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## **Сотворение иконы «О Тебе радуется...» в полифоническом спектакле заключенных**

*Riley Ossorgin*

### **How the Inmates' Polyphonic Play Performs the “All Creation” Icon**

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**Аннотация:** Статья представляет Богородичную икону «О Тебе радуется...» как богословский, литургический и образный контекст изображения каторжного театра в «Записках из Мертвого Дома» Ф.М. Достоевского. Как икона «О Тебе радуется...», так и гимн Иоанна Дамаскина, в качестве зрительного образа которого она создана, являются важнейшими составляющими литургии Василия Великого, которая, как и каторжный театр, сопровождает Праздник Рождества Христова. Автор статьи подчеркивает и проявляет визуальную ориентированность романа, обнаруживающуюся уже в предполагаемом названии повествователем собрания своих записей «Сценами из Мертвого дома». Образные элементы иконы появляются в главке, названной «Представление», чье пространство повествователь Горянчиков описывает как «странную картину» осторожного театра, спектакля и его зрителей. Автор статьи утверждает, что глава «Представление» – это буквальное осуществление иконы, чьей центральной темой является соборность. «Сцена» казармы, где разыгрывается представление, повторяет полифоническую образность иконы, заполняя пространство каторжного театра зрителями, сидящими перед, позади, над и вокруг сцены, на которой разыгрывается пьеса с главной женской ролью. Эти зрители одновременно созерцают и созидают действие, становясь его сотворцами. В то время как праздник Рождества заканчивается безобразием и ощущением одиночества и разобщенности, следующий за Рождеством день, день спектакля, напротив, завершается радостью от совместного празднования Пресвятой Богородицы.

Ее присутствие в виде иконы «О Тебе радуется...», скрывающейся в этой части под поверхностью повествования в сердцевине произведения, ходатайствует о торжестве прощения над наказанием, как это делал и Достоевский.

**Ключевые слова:** Достоевский, икона, соборность, Богоматерь, спектакль, Рождество, образная полифония.

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**Abstract:** This article interprets the Marian icon “In Thee All Creation rejoices” as the theological, liturgical, and visual context for the prisoners' play scene in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the House of the Dead*. Both the “All Creation” icon and the John of Damascus Hymn that it illustrates, feature prominently in St. Basil's liturgy, which, like the prisoners' play, accompanies the Nativity holiday. The author emphasizes the visual orientation of the novel beginning with the narrator's description of his collected writings as “Scenes from the House of the Dead”. The visual elements of the “All Creation” icon reappear within the chapter called “Predstavlenie”, in which the narrator Gorianchikov describes the “strange picture” of the prison theater, play and audience. The author contends that the play is a literary performance of the icon and its central theme of *sobornost'*. The prison play house “scene” mimics the visually polyphonic icon by crowding the prison theater with spectators who sit in front, above, behind and around the stage, on which a female lead appears. These spectators both perform and watch the play, becoming co-creators of the spectacle. Whereas the Nativity feast ends in the prisoners' debauchery and isolation, the day following Nativity by contrast, the day of the play, culminates in the joy of the shared feast of the Theotokos. Her presence, in the form of the “All Creation” icon that lurks beneath the surface of the chapter at the novel's core, advocates for amnesty over punishment of criminals, as did Dostoevsky.

**Key words:** Dostoevsky, Icon, Sobornost', Liturgy, Theotokos, Play, Nativity, Visual Polyphony.

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In *Notes from the House of Dead*, the former convict turned note-writer Gorianchikov narrates a scene that he calls a *strannaiia kartinka*, or “strange picture”<sup>1</sup>. His description of the festive prison play that brings joy to their dreary prison life humanizes the novel’s convict-prisoners. I contend that this “strange picture” is a literary performance of the visually-polyphonic, festal icon of the Theotokos (Mother of God) known as All Creation Rejoices (Fig. 1). It was painted by Dionysus, the fifteenth-century master of the Moscow school of icon painting, to illustrate a hymn written by the seventh-century Syrian monk, John of Damascus (holding a scroll in lower left quadrant in Figure 1). The John of Damascus hymn praises the Theotokos (Mother of God) for being one in whom “the angelic congregation” and “humankind” rejoice:

