

## **Christian Apatheia in Dostoevsky's 'Dream of a Ridiculous Man'**

Denis Crnković

Department of Modern Languages, Literatures & Cultures, Gustavus Adolphus College

cronk@gustavus.edu

### *Abstract*

Dostoevsky's "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" has been viewed variously as a story of the realization of the inner self's evil or goodness, of redemption or of perdition. The paper shows that Dostoevsky's familiarity with the Greek Patristic writings informed his narrative and that he infused his narrator's monologue with discernible Patristic concepts. Verbal, ideological and contextual references in the Ridiculous Man's narrative make it clear that the protagonist has embarked on a path to understanding, however confused and imperfect his main purpose might initially be. The narrator's uncertainty of action is expressed in his frequent repetition of "nothing mattered" (все равно), echoing the Patristic exhortations to embrace *apatheia*. To the Greek Fathers the ability to remain unstirred by superfluous earthly emotions was the beginning of the acceptance of *agape*, the ideal of Christian love. The Ridiculous Man's eventual realization that the only commandment that matters is "To love thy neighbor," clearly shows that he embraces the doctrines of the Patristic conception of Christian charity.

By all accounts the stories, sketches, essays and feuilletons that Dostoevsky produced between 1875 and 1877 for his singular journal, *The Diary of a Writer*, were among his most popular. Stories such as "A Gentle Creature", "A Little Boy at a Christmas Party" and "The Centenarian" garnered public and professional praise from all corners for their terse story lines and succinct ethical and moral messages (Frank 2002:338). Of the masterful pieces of short fiction that he wrote for his journal, his "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" stands out for its sweeping overview of the ethical history of mankind and for its simple, though not uncomplicated, moral message. The story has attracted its deserved share of critical analyses over the years, most of which have focused on the characterization of the narrator and his motivations, the story's textual details and its straightforward conclusion. The current article is too brief to allow a fuller review of these critical studies and thus concentrates on a reading of Dostoevsky's text that relies on the writings of the Greek Fathers of the Church as a point of departure. Indeed, the story can be read in light of the Patristic writings, in

particular in light of certain Fathers' understanding of how indifference to earthly passions leads to a deeper comprehension of the absolute truth and consequently of the commandment to love God and neighbor unquestioningly, as expressed in Christian doctrine.

While it is easy to see the title character's indifference, verbalized by his frequent use of the Russian phrase *все равно* ("nothing matters"), as a manifestation of a negative character trait, it is also possible to consider the Ridiculous Man's story as one not of desperation, but of dispassion. This is especially so if one reads the story in light of the works of the Greek Fathers of the Church and their teachings on the necessity of rejecting the things of the earthly world and giving oneself over to the actions of pure love. It is thus possible to understand the Ridiculous Man's "indifference" as a manifestation of the early Christian Fathers' notion of *apatheia*, which to them signified the first step in the path to attaining Christian wisdom. How is it that this self-described Ridiculous Man, who finds himself near suicide and in a state of seemingly senseless disorder, turns into a receptacle of great knowledge and wisdom?

One may seek an answer to this question by viewing a broader context and engaging those works to which Dostoevsky assuredly had direct or indirect recourse in generating his Ridiculous Man<sup>1</sup>. In fact, it seems crucial to view the story in the broadest of contexts here: Dostoevsky's story carries on a dialogue with the entire history of mankind, especially as spelled out in the Gospels, in the Gospel interpretations from the Christian Church's early days, (notably from the Greek Patristic era of the third and fourth centuries) and in Dostoevsky's own Petersburg society of the 19th century. The current paper concentrates on the similarities between Dostoevsky's and the Greek Fathers' understanding of the denial of the material and of that denial's importance in the human process of discovering and practicing true charity.

Dostoevsky, having become interested in their writings during his exile in Siberia, had more than a fleeting familiarity with the Greek Patristic works (Catteau 1978:70-71).<sup>2</sup> In the Russia of his day, the most accessible source of the Greek Patristic writings was, of course, the *Добротолюбие* or Russian adaptation of the Greek

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<sup>1</sup> Dostoevsky's library at the time that he wrote "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" held the foundational Christian texts and prayer books as well as secondary source discussions on theology including such diverse works as the Simeon Bogoslov's sermons on man's journey from darkness to light, Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation Christi* and works by Vladimir Solov'ev, among others. The library also held theological journals, including the monthly *Православный Собеседник* published by the Kazan Theological Academy. (Grossman 1919) Dostoevsky was clearly well read in many areas of orthodox theology and it is not out of the way to assume that he had a good knowledge of the Patristic writings.

