the sacred in nature. The repeated phrase "every blade of grass" becomes shorthand for the complex ideas about the divine language of nature in early Church writings that echo throughout Dostoevsky's work as it conveys the idea itself.<sup>6</sup> Within such theology, all matter exhibits and contains the mysterious energy and beautiful rationality of God's creation. And, as the Cappadocian St. Basil the Great argued, the smaller the object, the greater one's admiration for its Creator: "Therefore, when you see the trees in our gardens, or those of the forest, those which love the water or the land, those which bear flowers, or those which do not flower, I

---

3. Elizabeth Welt Trahan, "The Golden Age—Dream of a Ridiculous Man?" *Slavic and East European Journal* 3, no. 4 (Winter, 1959): 349–371. See also Alexander Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock: 2016) (previously published 1973), "Variations on Earthly Paradise," 154–168.

4. On the patristic revival, see Patrick Lally Michelson, *Beyond the Monastery Walls. The Ascetic Revolution in Russian Orthodox Thought, 1814–1914* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017). Other sources of Dostoevsky's understanding of the sanctity of the created world include his lived experience of the liturgy and well as childhood reader. See I. S. Iarysheva, "Religioznaia zhizn' sem'i Dostoevskikh (1867–1881) v memuarakh A. G. Dostoevskoi," *Problemy istoricheskoi poetiki* (2011): 233–242 and Gary Rosenshield, "Dostoevskii and the Book of Job: Theodicy and Theophany in *The Brothers Karamazov*," *Slavic and East European Journal* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 612.

5. F. M. Dostoevsky, Letter to A. E. Vrangeli, 13 April 1856, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, tom 28 (Moscow: Nauka, 1985), 229.

6. Similarly, as Konstantin Mochulsky notes, by the time Dostoevsky wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*, references to "little, sticky green leaves" had become proof for his characters of the existence of God and the eventual transfiguration of the world (*Dostoevsky. His Life and Work* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967], 135).

should like to see you recognizing grandeur even in small objects, adding incessantly to your admiration of, and redoubling your love for the Creator."<sup>7</sup>

Versions of the phrase "every blade of grass" appear in most of Dostoevsky's larger works, notably in *The Adolescent*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the notion that the natural world may offer a path toward forgiveness or redemption becomes thematically important. But the key to understanding the import of the phrase lies in Dostoevsky's earliest work and ideas that developed just before and after his imprisonment in Siberia. Equally important to identifying the first expressions of the relationship between the natural world and the sacred in Dostoevsky is acknowledging their source in theologies of creation from the patristic texts Dostoevsky so admired, read, and collected.<sup>8</sup> Only then can we dispel notions that the representation of nature in his work is sparse, perfunctory, or even mythical in its origins. To do so, I investigate how Dostoevsky's vision of the natural world as iconographical developed early on and, nearly forty years later, continued to play a significant role in his mature work and the intellectual life of his day. Like much of what Dostoevsky created, the theophany of the natural world is polyphonic—visual, spoken, and textual—echoing Biblical encounters of God in nature, through His voice, and in scripture. It is not surprising, then, that, along with his stated interest in the works of the Church Fathers after his release from the Omsk prison in 1854, Dostoevsky also demonstrated concern for the fate of the only piece of writing he completed during his detention in St. Petersburg's Peter and Paul Fortress in 1849—"The Little Hero" (*Malen'kii geroi*, a.k.a., *A Child's Tale [Detskaia skazka]*). In this "little thing," as he called it, we see his first fictional representation of the natural world as a manifestation of the divine and the first instances of "verbal" paintings that show how he was already engaged with ideas about landscape as an iconographical or sacred visual language. His request from Siberia for the theoretical writings of German landscape painter Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869) underscores this concern with the visual representation of nature as a kind of theophany, an idea that Dostoevsky explored further through the work of Swiss painter Alexandre Calame (1810–1864).<sup>9</sup> The aim of this study is to explore the representation of the natural world in Dostoevsky as a complex and multi-valent expression of aesthetic theology and, in doing so, offer new ways of reading his work. Exploring the Orthodox regard of creation as sacred may also be as important to our world—a world that seems as bent on self-destruction as some of Dostoevsky's characters—as it was to his essentially spiritual intellectual project.

The importance of Orthodox thought to Dostoevsky's work and his vision of Russia is difficult to overstate, although how the patristic vision of creation informs the representation

---

7. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Basil: Letters and Select Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 272.

8. See *Biblioteka F. M. Dostoevskogo. Opyt rekonstruktsii. Nauchnoe opisanie* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2005).

9. See Dostoevsky's request for the work of Carus and those of the Church Fathers in his letters to his brother Mikhail in January and February of 1854, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*. Tom 28. Pis'ma 1832–1859 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1985), 171–84.

of nature in Dostoevsky's work has rarely been studied.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the link between the natural world and Orthodox spirituality in Dostoevsky's work is often regarded as a form of nature-mysticism far removed from the tenets of formal Christian thought on which they are based.<sup>11</sup> (Even A. E. Vrangel', who noted Dostoevsky's Christological fervor during their time in Siberia, regarded the writer's faith to be somewhat pantheistic.)<sup>12</sup> To better understand the distinction in Dostoevsky's work between nature worship and the expression of a patristic understanding of creation, we recall the words of the fourth-century Cappadocian St. Basil, whose name (along with those of his fellow Cappadocian and brother St. Gregory of Nyssa) Dostoevsky calligraphed in his notebook in 1868 while working out ideas for *The Idiot*.<sup>13</sup> In his first sermon on creation (*Hexaemeron*), St. Basil entreated his listeners to approach the natural world as the visible manifestation of an "incomprehensible and invisible" God that is suffused everywhere with the divine energy (*energeia*) of creation: "I want creation to penetrate you with so much admiration that everywhere, wherever you may be, the least plant may bring to you the clear remembrance of the Creator. [...] A single plant, a blade of grass is sufficient to occupy all your intelligence in the contemplation of the skill which produced it."<sup>14</sup> This idea that the contemplation of a single blade of grass may lead to divine revelation dramatically shifted the paradigmatic relationship among humans, their gods, and the natural world familiar to Classical and Hellenistic cultures.<sup>15</sup> With the rise of ancient Christianity, environmental ethicist Bruce Folz points out, nature ceases to function as the "mask for some shrouded deity" and, newly regarded as "deeply revelatory of divine truth," takes on its own ontological

---

10. Of particular note is Bruce V. Folz, "Shook Foil and Trodden Sod: Nature, Beauty, and the Holy," *Environmental Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 47–57 and *The Noetics of Nature. Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). See also Robert Louis Jackson, "The Root and the Flower. Dostoevsky and Turgenev: A Comparative Esthetic," *The Yale Review* LXII, no. 2 (December 1973): 228–250 and David J. Leigh, "The Philosophy and Theology of Fyodor Dostoevsky," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 33, no. 1–2 (March 2010): 85–103.