All creation rejoices in thee, O full of grace, the angelic congregation (*sobor*) and humankind, / O consecrated (*osviashchennyi*) temple and grounded (*slovesny*) paradise, / the glory of virgins, of whom God was incarnate / and became a child, our God before the ages. / He made thy body into a throne, / and thy womb more spacious than the heavens. / All of creation rejoices in thee, O full of grace: Glory be to thee<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I quote Jakim’s translation, providing page numbers from his translation, followed by those from Dostoevsky’s *PSS*. Occasionally, I translate phrases or the passage in whole to highlight nuances in the Russian [Notes 2013: 158]. I am grateful to Deborah A. Martens for her commentary and suggestions as I prepared this article for publication.

<sup>2</sup> «О Тебе радуется, Благодатная, всякая тварь, ангельский собор и человеческий род. Освященный Храме и Раю словесный, девственная похвало из Нея же Бог воплотися и Младенец бысть, прежде век Сый Бог наш: ложесна бо Твоя Престол сотвори и чрево Твое пространнее небес содела. О Тебе радуется, Благодатная, всякая тварь, слава Тебе». I have modified an English translation from the official Orthodox Church in America website in order to emphasize difficulties in translation: <https://oca.org/the-hub/study-guides/the-virgin-mary-a-celebration-of-our-faith-session-5-iconography-and-t1>. Paul Valliere writes that in addition to its meaning of “council” in Russian, “Sobor comes from the Slavic root meaning ‘gather’ or ‘collect’. Sobor also means cathedral, a cathedral being a place where the community gathers for worship”. I have chosen to translate sobor as “congregation” with an eye towards this gathering of worshippers. Slavesny derives from the root *slovo*, or “word”, which is the Slavic rendering of the multivalent “logos”. According the Liddell and Scott, logos means among many other things, “wisdom”, “speech”, “account”, “word”, “reason”, “discourse”, and “ground”, I translate the adjective slavesny as “grounded” not only because of the wisdom inherent to being “grounded”, but also because it complements the “angelic congregation” just before it [Valliere 2012: 11; Liddell and Scott 1940].

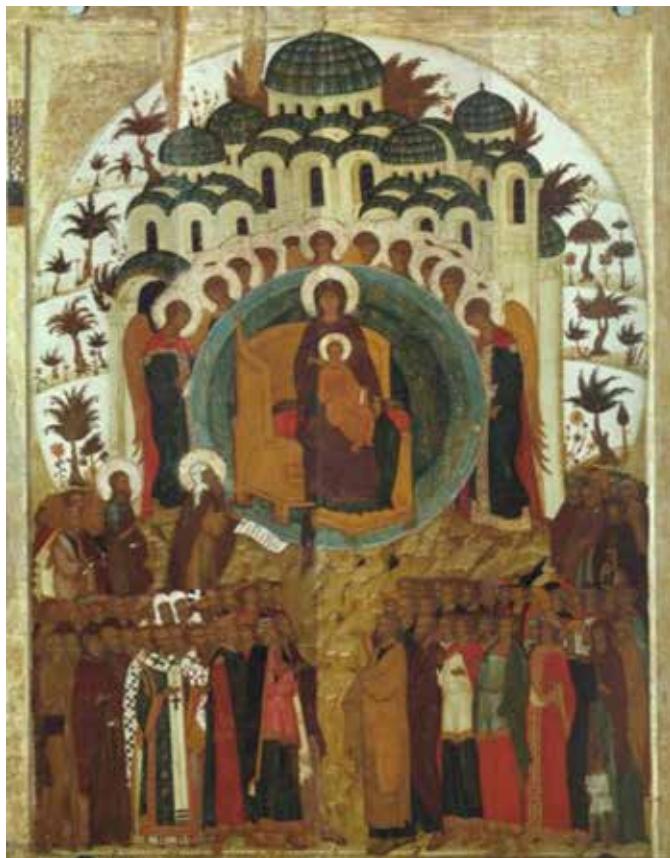


Fig. 1. 15th Century Icon of All Creation Rejoices by Dionysus.