<sup>2</sup> In a well-known letter written from his exile in Omsk in 1854, Dostoevsky asked his brother, Mikhail, to send him books, singling out the works of the Church Fathers: "Но вот что необходимо: мне надо (крайне нужно) историков древних (во французск<ом> переводе) и новых, экономистов и отцов церкви. Выбирай дешевле и компактные издания." (Dostoevskij 1996:91).

*Philokalia*, the popular anthology of writings of the Greek Fathers.<sup>3</sup> Important for our discussion are the treatises of Evagrius Ponticus (345–399 AD), in which he proposes that the human progression toward the greatest Christian truth, that unconditional Love of God and neighbor is man's ultimate goal, begins with a rejection of feelings (*apatheia*) for all earthly concerns. A number of concepts key to our discussion of the philosophical and theological similarities between Evagrius and Dostoevsky recur in the monk's major works, the *Praktikos* and the *Ad Monachos*, in which the theologian offers practical advice in the form of aphorisms on the holy life for the coenobitic monk. Both of these works comment on the nature and efficacy of contemplative prayer as it relates to the monk's spiritual journey toward understanding and the attainment of selfless charity (Greek: *agape*). Although intended primarily as a guide for the desert monks of his day, Evagrius' discourses became part of the complex of notions of prayer and the ascetic life popular among the laity in nineteenth century Russia.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout his works, Evagrius clarifies his conception of *agape* and crystallizes earlier Fathers' attempts to define the spiritual role of human dispassion, or impassibility in the face of strong emotion.<sup>5</sup> According to Evagrius, the prayerful monk travels on a path to selfless love (*agape*) that begins with a striving for purity of heart that results from dispassion (*apatheia*). This journey is not without its pitfalls, but the monk who is sincerely engaged in reaching this goal exhibits signs of dispassion that indicate he is on the right road. Not least of these signs is the monk's disinterest in not only the world around him, but the feelings that might lead him back to the false passions of this world. One indicator of true dispassion, as opposed to a kind of blithe indifference, is the nature of the monk's calm inner spiritual state.

Evagrius asserts that perfect dispassion comes to the soul when all the demons who oppose the active life are overcome. On the other hand, he warns, dispassion can be imperfect and is so called "when the soul still wages war as much as it can with the demon who attacks it without, however, giving ground" to it. The "mind will not pass through, nor complete safely this passionate way (of trials) and will not enter the realm of the incorporeal, unless it sets right what is within" (Kadloubovsky & Palmer 1953:108).

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<sup>3</sup>The popular *Добротолюбие*, an anthology of writings of the Greek Fathers translated into Church Slavonic (1793) and Russian (1877) from the Greek compilation known as the *Philokalia*, was one of the possible sources for Dostoevsky's knowledge of the Patristic writings. Although Grossman's catalogue of Dostoevsky's library does not make reference to the *Добротолюбие*, Dostoevsky's interest in Christian writings is a *topos*, and his library did include many of the foundational Christian works. Indeed, the author's many references and allusions to them throughout his writings attest to his keen knowledge of Orthodox theology.

<sup>4</sup> See Berdyaev, especially Chapter 4 for a concise discussion of the currents of spiritual thought in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent short discussion on the development of the idea of *apatheia* in the early Fathers, v. Špidlík Chapter 10, part 2.

*Apatheia* thus defines a state of the soul in which complete tranquility reigns, in which the soul is impassible, that is, unmoved by the confusion and upheaval that the senses bring. This is not to say, however, that *apatheia* constitutes the absence of feeling, either ecstasy or suffering. Evagrius asserts that “the reasoning soul acts according to its nature when its concupiscible side tends to virtue and when its irascible side struggles for it” (Evagrius 1971:86; 676)<sup>6</sup>, so that dispassion purifies the soul’s natural passions (ibid. 78; 666 and 85; 676). *Apatheia* as a refusal to entertain false and spiritually destructive passions is a key part of Evagrius’ practical spiritual method for cleansing the soul since the soul must operate according to its nature, concupiscible when desiring virtue and irascible when struggling against the demons (Špidlík 1986:274). This concept of purification of the soul in the face of temptation and trial plays a great role in the Ridiculous Man’s journey to his conclusion about the basic nature of charity. Nor is dispassion an end in itself for Dostoevsky’s dreamer, it is rather, in the words of Gregory of Nyssa, “the restoration of the image of God after one has removed that which has darkened its beauty ...[and] the passions” (ibid.:276). Yet, the Fathers questioned, did handing oneself over to dispassion mean the rejection of all feeling? Although Clement of Alexandria concluded that all human feeling was dispersed by *apatheia*, Evagrius and especially Gregory of Nyssa contended that dispassion and insensibility were opposed to each other (ibid.:274). The spirit must work according to its nature and will therefore be justly irascible in its struggle against demons or justly desirous in its quest for virtue.