11. Sergei Hackel's 1983 reading of Dostoevsky's treatment of the natural world as a "culture of the earth" and "little more than nature mysticism" ("The religious dimension: vision or evasion? Zosima's discourse in *The Brothers Karamazov*," *New Essays on Dostoevsky*, ed. Malcolm Jones and Garth Terry [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 144, 164) was later echoed in the work of Stephen Cassedy (*Dostoevsky's Religion* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005], 156) and amplified by others. For example, see Julian W. Connolly, "Dostoevskij's Guide to Spiritual Epiphany in 'The Brothers Karamazov,'" *Studies in East European Thought* 59, nos. 1–2 (June 2007): 39–54 and Gary Rosenshield, "Dostoevskii and the Book of Job: Theodicy and Theophany in 'The Brothers Karamazov,'" *Slavic and East European Journal* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 609–632.

12. See Vrangel's letter to his father, cited in Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850–1859* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983), 193.

13. Konstantin Barsht, "Zhitie i tvoreniia Grigoriia Bogoslova v tvorchestve F. M. Dostoevskogo," *Kul'turnyj palimpsest. Sbornik statei k 60-letiiu V. E. Bagno* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2011), 45–62.

14. Schaff and Wace, *Basil*, 265.

15. On the objectification of nature in Greek poetry and philosophy, see Mark Payne, "The Natural World in Greek Literature and Philosophy," *Oxford Handbook Topics in Classical Studies* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Apr. 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935390.013.001>, accessed 23 May 2024. In his study, "Nature and the Greeks" (*Nature and the Greeks and Science and Humanism* [Cambridge University Press, 2014], 3–102), physicist Erwin Schrödinger emphasized the subject-object relationship between humans and nature in Classical Greek thought, concluding that the resulting ideas about the knowability of nature informs the modern scientific view of the natural world.

significance and its own relationship with its Creator.<sup>16</sup> "This relationship to nature," Pavel Florensky writes in *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, "becomes conceivable only when people saw in creation [...] an independent, autonomous, and responsible creation of God, beloved of God and capable of responding to His love."<sup>17</sup>

For Dostoevsky, the perception of the "grandeur" of the Creator in an object as small as a blade of grass required a special kind of vision. Casual admirers of landscapes (Vrangel' was sometimes frustrated by Dostoevsky's indifference to the "marvelous" [дивный пейзаж] views of the Siberian steppes), those who study the natural world scientifically or, like *The Adolescent's* Versilov, embraced the "Geneva" idea of Godless nature, all lacked the ability to detect the divine in the natural world.<sup>18</sup> Instead, to perceive God's mystery in all things, one needs to develop the kind of "spiritual sight" described by St. Isaac of Syria, a spiritual descendent of the Cappadocians and whose homilies Dostoevsky knew well.<sup>19</sup> As Foltz points out, those who enjoy this type of sight are often the pilgrim, seeker, or ascetic who "leaves behind, even if temporarily, the conventions and convenience of the urban world and becomes immersed in nature."<sup>20</sup> Analogous characters in Dostoevsky can convey their vision in ways that echo such ideas in the early Christian texts. In the patristic experience and understanding of the mystery of the natural world, for example, each created being constantly demonstrates its intimate relationship with God. Using the labor-loving honeybee to model this interrelation between God and the natural world, Gregory of Nyssa notes how the creature joyfully demonstrates the intelligence of its own creation. "[E]verything orients itself perfectly toward celebration and rejoices. Look, what we can see! [...] Already the industrious honeybee, spreading its wings and leaving the hive, demonstrates its wisdom" («... все прекрасно собирается к торжеству и радуется. Смотри, каково видимое! (...) Уже трудолюбивая пчела, расправив крылья и оставив улей, показывает свою мудрость»).<sup>21</sup> In Dostoevsky, these thoughts are most clearly developed in the character of Father Zosima who contemplates the "great mystery" of creation in one well known example and observes how "Every little blade of grass, every little insect, ant, and little golden bee to the point of amazement knows its own path, and not possessing human intelligence, witnesses the divine mystery" (Всякая-то травка, всякая-то букашка, муравей, пчелка золотая, все-то до

---

16. Foltz, *Noetics of Nature*, 11, 236.

17. Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 210.

18. On the antithetical relationship between the patristic approach to nature and "scientism," see Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation. Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 44. On how this tension plays out in *The Adolescent*, see Charles Arndt's "Wandering in Two Different Directions: Spiritual Wandering as the Ideological Battleground in Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 607–625.

19. St. Isaac of Nineveh, *The Ascetical Homilies*, "The Second Part," Chapters IV-XLI, *Scripores Syri*, Tomus 225, trans. Sebastion Brock (Lovani, Belgium: Aedibus Peeters, 1995), 84.

20. Foltz, *Noetics of Nature*, 140.

21. Grigory Bogoslov. Slovo 44, *Tvoreniia sviatykh ottsov v russkom perevode s Prebavleniami dukhovnogo soderzhaniia, izdavaemye pri Moskovskoi dukhovnoi akademii* (Moscow, 1844). Part 4, 150.

изумления знают путь свой, не имея ума, тайну Божию свидетельствуют).<sup>22</sup> Dostoevsky's "wanderer" Makar also detects how the mystery of creation is expressed in natural forms, explaining to the "adolescent" Arkadii how "Every tree, every blade of grass (в каждой былинке) contains the mystery (эта самая тайна заключена) and indescribable beauty [of creation] itself."<sup>23</sup>

The Desert Father and early founder of monastic practice St. Anthony the Great was perhaps the first Christian thinker to envision nature as a sacred and theophanic text. Asked once how a thoughtful man such as he could live without books, he answered, "My book is this created nature. It is always with me, and when I wish I can read in it the words of God."<sup>24</sup> Using similar imagery, St. Isaac the Syrian regarded the natural world as "the first book given by God to rational creatures" and emphasized how, in the Sermon on the Mount and through parables, Christ himself "confirmed all spiritual things by examples from the things in nature" as "windows upon the workings of God in the world."<sup>25</sup> Like the visually discursive icon, the natural world provides a material and sensible guide for understanding God's creative will (Logos)—the *logoi* of being or "inner essence of things," which St. Maximos the Confessor envisioned as a link between two worlds (an idea reflected in Father Zosima's notion of God's "seeds from different worlds").<sup>26</sup> "The whole intelligible world," he reasoned, "seems mystically imprinted on the whole sensible world in symbolic forms, for those who are capable of seeing it, and conversely the whole sensible world subsists within the whole intelligible world, being rendered simple, spiritually and in accordance with intellect, in its rational principles (*logoi*)."<sup>27</sup> When Alyosha Karamazov suddenly realizes that "that the mystery of the earth was one with the mystery of the stars," for example, he uses Maximus's metaphor of the connectedness of God's *logoi* as a circle from which all things radiate: "It was," Alyosha thinks, "as if threads from all those innumerable worlds of God all came together in his soul (нити ото всех этих бесчисленных миров божиих сошлись разом в душе), and it was trembling all over, 'touching other worlds.'"<sup>28</sup>

For St. Maximos, the creative "words" (*logoi*) of God expressed visibly in every living thing make up an intelligible discourse or "interface," as Elizabeth Theokritoff calls it, between

---

22. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Brat'ia Karamazovy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, tom 14 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), 267.

23. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Подросток, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, tom 13 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1975), 287.

24. Quoted in Foltz, *Noetics of Nature*, 237.

25. Foltz, *Noetics of Nature*, 194–96.

26. David Bradshaw, "The *Logoi* of Being in Greek Patristic Thought," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration. Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*, ed. by John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 9, 17.

27. Bradshaw, "Logoi of Being," 16.

28. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Brat'ia Karamazovy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, tom 14 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), 328. See Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 50.



everything and its Creator and become a way for creatures to know God.<sup>29</sup> Those "capable of seeing" or otherwise sensing the *logoi* of being in creation can develop this awareness through the spiritual contemplation of nature (*theoria physike*). For St. Isaac of Syria, *theoria physike* was a state of consciousness that resulted from ascetic practice and revealed "God's creative power and the beauty of created things."<sup>30</sup> For St. Maximos the Confessor, it was a form of spiritual practice designed to perceive the spiritual principles of created beings.<sup>31</sup> As Vrangeli' described, the Siberian night sky had a similar effect on Dostoevsky in the mid-1850s.

One of his favorite pastimes on a warm evening was to spread out on the grass and, lying on our backs, to gaze on the myriad stars flickering in the depths of the dark-blue sky. These moments gave him peace. The contemplation of the majesty of the Creator (созерцание величия Творца), the all-knowing and all-powerful Divine force instills in us some kind of tenderness, the consciousness of our own insignificance, and somehow soothed our souls.<sup>32</sup>

Like St. Isaac of Syria, who defined true compassion as a "heart on fire for all creation," Dostoevsky's experience suggests that *theoria physike* is a kind of loving discourse, whereby the "divine force" that instills "some kind of tenderness" in the human soul is also the object of love itself. As Father Zosima exhorts, love for all creation reveals the "divine secret" inherent in everything: "Love all of God's creation (всё создание божие), the whole of it as well as every grain of sand. Love every little leaf, every divine ray of light (каждый луч божий). Love the animals, love the plants, love each thing (всякая вещь). If you love each thing, then you will understand the divine mystery in all things (тайну Божию постигнешь в вещах)."<sup>33</sup>

In several places in *A Writer's Diary*, Dostoevsky equates the diminishment of faith with a lost connection with this language (*logoi*) of nature.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, he notes how the very idea of allowing oneself to open up (раскрыться) to or dissolve (раствориться) into nature in the way St. Basil entreated or the way Dostoevsky himself did in Siberia would be regarded as "indecent" (неприлично) in society.<sup>35</sup> On his deathbed, Father Zosima's brother Markel

29. Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation*, 55.

30. Quoted in Foltz, *Noetics of Nature*, 200.

31. Metropolitan Jonah (Pafhausen), "Natural Contemplation in St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Isaac the Syrian," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, 48–49.

32. A. E. Vrangeli, *Vospominaniia o F. M. Dostoevskom v Sibiri 1854–56* (St. Petersburg: Tipografia A. S. Suvorin, 1912), 52.

33. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Brat'ia Karamazovy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, tom 14 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), 289.

34. See "In Lieu of an Introduction On the Big and Little Dipper, On the Prayers of the Great Goethe and About Nasty Habits in General" (January 1876); "Don Carlos and Sir Watkin. Once More About 'Signs of the End'" (March 1876), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, T. 22 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1981), 5–6, 91–97. In *Noetic of Nature*, Foltz notes how in Dostoevsky "corruption of the heart is connected to an alienation from nature, and [...] redemption is often—as is the case with Raskolnikov—heralded by a restored relation to nature" (189).

35. "What Really Helps at Spas—The Waters or the Bon Ton?" (July and August 1876), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, T. 23 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1981), 84.

repents of this fashionable atheism, asking "God's little birds" to forgive him for refusing to see the divine in nature: "[T]here was such divine glory (божия слава) all around me: the birds, the trees, the meadow, the sky (небеса), but I alone lived in disgrace (в позоре), I alone dishonored everything (обесчестил), and never noticed the beauty and the glory at all (красы и славы не приметил вовсе)."<sup>36</sup> Society's ironic attitude toward the natural world is challenged in Dostoevsky's work by a child's perspective. The reminiscence that imaginatively lifts Dostoevsky out of the grim reality of the Omsk prison, "The Peasant Marei" (1876), has the then nine-year old Dostoevsky describe in loving detail the insects, creatures, and plants in a birchwood fragrant with a groundcover of dead leaves. This mental contemplation of the natural world of the past presages the story's well-known spiritual revelation. But more than twenty-five years before he published "The Peasant Marei," Dostoevsky wrote another story from prison about a child and the divine language of the natural world. "A Little Hero" (written 1849, published 1857) provides the first glimpse of the patristic roots of Dostoevsky's eco-aesthetic theology.

### Say It With Flowers: "The Little Hero"

"The Little Hero" was the only work that Dostoevsky completed during his detention in the Alekseevskii Ravelin of the Peter and Paul Fortress in the summer of 1849. The draft he produced there seems to have remained in the forefront of his mind throughout his Siberian imprisonment. In his first letter after his release from the Omsk prison in 1854, he instructed his brother Mikhail (who received and kept the manuscript and other papers after Dostoevsky's sentencing) not to show the story to anyone, hinting that he intended to rework the text.<sup>37</sup> "You have to agree," he wrote to his brother later in 1857 as he anticipated the restoration of his right to publish, "that the fate of the little thing (вещица), 'A Child's Tale,' is interesting to me for many reasons."<sup>38</sup> One of those reasons may have been Dostoevsky's well substantiated belief that the story may have been the last "thing" he would ever publish (he was sentenced to death in November of the same year). It is not unreasonable, therefore, to read the work as a kind of profession of faith. Another reason for the tale's importance may be that the process of its composition allowed Dostoevsky to endure and—as in "The Peasant Marei"—even transcend the conditions of his imprisonment. "When I found myself in the fortress," he told the novelist Vsevolod Solov'ev in 1874, "I thought it would be the end of me, that I couldn't last three days and—suddenly I found myself completely at peace. Do you know what I did? ... I wrote 'The Little Hero.'"<sup>39</sup> Reimagining the enchanted landscape of his

---

36. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Brat'ia Karamazovy*, 263.

37. See V. D. Rak, "Kommentarii, 'Malen'kij geroi.'" *F. M. Dostoevskii. Sobranie sochinenii v 15-ti tomakh*. T. 2 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1988), 576–578.