Photo Cred: Iconreader.wordpress.com

The harsh barracks transforms into a welcoming theater that metaphorically expands to incorporate “all creation”. The typically isolated prisoners momentarily co-create *sobornost'* as they gather to rejoice in the Nativity play’s female lead role, and the hardened criminals look on from the rafters with childlike wonder, imitating the icon’s angels. Both the icon and the “strange picture” offer spectators, including the reader, a way of rethinking the Nativity feast by shifting focus from he who was born, Christ, to she who bore him, the Theotokos<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> In her chapter “Dostoevsky’s ‘Journey Through the Torments’: Maternal Protest in *Notes From the Dead House*”, Liza Knapp sees the *Dead House* as a direct reflection of the spirit of the Byzantine tale “Journey of the Mother of God through the Torments”, an apocryphal tale of amnesty. She defines amnesty as “an act of gratuitous mercy from an almighty power, brought about

The icons placed on the analogion, or central stand, of a Russian cathedral rotate constantly in accordance with the liturgical calendar. Within the living ritual tradition of the global Orthodox Churches, the liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church constitutes one of the principal streams. Although the rites are codified in manifold liturgical books (including a regulatory volume, known in the Slavic tradition as the *Ustav*. lit., “rule”), they have not been compiled into a definitive or critical edition. Much in contemporary practice is still regulated by personally transmitted knowledge. The festal icon is occasionally placed beside an icon that features other biblical figures who either played an important role in the feast day or whose feast day will be celebrated in the upcoming week. Smaller parishes do their best to mimic this cathedral practice, depending on the extent of their icon collections<sup>4</sup>.

In describing the barracks church that the convicts improvise for the Nativity service, Gorianchikov remembers the central icon. The title of Chapter X, in which an icon appears, is “Праздник Рождества Христова,” or “The Feast of the Nativity of Christ”. Gorianchikov observes: “[The convicts] had placed a little table in the middle of the room, covered it with a clean towel, placed an icon on it and lit the icon lamp” [Jakim 2013: 140]. Significantly, the convicts know that a central icon is integral to the festal service. But the question here is which icon? Given that the convicts place it there, it is likely that whatever icon was at hand served as a substitute for the festal icon.

Russian church-goers would have known which icons appeared in the center of the church during the Nativity season. The most fitting would have been a Nativity icon.

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through the intercession of a being close to the ruler” [Knapp 2012: 416]. Knapp collects the instances of maternal compassion in *Dead House* that offer both a reprieve from and a direct challenge to the paternal, authoritarian penal system in the novel. This article amplifies her argument about maternal compassion and amnesty by showing how the Theotokos icon lurks beneath the surface of the “Dead House” prison play scene. See [Knapp 2012: 413-430].

<sup>4</sup> Unlike the liturgy in western communities, the Orthodox liturgy has been subjected to no thoroughgoing, systematic revision in the recent past. In many churches – of the Syro-Byzantine liturgical tradition especially – there is no central analogion at all. Nevertheless, this is a widespread practice in churches of Slavic tradition. In Slavic practice, the festal and related icons are usually brought out during the Polyeleos at Matins and they remain on the analogion until the Leave-taking, but this is not prescribed in the *Ustav*. Conventionally, the icon of the Resurrection is placed there on Sundays; on other days the icon of the church’s patron saint or a generic icon of Christ or the Theotokos rests there. I am grateful to Gregory Tucker for this explanation.