Evagrius warns, however, that although one can attain a perfect dispassion, dispassion itself can be imperfect if incomplete and generated in the wrong spiritual state. Concerned that his monks avoid this imperfect *apatheia* – a false peaceful state of the soul brought on by the devil – and that they strive for the perfect *apatheia* of God’s grace, he asks how one recognizes perfect *apatheia*. Quite simply, he answers, the soul that has attained the perfect dispassion is no longer bothered by thoughts or even by their recollection (Evagrius 1971:67; 652). Furthermore, he asserts that dreams can reveal the bearer’s true state of *apatheia* since the mind of such a person remains “calm before the images of sleep and looks on these objects with serenity” (ibid.:64; 649).<sup>7</sup>

If dreams in general are a medium for revealing the inner state of mind, then the Ridiculous Man’s particular dream shows his total spiritual state and virtually his entire path to the truth: it is a journey begun in dispassion, that continues through the vision of man’s greatest sacrifices and ends in the *agape* that is born of an epiphanic realization of the ultimate truth. This, in fact, is the very product that Evagrius describes: “*Agape* is the child of *apatheia*” (ibid.: 81; 670). By experiencing the path

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<sup>6</sup> References for Evagrius are to the chapter numbers of his *Praktikos* in the Guillaumont edition. Page numbers to the same edition are given after the semicolons.

<sup>7</sup>In a broader context, Dostoevsky’s use of the dream as both plot device and character motivator appears early in his works. For a thorough exposition of dreams in Dostoevsky’s early writings see Dukkon 1997.

of the man-like-God the Ridiculous Man finds the true passion (i.e. the passion worth having) which is the passion of out-reaching love. A closer examination of Dostoevsky's text reveals how this progression represents the path to ultimate truth begun in the Ridiculous Man's throes of imperfect – but promising – dispassion.

The Ridiculous Man's experience of dispassion is repeatedly recalled in the first section of the story by the repetition of the Russian phrase *все равно* and by the narrator's own revelation that he has ceased to care about anything, that he is indifferent to all the events around him. In the beginning of the story his mental state parallels his spiritual state, that is, he shows an indifference to nearly everything in his physical, earthly surroundings, rejecting human emotion as superfluous and leaving himself open only to the possibility of oblivion to be brought about by suicide. His "dispassion" is therefore imperfect by Patristic standards since he gives ground to that which is destructive, i.e. the thoughts of and eventual clear intent to shoot himself. Ironically, this leaves him so devoid of any distraction that he is open to a certain inspiration. Our hero experiences a doubt so deep that he questions if anything has any value, and although his is not the peaceful state of mind that comes from true dispassion, this state of not caring about anything proves to be crucial: it is the catalyst that leads him to discover the ultimate Christian Orthodox truth that considers *agape* to be the ultimate good.

Although the narrator's apathy seems pervasive, the reader is nevertheless compelled to ask the question: Toward exactly what has the Ridiculous Man become dispassionate? To those very things which might distract him on his impending journey to *agape* and, as a specific and intriguing textual homologue to the writings of the Church Fathers, to those things that would anger him. He is, he claims, no longer irascible where irascibility has no purpose.

Like the Greek Fathers, the Ridiculous Man realizes that complete indifference is impossible and that non-feeling and dispassion are not necessarily the same thing. In spite of his determination not to be moved by normal human passions or emotions, the Ridiculous Man nonetheless experiences events that provoke feelings. Indeed, what does provoke feeling (*pathos*) in our narrator is cleverly invented by Dostoevsky – it is an incident full of pathos – a young girl's gnawing plea for help. Indeed, this one incident is reason enough for the reader to question whether the Ridiculous Man experiences sheer indifference or "dispassion" toward those earthly cares, worries and events that do not matter in relationship to the ultimate truth he claims to have discovered. Moreover, the narrator himself indicates his awareness that his indifference is not composed solely of insensitivity:

You see, although nothing mattered to me, I actually felt pain, for instance. It was exactly the same in the moral arena: if something pitiable happened, I would feel pity just as I used to do when there were things in life that did matter to me.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the Ridiculous Man's dispassion at first manifests itself as a kind of undirected and sarcastic indifference (*все равно*) that leads him to thoughts of suicide. Yet here, his strident determination to kill himself fails him because his very indifference prevents him from accomplishing the deed and he is soon forced, as the result of a little girl's pleas for help, to question the legitimacy of rejecting all feeling.