38. Letter to M.M. Dostoevskii, 9 March 1857. *Sobranie sochinenii v 15-ti tomakh*, T.15 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1996), 173.

39. Rak "Kommentarii, 'Malen'kii geroi,'" 576–577.

family's provincial estate, Dostoevsky could escape through the consciousness of a child to a festive summer gathering. "I, of course, chase all temptations from my imagination, but, at other times, I'm unable to manage and my former life breaks into my soul and the past lives again," he wrote to his brother at the time.<sup>40</sup>

Like his writer's forays into his remembered past, reading materials from his brother and the fortress library provided Dostoevsky aesthetic relief from the reality of his prison cell. With these sources, he thought out themes that later developed in his work through subtexts that include significant works of European literature. Considering the conditions under which Dostoevsky wrote "The Little Hero," the peaceful country setting and the joyful theatricality of the gathering (gently disturbed only by the angst of entangled love plots) are striking; they evoke Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," Molière's "Tartuffe," and Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro." A lesser-known literary model is Tasso's sixteenth-century fictionalized telling of the First Crusade, *Jerusalem Delivered*. Tasso's text provides the story with its chivalric imagery and the "steed" Tancred, the dangerous mount that allows the hero, as Barry Scherr notes, to change his symbolic social status from enamored page-boy (паж) to "knight" (рыцарь).<sup>41</sup>

The courtly language of flowers was widely understood and practiced by the European and Russian upper classes through the nineteenth century and becomes an indicator of this emotional transition in Dostoevsky's "little hero."<sup>42</sup> Although he is perplexed by the sentimental intricacies of Madame M.'s secret love affair, the garden scene late in the story shows how the young hero begins to understand the non-verbal social language of the adult world, although his gesture—delivering in a bouquet of flowers a letter from Madame M.'s lover, despite the boy's own affection for her—remains chaste and chivalric. The boy hero hurries to the fields to gather the bouquet of wildflowers. The list of specific blooms (a rarity in Dostoevsky's work) includes wild roses, field jasmine, cornflower, forget-me-nots, campanula, dianthus, lilies, violets, along with stalks of rye, tall grasses, and maple leaves. Whether understood via heraldic symbolism or the Romantic language of flowers, the bouquet symbolically underscores the purity of the boy's love. But the flowers—and the letter concealed in it—go unnoticed by Madame M. until a "blessed event" (благословенный случай) takes place. A "large golden bee" (большая золотая пчела) seems to purposefully (будто нарочно) bother Madame M. until, using the bouquet to wave the bee away, she discovers the letter. The scene is revelatory as the boy gives himself over to a "new consciousness, the revelation of [his] heart, and the first, unclear insight into [his own]

---

40. Letter to M.M. Dostoevsky, 18 July 1849. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, T. 28 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1985), 156.

41. On the Tasso subtext and themes of chivalry, see Tatiana G. Magaril-Iliaeva, "Rasskaz F. M. Dostoevskogo 'Malen'kii geroi' kak initsiativnyi tekst," *Dostoevskii i mirovaia kul'tura* 18, no. 2 (2022): 18–39. On the significance of the horse Tancred (named for a leader of the First Crusade) see Barry P. Scherr, "Dostoevskii on Horseback," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 61, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 674–695.

42. On the semantics of emotion expressed through garden design and flora, see Dmitrii S. Likhachev, *Poeziia sadov*.

nature."<sup>43</sup> The boy does not engage with Madame M. beyond her grateful kiss and carefully notes that he never looks at her after she opens the letter. Instead, feigning sleep on the grass, he seems to dissolve into the natural world—he imagines that he becomes a "bird caught by a curly-haired village lad" and "a blade of grass" (былинка)—as he experiences an "unforgettable moment" of sweet suffering.

Considering the role of the bee as witness to the divine mystery of creation expressed in patristic thought and in Father Zosima's words, the presence of the golden bee in this final scene suggests that—beyond the end of his "first childhood"—the boy has discovered through the natural world a more spiritual understanding of love and sacrifice. As the deathbed confession of Zosima's brother Markel shows, this kind of spiritual understanding of the natural world is uncommon. Dostoevsky makes this point explicitly in the summer of 1876, writing in *Diary of a Writer* how the social language of flowers is often limited to insincere communication among people, allowing "contact with nature only as far as politeness and *bon ton* will permit" (они соприкасаются с природой лишь насколько позволяют приличие и хороший тон).<sup>44</sup> In his critique of this trend, Dostoevsky invokes the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6: 28–29), entreating his readers to recall the passage he quotes as: "Do not worry about what you wear, look at the flowers of the field, even Solomon in all his glory was not dressed like one of these, will not God dress you better?" (Не заботьтесь во что одеться, взгляните на цветы полевые, и Соломон во дни славы своей не одевался как они, кольми паче оденет вас Бог).<sup>45</sup> Although he inaccurately quotes the passage—leaving out "they toil not, neither do they spin" (ни трудятся, ни прядут) and substituting the more general "flowers" for "lilies"—Dostoevsky ensures his readers that this passage expresses "the entire truth of nature" (вся правда природы), a statement that makes a similar reference to the Sermon on the Mount in "The Little Hero" seem more intentional and meaningful to the tale.<sup>46</sup>

Before he gathers his bouquet, the boy spends the morning alone in the riverside glades then returns to the more manicured gardens closer to the house. He finds Madame M. sitting under an elm tree surrounded by ivy, jasmine, and wild roses. Here, the narrative pauses to present the surrounding landscape through the boy's eyes. The language of this passage recalls pastoral landscape paintings of the early nineteenth century and anticipates the spiritual symbolism of visual art we see in Dostoevsky's later work.

---

43. F. M. Dostoevskii. "Malen'kii geroi," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*. T. 2 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972), 393.

44. "What Really Helps at Spas—The Waters or the Bon Ton?" (1876), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, T. 23 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1981), 84–88.

45. "What Really Helps at Spas—The Waters or the Bon Ton?" (1876), 87. Translation, King James Bible.

46. In his reading of one nature scene in "The Little Hero" (Malen'kii geroi), Joseph Frank detects a vague "religious meaning," but conjectures that what seems to him a sudden and incongruous "prayer of nature" may simply be the "accidental result" of Dostoevsky's prison readings, which included the New Testament and the life of St. Dmitrii of Rostov (*Dostoevsky. The Years of Ordeal, 1850–1859* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983], 27–31).