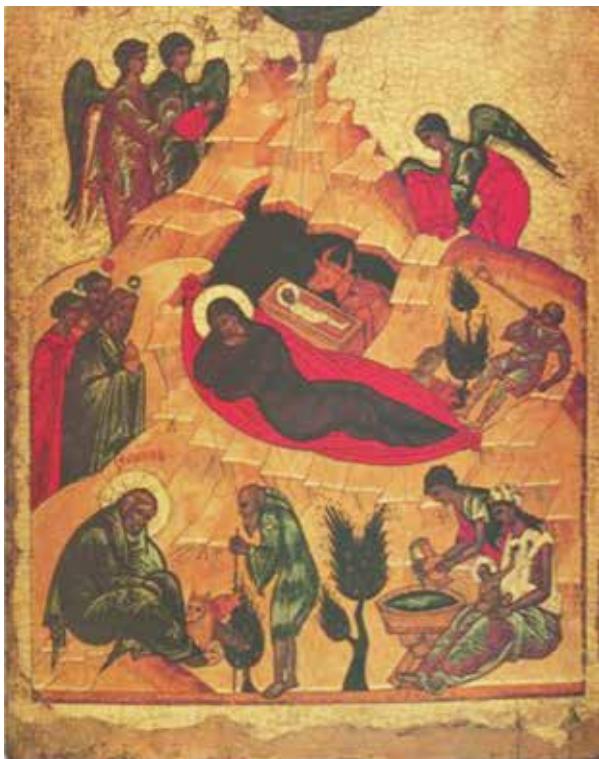


Figure 2. The Nativity of Christ, Novgorod School, attributed to the XVth century.  
17 1/4 X 21 1/3 inches. Photo Cred: Christies New York.

Ouspensky describes the festal icon's dogmatic significance:

In its content, the icon of the Nativity has two fundamental aspects: first of all it discloses the very essence of the event, the immutable fact of the incarnation of God; it places us before a visible testimony of the fundamental dogma of the Christian faith, underlining by its details both the Divinity and the human nature of the Word made flesh. Secondly, the icon of the Nativity shows us the effect of this event on the natural life of the world, gives as it were a perspective of all its consequences<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> В своем содержании икона Рождества Христова имеет два основных аспекта: прежде всего, она раскрывает самую сущность события, факт непреложного вочеловечения Бога, ставит нас перед видимым свидетельством основного догмата христианской веры, подчеркивая своими деталями как Божество, так и человечество воплотившегося Слова. Во-вторых, икона Рождества Христова показывает нам действие этого события на естественную жизнь мира, дает как бы перспективу всех его последствий. For the theological context of this

As Ouspensky notes, the depiction of the Nativity includes multiple perspectives. The Nativity icon arranges the diachronic gospel context into a single image that includes symbolic figures from all walks of life in order to communicate its purported ontological impact on the created world.

Since the Nativity commemorates both Christ's birth and Mary's birth-giving, the liturgy incorporates special hymns and prayers to the Theotokos, making Theotokian icons appear on the anologian during the Nativity season<sup>6</sup>. Two Marian icons in particular are commonly featured along with the Nativity icon: the Icon of the Meeting / Synaxis of the Mother of God<sup>7</sup>, and the All Creation Rejoices Icon (Fig. 3)<sup>8</sup>. The All Creation Rejoices is positioned in the center of the church during the Liturgy of St. Basil, which is performed on the Eve of Nativity unless Nativity falls on either a Sunday or Monday, in which case the Basil liturgy is performed on the feast day and the usual Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is performed on the Eve of Nativity<sup>9</sup>.

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icon, see Ouspensky's chapter "The Nativity of Christ" in his *The Meaning of the Icon* co-authored with Vladimir Lossky. Trans. G.E.H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky [Ouspensky 1999: 157].

<sup>6</sup> Nativity is one of the Twelve Great Feasts in the Russian Orthodox liturgical calendar, each of which commemorates significant biblical events in the Christian salvation narrative.