It became clear that, if I am a man and not nothing and if I have not yet returned to nothing, then I am alive and consequently I can suffer, get angry and feel shame for my transgressions.<sup>9</sup>

Is it just, he argues with himself, to conclude that all feeling is irrational and meaningless and that therefore all things are pointless, since he is human and alive and therefore must feel? This is the very question that taunted the ancient Fathers.

The Ridiculous Man's struggle to maintain his indifference is often accompanied by the possibility of anger: In the opening chapter, he is able to bely his anger ("Then I left off being angry with people."<sup>10</sup>), whereas here, for the sake of charity to the little girl, he must call on anger to solve the apparent paradox of engaging a passionless passion ("...a question suddenly arose before me and I could not settle it. The question was an idle one, but I was angered."<sup>11</sup>). His feeling must be, as Gregory of Nyssa had it, *apathes*, that is, passionless (Špidlík 1986:274). Joseph Frank sees this irritation to the point of anger as a lapse in the narrator's resolve to be dispassionate even about his own indifference and suggests that this state of irritation and confusion sets the stage for his redemption by means of the little girl (Frank 2002:352–353). The role of the girl as savior, Frank rightly states, concerns not only the Ridiculous Man's postponing his suicide but also his having to confront the contradictory pathos that he unwillingly experiences. As expected, the Ridiculous Man is at first confused by this move into the paradoxical realm of almost pure feeling. The apparent contradiction even startles him, although its resolution was quite clear to the Patristic theologians: dispassion, or lack of passion, is to be distinguished from lack of feeling. In fact the human inclination to feeling is an integral component of the struggle to attain true charity.

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<sup>8</sup> Видите ли: хоть мне и было все равно, но ведь боль-то я, например, чувствовал... Так точно и в нравственном отношении: случилось что-нибудь жалкое, то почувствовал бы жалость, так же как и тогда, когда мне было еще в жизни не все равно (425). English translations are mine throughout, unless otherwise referenced. Page numbers for the Russian quotations from the "Dream" are to Достоевский, «Сон смешного человека».

<sup>9</sup> Представлялось ясным, что если я человек, и еще не нуль, и пока не обратился в нуль, то живу, а следовательно, могу страдать, сердиться и ощущать стыд за свои поступки (425).

<sup>10</sup> Тогда я вдруг перестал сердиться на людей (421).

<sup>11</sup> ...вдруг возник тогда передо мной вопрос, и я не мог разрешить его. Вопрос был праздный, но я рассердился (425).

The Ridiculous Man, however, is unable at first to recognize the essence of the difference between the arousal of his feelings in this instance and the non-arousal of his passions in other contexts. In a sense, he is unable to see the difference between the straightforward and direct temptation to indulge one's evil passions and the—much more dangerous—circumspect temptation to sin by ignoring what is a healthful and even beneficent arousal of one's passion, sympathy with the girl's suffering. In the face of this inherently illogical, nearly absurd, but real, dichotomy—passion opposes passion—his rational conclusion that “nothing matters” fails him. Now, as if devoid of anything to prevent him, he can give into “feeling”. Moreover, he is now becoming more keenly aware that “indifference” may be of a different order than simply being inured to all emotional events. This realization, however, is only one stopping point on his road to this truth.

Like the unexpected appearance of the pleading girl, the unexpected appearance of the star, to which the Ridiculous Man has turned as a beacon of rationality, also represents a type of “giving in” to emotion – but of the type directly opposed to that feeling elicited by the girl's plight. The Ridiculous Man is here confronted with two paths: one the Christian path of faith and love, the other the path of false light, based on inordinate rationalization, which is ultimately darkness. Thus, his reliance can be either on a dispassion of truth (i.e., a dispassion that accompanies him on his path on the road to truth) or on an indifference that obscures that right path and leads him from it. Thus, the opening sequences of the Ridiculous Man's tale show the narrator confronted with the choice between finding the ultimate truth or finding ultimate falsehoods: the former is presented to him by the little girl's piteous pleas, the latter by the romantic, even sentimental, but destructive vision of a distant star breaking through the dark clouds. In typical fashion, Dostoevsky places truth at the end of a gritty path and falsehood on an ostensibly higher – ironically, even heavenly – plane.