The sun was already high and was floating gloriously in the deep, dark blue sky, as though melting away in its own light. The mowers were by now far away; they were scarcely visible from our side of the river; endless ridges of mown grass crept after them in unbroken succession, and from time to time the faintly stirring breeze wafted their sweet-smelling exhalations (благовонная испарина) toward us. The never ceasing concert of those who "sow not, neither do they reap" (не жнут и не сеют) and are free as the air they cleave with their sportive wings was all about us. It seemed as though at that moment every flower, every blade of grass (каждый цветок, последняя былинка) was giving off a sacrificial aroma (курясь жертвенным ароматом), saying to its Creator, "Father, I am blessed and happy" (говорила создавшему ее: "Отец! я блаженна и счастлива!")<sup>47</sup>

The boy does not regard the natural surroundings as an objective observer or casual admirer; rather, he perceives in it the kind of cosmic liturgy captured in the reference to Matthew 6:26 (a passage read in the Orthodox liturgy just before the July setting of the tale) about the birds who, in contrast to the mowers in the distance, "sow not, neither do they reap."<sup>48</sup> In Dostoevsky, as in the Sermon on the Mount, it is the pure of heart who "see" God. Here, the young boy detects what Gregory of Nyssa described as the "trace of divine fragrance" in creation, noting the "sweet exhalations" of fresh cut grasses as well as the "aroma of sacrifice" given off by "every blade of grass" that joyfully witnesses its own creation.<sup>49</sup> In this passage, the doxological nature of the created world combines with the sacramental nature of the relationship between the Creator and the created. As the gifts of bread and wine are offered back to God, so, too, the sacrificial aroma (жертвенный аромат) of "every blade of grass" "entails a constant connection with the Giver" and "a cause of endless gratitude."<sup>50</sup>

The boy's ability to perceive the "truth" of nature as a divine rather than social language results from the period of contemplation of nature (*theoria physike*) that precedes his encounter with Madame M. Rising early that morning, he leaves the garden behind, seeking out the thickest parts of the groves near the river (где гуще зелень), where "the resinous scent of the trees was strongest and rays of sunlight rejoiced that they were able to penetrate the shady gloom of the thick leaves" (где смолистее запах деревьев и куда веселее заглядывал солнечный луч, радуясь, что удалось там и сям пронизать мглистую густоту листьев). In this "wondrous morning" (прекрасное утро), the young hero gradually surrenders his awareness of self as sensory experience gives way to the contemplation of his natural surroundings, and he "unconsciously" (незаметно) walks farther and farther into the copse.

---

47. F. M. Dostoevskii. "Malen'kii geroi," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*. T. 2 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972), 364.

48. Matthew 6:26. Matthew 6: 22–33 is read on the third Sunday after Pentecost, which, between 1849 and 1857, fell in late June/early July.

49. See Bruce V. Foltz, "Traces of Divine Fragrance: Droplets of Divine Love: On the Beauty of Visible Creation," *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, 324–336.

50. Theokritoff 79.

There, "staring" (засмотрелся) at the light playing off of the mowers' scythes, he loses himself in contemplation (Уж не помню, сколько времени провел я в созерцании) until the sound of hoofbeats brings him back to his senses (вдруг очнулся). As Dostoevsky noted from the confines of his prison, immersion in the natural world—even in memory—can be transcendent and transformative.

Such descriptions of the outdoor setting in "The Little Hero" reflect the growing awareness of the contemplation of nature as a path toward revelation that was transforming the art world in Dostoevsky's lifetime. The characterization of Madame M. as living Madonna and, as Tat'iana Magaril-Il'iaeva notes, the implicit description of Titian's "Sacred and Profane Love" (1514) in the garden scene show Dostoevsky already turning to the visual arts as a means of expressing his eco-aesthetic theology.<sup>51</sup> Within this framework, European landscape painting played a particularly important role as a way to perceive and represent the holy in nature. This idea seemed to fascinate Dostoevsky after his release from the Omsk prison. In addition to his requests for works by the Church Fathers and his focus on "The Little Hero," Dostoevsky asked for the study *Psyche: On the Development of the Soul* (1841), a work by Carl Gustav Carus, in which the Dresden painter argued that the life of the soul is inextricably bound to both God and nature.

## Art and Soul: The Visual Language of the Divine

Dostoevsky's deep interest in the visual arts is well documented in his letters and in his wife's journals that describe their tours through European galleries and museums. In his work, the word-image reached beyond ekphrastic description or—as it concerned the natural world—the pathetic fallacy, revealing his search for ideal visual forms as an aesthetic and spiritual journey.<sup>52</sup> Dostoevsky was born at an important time in the development of European painting, when landscape was being reevaluated as an object with religious and moral significance rather than the mere backdrop of human experience.<sup>53</sup> Artistic images of the natural world also offered the possibility of transcending the limitations of language to express the ineffable, if not the divine. The rise of science and technology in the West in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Lynn White argues, disrupted ways of knowing the world of creation as deeply revelatory of the divine truth, as described in the works of the Church Fathers and adhered to more closely but not exclusively by the Orthodox East.<sup>54</sup> But in the

---

51. Tat'iana Georgievna Magaril-Il'iaeva, "Rasskaz F. M. Dostoevskogo 'Malen'kii geroi' kak initsiaticheskii tekst," *Dostoevskii i mirovaia kul'tura* 18, no. 2 (2022): 18–39.

52. See, for example, Robert Louis Jackson, *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of His Philosophy of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) and the work of Tat'iana Kasatkina, especially *Sviashchennoe v povesednevnom: Dvustavnyi obraz v proizvedeniakh F. M. Dostoevskogo* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2015).

53. Timothy Mitchell, "Caspar David Friedrich's Der Watzmann: German Romantic Landscape Painting and Historical Geology," *The Art Bulletin* 66, no. 3 (Sep., 1984), 452.

54. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis," *Science*, Mar. 10, 1967, 1203–07.

work of some Western artists Dostoevsky saw a striving for the "truth of nature" reflected in the "mystery" of their art that aligned philosophically with the teaching of the Church Fathers on the perception of nature as a divine language. Prominent among them was Carl Gustav Carus, whose work Dostoevsky was thinking about as early as 1853 when he requested that his brother send him *Psyche* and a German dictionary to translate it.

At the turn of the nineteenth century in Europe, a number of theoretical treatises, discourses, and "letters" on what was considered to be the "new" art of landscape grappled with ideas about the artists' vision and the representation of the sublime, mystical, and, eventually, the divine in the beauty of nature as a "poetic" ideal.<sup>55</sup> Confronted by the multiplicity of created forms and phenomena, but unsatisfied with the Enlightenment's explanations through science and reason, landscape painters like Carl Gustav Carus and, later, Alexandre Calame (1810–1864)—who was part of the Dusseldorf School that inherited and developed many of the ideas of Carus's Dresden School—rediscovered the natural world as a great theophany. The work of both men stood in sharp contrast to the strivings of the post-Renaissance West to produce "technically perfect, mathematically accurate, or near photographic images of the world."<sup>56</sup> Carus instead imagined how the artist's eye must perceive "the true and wondrous life of nature" while the artist's hand must be trained to "do the soul's bidding, quickly, easily, and beautifully."<sup>57</sup> Within the context of these discussions, Carus's *Nine Letters of Landscape* and his paintings reflected the belief among the German Romanticists that the landscape artists must have "sufficient intelligence and sensibility to feel the spirit and soul of the matter that lies before him."<sup>58</sup> For one of the most well known of the German Romantic painters and Carus's close friend Caspar David Friedrich, "nature was the book of God and revealed his active presence through the language of the moon, clouds, trees, and rocks."<sup>59</sup>