<sup>7</sup> The Synaxis of the Theotokos is a fixed feast that is celebrated on the day after Nativity (Dec 26th/Jan 8th). Both the Greek word "synaxis" and the Russian word "sobor" connote an assembly of the faithful. In the novel, the play occurs "*na tretii den' prazdnika*", which falls on the day after Nativity.

<sup>8</sup> The two Marian icons are often mistaken for one another because they contain similar visual themes (even though they depict different stories). One out of every four Nativities occurs on either a Monday or Sunday.

<sup>9</sup> The Liturgy of St. Basil is normally celebrated as the Vesperal Liturgy of Nativity on Dec 24/Jan 6<sup>th</sup>; it is attached to vespers because the eve of the feast requires a strict fast and according to ancient Constantinopolitan practice there would be no communion until after vespers, which marks the beginning of the next liturgical day. When the feast falls on a Sunday or Monday, however, the eve is a Saturday or Sunday, which can never be strict fasting days. In that case, the normal Chrysostom liturgy is celebrated in the morning of the eve, and the Basil liturgy is celebrated on the morning of the feast day itself.



Fig. 3. Left: 18th century icon of *Sobor Bogomateri* or The Synaxis (“Meeting”) of the Mother of God. Right: 15th century icon by Dionysus of All Creation Rejoices.

Photo Cred: Iconreader.wordpress.com

While the icon sits upright in full view throughout the service as a visual aid, various exegetic hymns, readings, sermons, and scriptures interpret the feast for the attendees. As Gorianchikov recalls, “The days of the great feasts are sharply imprinted in the memories of the common people, beginning in childhood” / «Дни великих праздников резко отпечатываются в памяти простолюдинов, начиная с самого детства» [Jakim 2013: 134]. The festal icon thus serves as the visual focal point for these memories. It organizes the exegetic texts into one scene that collates the visual referents for the feast’s theological interpretations<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Robert L. Jackson has remarked that Chapter XI, in which the play takes place, is not only centrally located in the novel, but also of central thematic importance. Thus, the chapter is the novel’s analogion. He writes that Chapter XI is “the structural and ideological center of the work. The chapter is entitled ‘Predstavlenie’ – a word that in its literal root meaning might be translated as the ‘presentation’, the ‘representation,’ the ‘showing’ – and indeed that is what Dostoevsky is about: showing another form of freedom, or self-expression. In this case the ‘showing’ is clearly linked with ‘revelation’. On the third day after Christmas, a holiday, the convicts are permitted to present some theatrical presentations: primitive skits that constitute a strange mélange of Russian folk lore and elements of western morality plays” [Jackson 1995: 8]. I add to Jackson’s “strange mélange” the All Creation icon. See [Jackson 1995: 1-21].

I respectfully note a minor error in Jackson’s timing of the play. The play is first performed on the day after Nativity proper, the official holiday “authorized by law” [Jackson 1995: 134]. The

Gorianchikov conceives of the eponymous “notes” as “scenes” like those presented in the icons [Jakim 2013: 7]. The editor of Gorianchikov’s notes borrows the title *Notes from the Dead House* from Gorianchikov, with one important difference. He keeps the second half of Gorianchikov’s title, “From the Dead House,” but inserts the word “Notes” in place of Gorianchikov’s descriptor, *Stseny iz mertvogo doma*, or *Scenes from the Dead House*<sup>11</sup> [Jakim 2013: 7; Достоевский 1972–1990: IV, 8]. Since there are no visual images in the notes themselves, the precise nature of these “scenes” is elusive. Yet this is how Gorianchikov defines his writing, which describes various visual art forms, including pictures, staged plays, photographs, impressionistic and realist paintings, and icons<sup>12</sup>. Robin Feuer Miller has written that *Dead House* “affects us in a way approximating a work of visual art” [Miller 2007: 22]. Robert Jackson describes the visual impact of the notes as “a series of gigantic frescoes of human experience and destiny”<sup>13</sup>. By calling his writing “scenes”, Gorianchikov may intend to induce a decidedly visual experience in the reader’s imagination.

