

Amy Singleton Adams

Learning How to Look: The Meaning of the Unseen Icon in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

In Dostoevsky's work, the ability to perceive or sense the Mother of God (*Bozh'ia mater', Bogoroditsa*) often presages spiritually transformative experiences. References to these iconic images, however, are not always apparent, but only suggested by verbal description. In *The Idiot*, the presence of the "verbal" or "word" icons (*verbal'naia* or *slovesnaia ikona*) can only be perceived if the reader looks beyond the verbal plane of the narrative and the everyday reality (*bezobrazie*) of the novelistic world. For Dostoevsky, this kind of vision and the problem of "looking" are not about eyesight *per se* but about seeing with a different eye altogether, the "eye of the soul" (*glazami dushi ili okom dukhovnym*).

The present reading of *The Idiot* on the iconic level focuses primarily on two Mother of God icon types - the Dormition of the Mother of God (*Uspenie Presviatoi Bogoroditsy*) and the Do Not Lament Me, Mother (*Ne Rydai Mene, Mati*). Through these examples, this essay explores the dynamics of the creation of text or word icons and investigates their function within the novel. It also considers how the presence of these text icons introduces the image of John the Baptist into the narrative, which further informs Dostoevsky's ideas on the "vision" and role of the writer. Ultimately, our reading aims to reassess the perceived "success" of the *The Idiot* in light of the aesthetics of transfiguration that are so closely associated with the iconic imagery of the Mother of God.