For Dostoevsky, this ability to see the natural world as the *logoi*, or the visual language of God, was key to his understanding of the role of art and artists. Dostoevsky's simultaneous requests for patristic texts and Carus's *Psyche*—which envisions a unity among the human, the natural, and the divine—suggests that he sensed a common understanding of the natural world in both.<sup>60</sup> *Psyche* builds on Carus's previous work on landscape, positing that the unconscious mind can know the spiritual principle inherent in natural forms. In the book, Carus connects

---

55. For an overview of this movement, see Oskar Bätschmann's "Introduction" in Carl Gustav Carus, *Nine Letters on Landscape Painting, Written in the Years 1815–1824; with a Letter from Goethe by Way of Introduction* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2002), 1–76.

56. Valentina Anker, *Alexandre Calame. Vie et œuvre. Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint* (Fribourg: Office du livre, 1987), 310.

57. Carus, *Nine Letters*, 30.

58. Johann Georg Sulzer, *General Theory of the Fine Arts*, quoted in Carus, *Nine Letters*, 12.

59. Mitchell, "German Romantic Painting," 458.

60. George Gibian, "C.G. Carus' *Psyche* and Dostoevsky," *The American Slavic and East European Review* 14, no. 3 (October 1955): 371–382.

the unconscious, visual images, and the sense impressions created in the mind through the act of looking.<sup>61</sup> "The subtle, mysterious nature of this link between the visual, the spirit, and the emotions," Elisabeth Stopp observes, "was Carus' main and life-long preoccupation" and he worked on it through his scientific inquiries and his landscape painting.<sup>62</sup> As in Dostoevsky, love of the natural world acts as a powerful and transformative force for Carus. Of Carus, George Gibian writes, "His praise of love serves as a meeting of the conscious and unconscious parts of the soul, through which human beings repudiate their selfishness, overcome their isolation, and are enabled to return to community with other human beings as well as to arrive at a supra-rational awareness of the universal and the divine."<sup>63</sup>

The merging of the conscious and unconscious that informs this awareness of the divine in nature develops in what Carus called "earth-life painting" (*Erdleben-Bildkunst*).<sup>64</sup> This theory of landscape painting posits the unity of science and art so that, as artists visualize the inner workings of landforms over time and perceive its geological history ("the true and wondrous life of nature"), they also understand and represent nature as the "true bodily revelation or—in human terms—the language of God."<sup>65</sup> Any dichotomy between natural science and landscape painting is resolved for Carus by the "eternal, supreme, infinite unity" that underlies the goals of science and art: to recognize nature as the manifestation of the divine.<sup>66</sup> For Carus, the sacred role of art and the artist is to "speak the language of nature," in other words, to perceive, represent, and convey the mystery of Creation:

When the soul is saturated with the inner meaning of all these different forms; when it has clear intimations of the mysterious, divine life of nature; when the hand has taught itself to represent securely, and the eye to see purely and acutely; and when the artist's heart is purely and entirely a consecrated, joyous vessel in which to receive the light from above: then there will infallibly be earth-life paintings, of a new and higher kind, which will uplift the viewer into a higher contemplation of nature. These works will truly deserve to be named mystic and orphic.<sup>67</sup>

The striking similarities between Carus's description of his philosophy of art and, for instance, St. Basil's appeal to immerse oneself in nature in order to sense its Creator may explain Dostoevsky's deep interest in Carus and other landscape painters. Indeed, Carus's earth-life

---

61. James Hillman, "Introductory Note," in *Psyche: On the Development of the Soul* (Thompson, CT: Spring Publications 2017), 13.

62. Elisabeth Stopp, "Carl Gustav Carus' Emblematic Thinking," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* (1989), 22.

63. Gibian, "C.G. Carus' *Psyche* and Dostoevsky," 373.

64. *German Masters of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 15.

65. Carus, *Nine Letters* 29, 39.

66. Carus, *Nine Letters*, 38.

67. Carus, *Nine Letters*, 30–31.



painting reiterates the importance of *theoria physike* as a way of perceiving the "mysterious, divine life of nature" while also emphasizing that, in addition to purity of the heart and eye, the artist's hand must be able to represent the natural world in ways that "uplift the viewer" into the same kind of contemplation.

Ultimately, it was not the Dresden painters but the Dusseldorf school and its vision of the sublime in the grandeur of mostly unpeopled landscapes that dominated European painting throughout Dostoevsky's lifetime. In particular, the work of Swiss painter Alexandre Calame, its leading artist and the intellectual descendent of Carus, played a prominent role in Dostoevsky's understanding about the visual representation of the sacred in the natural world. Like Carus, Calame broke with the conventions of his day, committing what one art historian calls the "historical transgression" of reaching back before the Renaissance to the tradition of treating landscape and the natural world as sacred soil.<sup>68</sup> Calame's work introduced "visual writing" to landscape painting, an approach that regarded natural spaces as the visible manifestation of the invisible God.<sup>69</sup> Calame saw nature as "subjugated to divine laws and to rules of harmony" and a "composition for which God was ultimately responsible."<sup>70</sup> His paintings "explore his belief in a divine presence in the rugged open spaces of his native country."<sup>71</sup> Calame aspired to find the visual language of the sublime (which Valentina Anker describes as his "uniquely mimetic iconography" and a "grammar of a mythical cosmology") and to express in his paintings the "divine dimension" he perceived in the "immense majesty of creation," especially in the craggy summits of the Swiss landscape, which, despite serious health risks, he insisted on painting *en plein air*.<sup>72</sup> For Calame, the process of painting *en plein air* rather than producing a studio copy was both an act and profession of his own faith. Calame was certain, writes Anker, that the contemplation of natural spectacles, especially after a physically challenging climb into the mountains, could induce in the soul a sense of supreme harmony with the divine. It was precisely this kind of privileged moment that Calame saw reflected in the natural world and what he wanted to capture and convey in his work.<sup>73</sup>

The effect of his paintings on viewers was meant to be equally transfiguring. Throughout the 1860s, art reviewers (including Dostoevsky) distinguished Calame's work from more "photographic" renderings of nature, noting how Calame's work could "wake the souls of

---

68. Valentina Anker, *Calame*, 310.

69. A. E. Cherniavskaia and A. V. Martynova, "F. M. Dostoevskii i shveitsarskii peizazhist A. Kalam," *Vestnik Omskogo universiteta*, No. 4 (2007): 79.

70. Alberto de Andrés, *Alpine Views. Alexandre Calame and the Swiss Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 11.