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convicts take the first day off unofficially on the eve of Nativity, and Gorianchikov marks it as the beginning of the holiday: “At last the holidays came: On the day before Christmas almost none of the convicts went out to work” [Ibid.]. On the night of Nativity, they go to bed in a drunken stupor long after the barracks impromptu Nativity service: “But what’s the point of describing this drunken hell? Finally this suffocating day [Nativity] was coming to an end <...> Tomorrow was going to be an ordinary day, back to work again...” [Jakim 2013: 149]. They resume work on the day after Nativity and attend the first performance later that evening. “On the third day of the Christmas [Nativity] holiday, in the evening, the first performance in our theater took place” [Jakim 2013: 150].

<sup>11</sup> Since Gorianchikov’s aesthetics align with Dostoevsky’s, Gorianchikov can be seen as a rather transparent mask for Dostoevsky. Joseph Frank argues that Dostoevsky was at least partially motivated to create the persona of Gorianchikov in order to get around the censors. See [Frank 1983: 218–219]. There are, however, many important differences between the fictional biography of Gorianchikov and Dostoevsky’s, such as the salient fact that Dostoevsky was not imprisoned for murdering his wife; nor, obviously did he die immediately after his release from prison.

<sup>12</sup> The precise nature of the genre of this novel has received much critical attention. Joseph Frank initially defines it as a hybrid of “unadorned memoir” and “fictional construct” and later as a tripartite of “sketch form,” “personal memoir,” and “documentary novel about collectivity” [Frank 1983: 222]. Chirkov defines the novel as “an artistic memoir”, which he considers an important phase in the development of Dostoevsky’s realism. See [Chirkov 1967: 16]. Viktor Shklovskii calls the work “a documentary novel” in *Za i protiv* and “a new, original, artistic union of the novel” in *Povesti o proze* [Shklovskij 1957: 64–84, Shklovskij 1966: II, 214].

<sup>13</sup> See [Jackson 1966: 217]. In his analysis of Dostoevsky’s aesthetics in “Crime and Punishment”, Roger Anderson writes: “Given Dostoevsky’s Orthodox biography, within which icons were synonymous with Gospel narratives, it is perhaps not unexpected that he moves our mind by organizing our eye within his narrative composition”. In the “Dead House” prison theater scene, Dostoevsky organizes the reader’s eye in such a way as to recreate the festal Theotokian icons. See [Anderson 1994: 98].

In describing the temporary prison theater house before the eagerly anticipated play, Gorianchikov refers to it as a picture: “Before the curtain was raised, the whole room presented a strange and animated picture (*predstavliala stranniu i ozhivlenniu kartinku*)” [Jakim 2013: 158; Достоевский 1972–1990: IV, 122]. The adjective Gorianchikov uses to modify the “picture” (*kartinka*) is “*ozhivlennaia*”, which derives from the root *zhizn'* (life). It means not just “animated” but even “boisterous” and “lively”, adjectives that denote motion, noise, and activity. Gorianchikov’s picture is “strange” for several reasons: it incorporates motion, sound, and various time frames, which are considered from all possible perspectives within the prison theater. In short, his “picture” shares features with the All Creation Rejoices icon.

Gorianchikov’s “strange picture” includes a stage curtain that contains visual elements pertaining not only to the upcoming play, but also alluding to the festal icon. On the one hand, the painting creates a leisurely atmosphere before the play. The painting’s arbors, green trees and ponds, suggest the backdrop for the play’s wealthy country folk, including a lead “benevolent lady”. On the other hand, the curtain alludes to the Marian festal icon. The painting sits on the curtain in the center of the barracks, approximately where the prisoners’ icon stood for the impromptu Nativity service the day before. In the icon, several green trees symbolize both Christ’s birth and Mary’s ability to engender life, several arbors on the curtain invoke the All Creation icon’s multi-roofed *sobor*, and the ponds allude to the central blue rings of divine radiance surrounding Mary (Fig.1)<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, the multi-roofed *sobor* pictured behind Mary in the icon symbolizes the infinite heavenly kingdom that the benevolent Mary’s finite body paradoxically contains<sup>15</sup>. On the previous day, the barracks were transformed into a church for the Nativity service. On the day after Nativity, that is, the first day of the play, the same barracks become a theater, but the church atmosphere lingers.