71. de Andrés, *Alpine Views*, 11.

72. Anker, *Alexandre Calame*, 310.

73. Anker, *Calame*, 304–08.

the spectators."<sup>74</sup> For Dostoevsky, writing in 1861, for example, Calame's *Lake of the Four Cantons* (1852) bears the mark of the "true artist" (истинный художник).<sup>75</sup> Its depiction of nature shows neither the photographic mirror that signals for him an "absence of art" (отсутствие художеств) nor does it conceive of nature as the "implacable dumb beast" (неумолимого и немоего зверя) or senseless and crushing "machine" (машина) imagined in Ippolit's description of Rogozhin's painting.<sup>76</sup> Rather, it achieves the "something" that Dostoevsky describes as "different, more, wider, deeper" (кое-что другое, больше, шире, глубже) than mere photographic realism.<sup>77</sup> In his rejection of views of nature as "intelligible apart from grace" (photographic) or "autonomous and self-contained" (like Rogozhin's painting), Dostoevsky highlights the iconographical qualities of Calame's work wherein nature becomes the "medium" through which the "magician of a painter" conveys the experience of his soul.<sup>78</sup>

Calame's project constantly searched for a worthy subject to demonstrate the kind of "perfection" of nature that reveals its Creator—the "mighty God"—in the "magnificent language of the soul."<sup>79</sup> For Calame, as with Dostoevsky, the true "teacher" of this kind of painting is nature itself.<sup>80</sup> "Nothing elevates the soul like the contemplation of the snowy heights and craggy peaks," wrote Calame in 1851 about painting the Alps. In phrasing that echoes the effect of the Siberian night sky on Dostoevsky, he continues: "At that moment, you find yourself immersed in immense solitude, alone before God. You reflect on the insignificance of man, on his irrationality." Continuing, the Protestant Calame expresses a deeply iconographical understanding of creation as he nearly paraphrases the writings of Church Fathers: "The whole earth glorifies the power and endless goodness of God, which are evident in every blade of grass, in each hardly noticeable insect. You feel that you are infinitely elevated by this unsurmountable power and a cry is torn from your soul, from the very depths of this experience, which my brush is powerless to convey."<sup>81</sup>

Dostoevsky's praise of Calame's 1852 *Lake of the Four Cantons* marveled at the "secret" by which the "magician painter" conveyed this revelatory experience to the viewer. In *The Idiot*, a verbal correlate of such a painting takes shape in Myshkin's description of his experiences in the Alps that treats the natural setting not only as iconographical space, but as an icon. Doing

---

74. "No," wrote Paris critic Henri Delaborde in 1865, "Calame does not simply photograph the Alps. He knew, the master that he was, how to appropriate the picturesque elements and have them serve to produce impressions that can wake the souls of the spectators" (quoted in Anker, *Calame*, 224–26).

75. F. M. Dostoevskii. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*. T. 19 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1979), 150.

76. F. M. Dostoevskii. T. 19 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1979), 149.

77. F. M. Dostoevskii. T. 19 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1979), 150.

78. F. M. Dostoevskii. T. 19 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1979), 150.

79. Anker, *Calame*, 40–43.

80. Anker, *Calame*, 43.

81. Anker, *Calame*, 208.

so, Dostoevsky inserts a non-verbal sacred text into this highly visualized work that, as Tat'iana Kasatkina shows, is thematically structured on the interplay between the "icon" as window onto the divine and eternal and "painting" as the mirror-like reflection of material reality.<sup>82</sup> Kasatkina notes how Prince Myshkin is always seeking the "soul" of a landscape (or person), as if looking into "another world" (как в иной мир) that is "closer to an icon."<sup>83</sup> Recalling Florensky's belief that "icon painting is the occupation of a person who see the world as sacred" allows us to see more clearly what Valerii Lepakkin terms the "verbal icon" (словесная икона) that Myshkin creates to explain how the natural setting in the Swiss mountains made him feel simultaneously "good," "oppressed," and "uneasy."<sup>84</sup> More specifically, the scene suggests the icon of the Transfiguration of Christ, with Mount Tabor transposed onto the Alps and Myshkin's experience echoing that of the witnessing apostles as the natural world becomes a window onto divine eternity.<sup>85</sup>

Like passages in "The Little Hero" and anticipating Alyosha's stargazing in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Myshkin's descriptions of his walks in the Alps ("where sky and earth meet") immediately introduce the idea of the sacred into the natural surroundings. The first instance, Sarah Young shows, underscores Myshkin's experience of seeing nature as "a higher reality, a different spatial dimension beyond the horizon where the true nature of the universe, and man's place in it, are revealed."<sup>86</sup> In the "terrible silence" (тишина страшная) of the place that evokes the "terrible God" (Бог страшен) of the Psalms, Myshkin envisions the iconographical in the natural world, engaging in what Florensky calls "beholding that ascends."<sup>87</sup> The second description of his solitary walks in the Alps represents more distinctly Myshkin's entrance into iconographical space, signaled by the shift from the first-person narration in the first instance to third-person, which recalls the lack of coherent speech Myshkin suffered in Switzerland. But the narrative loss of Myshkin's voice at this point seems the best response; rational thought

---

82. Tat'iana Kasatkina, "Ob odnom svoistve epilogov piati velikikh romanov Dostoevskogo," *Dostoevskii v kontse XX veka* (1996): 94–116. On the creation and meaning of the "verbal icon" see Valerii Lepakkin, "Basic Types of Correlation Between Text and Icon, Between Verbal and Visual Icons," *Literature and Theology* 20, No. 1 (March 2006): 20–30.

83. Kasatkina, "Ob odnom," 100.

84. Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1996), 78. On the "verbal icon" in Russian literature, see Valerii Lepakkin's *Ikona v russkoi khudozhestvennoi literature: Ikona i ikonopochitanie, Ikonopis' i ikonopistsy* (Moscow: Otchii Dom, 2002).

85. Such transformative dynamics are explored by Aleksei Lidov, "Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History," in A.M. Lidov, ed., *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia* (Moscow, 2006), 9–31 and Sergei Avanesov on "cultural-semiotic transfer" in "Sakral'naia topika russkogo goroda (2). Sofiiskii sobor: Sintaksis i semantika," *PRAKXIMA: Problemy visual'noi semiotiki* 9, no. 3 (2016): 25–81.

86. Sarah J. Young, *Dostoevsky's The Idiot and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative: Reading, Narrating, Scripting* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 78. See also, Tat'iana Kasatkina, "Smert', novaia zemlia i novaia priroda v romane F. M. Dostoevskogo 'Idiot,'" *Dostoevskii i mirovaia kul'tura*, no. 3 (2020), 16–19.

87. Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 72.

and words are inadequate to comprehend or describe the divine and its presence is often represented through silence.<sup>88</sup>

As I have discussed elsewhere, Dostoevsky sometimes depends on readers to mentally complete his verbal icons when he evokes iconographical principles whose elements may exist outside the narrative frame.<sup>89</sup> In this instance, the icon of the Transfiguration of Christ can be inferred as Myshkin, in his first description of his experience in the Alps, raises his hands to the bright light all about him on the mountain. Understanding the correlation with this icon allows us to better understand the "good" yet "oppressed" effect the natural world has on Myshkin as *penthos* ("joyful sorrow"), which St. John Climacus considered a sign of mourning in a truly contrite heart that at once perceives its alienation from heaven—envisioned biblically by Myshkin as a "great everlasting feast"—and presages the joy of baptism into "new life."<sup>90</sup>

Once he went into the mountains on a clear, sunny day, and wandered about for a long time with a tormenting thought that refused to take shape (с одною мучительною, но никак не воплощавшеюся мыслию). Before him was the shining sky, below him the lake, around him the horizon, bright and infinite, as if it went on forever. For a long time, he looked and agonized (терзаться). He remembered now how he had stretched out his arms to that bright, infinite blue and wept. What had tormented him (Мучило его) was that he was a total stranger to it all. What was this banquet, what was this great everlasting feast, which has no end and to which he had long been drawn, always, even since childhood, and which he could never join?<sup>91</sup>

At the same time, Myshkin's prayerful suffering and torment in the natural setting points to the fundamental understanding in Orthodox theology of the economy of salvation: like the incarnation (воплощение—which echoes Myshkin's inability to give shape to his tormenting thought) of God's divine world, the natural world will also be transformed at the Transfiguration of Christ.<sup>92</sup>

Myshkin's second description of the Alps follows Ippolit's "Necessary Explanation" and serves as a rebuttal of the latter's sense of being locked in a material world that denies the truth of immortality and resurrection, an idea visually represented by Rogozhin's painting of the dead Christ in the grave. Myshkin even cites Ippolit's image of the buzzing fly (which reappears in Nastasya Filippova's death scene) to make the opposite point—that nature is

---

88. Foltz, *Noetics of Nature*, 126.

89. See, for instance, Amy Singleton Adams, "Learning to Look: The Meaning of Unseen Icons in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*," *IKON. Journal of Iconographic Studies* 9 (2016): 363–374.

90. Anthony M. Coniaris, *Philokalia. The Bible of Orthodox Spirituality* (Minneapolis, MN: Light & Life Publishing Co., 1998), 173–175.

91. F. M. Dostoevskii. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, Tom 8 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1973), 390–391.

92. See Pavel Evdokimov, "Nature," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18, issue 1 (1965): 1–22.

not only the visible incarnation of the divine, but offers a glimpse into eternal space and time.<sup>93</sup> Once again, the image of the "blade of grass" that demonstrates an awareness of its own incarnation (and thus sanctification) becomes for Dostoevsky a shorthand for the sacred language of the natural world.

Every morning the same bright sun rises; every morning there is a rainbow over the waterfall; every evening the highest snow capped mountain, there, far away, at the edge of the sky, burns with a crimson flame; every "little fly that buzzes near him in a hot ray of sunlight participates in this whole chorus: knows its place, loves it, and is happy"; every little blade of grass grows and is happy (каждая-то травка растёт и счастлив)!<sup>94</sup>

Ultimately, Myshkin's two-part description of time spent on the mountain creates a verbal icon that is particularly relevant to Dostoevsky's eco-aesthetic theology, suggesting, as Calame sensed, the promise of transfiguration or *theosis* for those with the spiritual (or aesthetic) vision to behold the natural world as sacred.<sup>95</sup>

Dostoevsky's fascination with both landscape and religious painting finds expression in his representation of the natural world as a sacred language or "words" (*logoi*) of God. Although this understanding of the natural world took shape early in Dostoevsky's life and career, it can also be viewed as part of broader discussions in the late nineteenth century about the Forest Question, for example, or Russia's cultural affinity with Western Europe.<sup>96</sup> Dostoevsky was still exploring the "secret" of the type of art that might "utter the ultimate word of great, general harmony" to unite the intellectualized wanderers (like Pushkin's unrooted Aleko and Onegin, whom Dostoevsky described as "no more than a blade of grass [былинка], torn from its stem and carried off by the wind") with the religious wanderers—like the hesychastic Makar—who are "firmly rooted" in their native Russian soil, have faith in God, and perceive the beauty of His creation.<sup>97</sup> As John McGucken points out, for the Church Fathers, the experience of beauty in the world can be understood as "an epiphany of the underlying energy of the Logos who had made the world."<sup>98</sup> Perhaps it is the *logoi* of the created world that becomes "the ultimate word" that Dostoevsky imagined would come out of Russia to "enfold" its European "brethren" with "brotherly love." Of course, it is difficult

---

93. Kasatkina, "Smert'," 16.

94. F. M. Dostoevskii. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, Tom 8, 391.

95. On this process in the work of the Church Fathers and in Dostoevsky's fiction, see Bruce Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, especially 11–12, 113–202.

96. On the environmental concerns in Russia in the late nineteenth century and the aesthetic response, see Jane T. Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia. Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

97. F. M. Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh*, Tom 14 (1976), 439.

98. John McGucken, "The Beauty of the World and Its Significance in St. Gregory the Theologian," in *Towards an Ecology of Transfiguration*, 35.

## AMY SINGLETON ADAMS

at this historical moment to imagine Russia as the source of "brotherly love." But important elements of Dostoevsky's eco-aesthetic theology clearly ring in the response of the Eastern Christian church to today's climate crisis. His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Batholomew I continues to urge citizens of all nations and faiths to share the fundamental Orthodox belief in the sacredness and beauty of all creation and to regard our relationship with the natural environment as sacramental.<sup>99</sup> It is not, he emphasizes, the scientific study of the environment that will cause the dramatic shift of mind and change of heart to transform attitudes and actions in the world.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps, as Dostoevsky noted, the world will be saved only when its beauty is widely recognized as sacred.



**Amy Singleton Adams** is a professor of Russian Studies at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. She received her B.A. in Russian Language and Literature at Dartmouth College, and her M.A. and Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research focuses on the non-ecclesiastical use of icons and creation of iconic or sacred space in Russian literature, art, and society. She co-edited and contributed to the volume *Framing Mary: The Mother of God in Modern, Revolutionary, and Post-Soviet Russia* and recently published an essay on Vladimir Putin's use of Orthodox iconography as a form of political discourse. The present essay is part of a broader study of sacred landscapes and the divine language of nature in Dostoevsky's work.

---

99. Faith and Environment: An Inspirational Perspective" (2014). [https://www.orth-transfiguration.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Lecture\\_HAH-2014-04-Utrecht-The-Netherlands-April-24-14.pdf](https://www.orth-transfiguration.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Lecture_HAH-2014-04-Utrecht-The-Netherlands-April-24-14.pdf) (Accessed 26 May 2024).

100. Ibid.