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<sup>14</sup> Alexei Lidov traces the roots of this common iconographic symbol of Christ and Mary’s divine radiance to Neoplatonism: “Following the Neoplatonic conception, the light is depicted as dark and pale blue, white concentric circles, halos thinning out from the centre to the edge and emergent emanating beyond them”. See [Lidov 2012: 67].

<sup>15</sup> Lidov conveys the paradox of the finite containing the infinite in his translation of a well-known Greek moniker for the Theotokos, “ΜΡ ΘΥ Ή ΧΩΡΑ ΤΟΥ ΑΧΩΡΙΤΟΥ (Mater Theou, Chora tou achoretou)”, which, he writes, “may be translated from the Greek as ‘Mother of God, the dwelling place of the Uncontainable’ or, more accurately in my opinion, as ‘the space of that which is beyond space’” [Lidov 2016: 22].

The peculiar curtain itself can be seen as a textile reinforcement of the icon's all-inclusive theme of universal rejoicing. The curtain literally contains the realia of the gathered community, including pieces of clothing and other materials belonging to the prisoners, officers, and townspeople. Sheets of paper begged from officers by prisoners-artists complete the curtain since there was not enough cloth available. The curtain thus serves as an extension of the Theotokos icon, which depicts a spiritual community of varied people living collectively, or what Slavophile theologians Ivan Kireevsky and Aleksei Khomiakov among others call *sobornost'*. As Paul Valliere suggests, "To appreciate *sobornost'* <...> one must imagine the warm communal feeling of a cathedral service on a great feast day" [Valliere 2012: 11]. Leading up to and for the duration of the play, the townspeople, guards, and convicts (Muslim, Jewish, Orthodox Christian, and Catholic alike) overcome individual quarrels and participate in this "communal feeling".

Although Gorianchikov and other special guests get preferred seats near the front, the sense of community in this "strange picture" is reinforced by the crushing proximity of the spectators' bodies, which are so crowded together that the physical boundaries between them seem to break down, as in the All Creation icon. In place of an admission fee, the prisoners pass around a collection basket, as during the liturgy. They are verging on physical unity, yet contrary to the forced unity that typifies the overcrowded prison or that characterizes the "hell" that Gorianchikov describes occurring in the bath-house scene, this uncommonly crowded ward does not create discord among the spectators. On the contrary, Gorianchikov writes:

To begin with, there was the crowd of spectators, squeezed, crushed, jammed together on all sides, waiting patiently and with blissful faces for the show (*predstavlenie*) to begin <...> Many of them had brought logs of wood from the kitchen; setting a thick log against the wall, you could stand on top of it while supporting yourself with both hands on the shoulders of the man in front of you <...> Everyone was behaving peaceably and decorously. Everyone wanted to display himself in the best light before the officers and visitors. All the faces expressed the most simple-hearted expectation <...> What a strange light of childlike joy, of pure and delightful pleasure, emanated from these furrowed and branded foreheads and cheeks, from these gazes of men who until now had been somber and sullen, from these eyes which at other times glistened with a terrifying fire! [Jakim 2013: 158; Достоевский 1972–1990: IV, 122]

The tiny prison quarters feel uncharacteristically boundless, as if stretching to house the entire town – prisoners, officers, and citizens alike – for this communal event. Gorianchikov thus depicts a rare gathering that spans contrasting world-views. Each spectator comes to see the play from a uniquely positioned physical and metaphorical perspective. The typically buried joy of the prisoners now emanates from each of their faces as they wait for the curtain to part and the play to begin. Gorianchikov, who views himself as separate from the convicts for most of the novel, finds himself happily immersed in their festive celebration<sup>16</sup>.

In the prison theater performance, the dividing line between artist and spectator is completely blurred. In the first place, there is no single correct angle from which to view the play. Everyone experiences the play from wherever they are situated in the overly-crowded theater: “Not only were some convicts literally sitting on top of others, particularly in the back rows, but the plank beds and stage wings were packed too, and there were even some ardent spectators who watched the show every night from the adjoining barracks behind the stage” [Jakim 2013: 156; Достоевский 1972–1990: IV, 120]. The variety of perspectives highlights both the different ways of seeing it as well as the different impressions that result from these individualized perspectives, none of which is privileged over the other. The communal viewing also unites the prisoners by their joy, as in the All Creation icon. The physical proximity of the spectators to the performers and the viewpoint of some spectators who are back stage, shadowing the actors’ perspective, breaks down the division between actor and spectator. Instead, the theater, like the icon, is filled to the brim with actor-spectators and co-creators of the feast. The variety of perspectives hints at both the variety of perspectives within the community as a whole as well as the variety of individual perspectives. The lack of division between spectator and actor is also mirrored in Gorianchikov who is both prisoner and narrator. Gorianchikov’s “strange picture” not only humanizes the prisoners but makes him part of their collective.

While the actor Ivanov does not explicitly play the Theotokos, Gorianchikov and the prisoners refer to his character as *blagodetel’naia*

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<sup>16</sup> Dostoevsky idealizes the convicts just as the saintly figures are idealized in the icon. Shawn Elliott illuminates Dostoevsky’s tendency to “iconicize” the folk in his literature by depicting them as the characters in the images and stories that the folk love. Here we have one such example of Dostoevsky depicting peasant convicts as those gathered in their beloved festal icon. See Shawn Elliott’s dissertation, “The Aesthetics of Russian Folk Religion and ‘The Brothers Karamazov’” [Elliott 1997].

*pomeshchnitsa*, which Jakim renders as “the benevolent lady”. The term also conveys the meaning of “beneficent / benevolent lady of the house” and thus reflects the icon’s central theme. The audience greets Ivanov with a roar of laughter when “she” arrives on stage. Gorianchikov also notes that “the lady herself could not refrain from bursting into laughter several times” [Jakim 2013: 162; Достоевский 1972–1990: IV, 125]. In short, “the benevolent lady” participates in the mirth, thereby demonstrating that the actors participate in the audience’s joy as part of this communal experience. Gorianchikov’s depiction of the prisoners in this scene is wholly communal, from the narrator to the actors to the audience, and perhaps even to the reader. Gorianchikov’s notes induce a visual experience in the reader’s imagination. The reader must render the notes on the “benevolent lady” into a communal “scene”. The liturgical context for the play offers the All Creation icon as a template for this vision.

Gorianchikov’s writing characterized as “notes” represent his individual thoughts in private, but as “scenes” they tell the story of collective experience. The barracks theater, like Mary’s womb, becomes spacious enough to incorporate representative “humankind”. The Siberian villagers and prisoners from all walks of life co-participate in the creation of a *sobornost’* that Dionysis captures in his festal icon. The icon, like the play, features a female lead, in an otherwise male-dominated novel and male-dominated feast. The image of the Theotokos seated in her throne of mercy emerges from Gorianchikov’s barracks-cave scene. The barracks, like the cave, is in this moment “full of grace”. The “benevolent lady” both in the icon and in the play bring joy to all those who encounter them, and those who encounter them reciprocate. The prisoners who hang from the rafters mimic the congregation of angels. On the day after Nativity, the miracle of the play mirrors the miracle of the moment that follows Christ’s birth, namely, the gathering around the newborn Christ and the Theotokos in communal rejoicing. The prisoners’ polyphonic play is a literary performance of the polyphonic icon.

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