Robert Jackson correctly concludes that Dostoevsky “understands suicide as an extinguishing of the light, an objective denial of the light, a denial of God and immortality” (Jackson 1981:274). Similar to Jackson's conclusions is Christopher Pike's observation that a series of paradoxes confronts the Ridiculous Man as he sorts through the wave of emotions that has overcome him after his encounter with the little girl (Pike 1984:49–50). Price and Jackson see these seeming contradictions as the result of the Ridiculous Man's over-reliance on rational thought, to the exclusion of what Pike calls “emotion.” Ratiocination, “the disease of consciousness” as it has been called, stands in the way of this path to “enlightened” feeling. On the other hand, it is necessary to it. Arguing with himself the questions “Would I or would I not have felt shame...” if [I] had committed a crime on another planet, the Ridiculous Man logically concludes that reason is limited, that he, “cannot reason his way to moral and spiritual truth [because] truth – the ideal – must be felt” (Jackson 1981:278). Feeling is thus not

contrary to *apatheia*, it rather compliments it. The question is not, then, “Does the Ridiculous Man care?” but, “How does the Ridiculous Man not care?” In light of dispassion, “passion” becomes positive. As Evagrius explains, when superfluous and even damaging passions are removed, the remaining passions are made pure and become the tools of *agape*.

Given that the Ridiculous Man experiences a cleansing of his superfluous passions so that he is unencumbered by them on his road to the truth; it is difficult to agree with Roger Phillips, who dismisses the Ridiculous Man’s frequent recourse to the phrase *все равно* as essentially ambiguous. Phillips argues that it is obvious that the Ridiculous Man “really does care, all too much” (Phillips 1975:357) and contends that the Ridiculous Man’s indifference remains an outer façade, “a consciously adopted defense mechanism” against being looked on as silly (ibid.:357). By concluding that the Ridiculous Man only play acts at “true indifference” because he really does notice what goes on around him, Phillips ignores the more probing question of how the Ridiculous Man himself reconciles the apparent ambiguity between his indifference and his acute feelings. Moreover, Phillips’ discussion of the truth misses the crucial point that the concept of truth for Dostoevsky’s character makes little room for ambiguity. Hence, when the Ridiculous Man speaks of *Istina* (*Истина*) he speaks of an absolute. (“But isn’t it really all the same whether it was a dream or reality, if the dream raised the Truth before me?”<sup>12</sup>) One cannot help but note the ironic use of the negative *не все равно* in this question, in which the word truth is pointedly capitalized. Thus, what Phillips sees as dichotomous is not at all so:

in what [the Ridiculous Man] tells us there is not one but two truths. He himself refers to it in one place as radiant bliss of the beautiful people and the unbroken harmony of their lives, and in another as his corruption of them and their subsequent life, for he has experienced both (ibid.:362).

From the very beginning of the narrative the reader is aware that the Ridiculous Man has chosen to follow the dispassionate path to unambiguous truth, however vague it may seem to the reader at first. Early on he reveals what has brought him to his current state: “But I gave up caring about anything, and all the problems disappeared. And it was after that that I found out the truth.”<sup>13</sup> The dreamer’s procession from impassibility to truth is direct and linear.<sup>14</sup>

Nor does he set one “truth” against the other as some readers have suggested. Rather, he sets “truth” against “falsehood” so that, what Phillips sees as alternating truths is, in essence, the alternation of truth and falsehood that the Ridiculous Man encounters on his path to the ultimate truth. In Dostoevsky’s typical manner,

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<sup>12</sup> Но неужели не все равно сон ли или нет, если сон этот возвестил мне Истину? (427)

<sup>13</sup> Но мне стало *все равно* и вопросы все удалились. И вот после того уж, я узнал истину (422).

<sup>14</sup> In this regard, Gerald Sabo discusses Dostoevsky’s reliance on the New Testament and Christ’s description of Himself as “the Way, the Truth and the Life” and how this formulation is central to understanding the Ridiculous Man’s progress toward living a life of Christian charity (Sabo 2009:57-58).

seemingly contradictory elements often turn out not to be so, so that the apparent ambiguity we spoke of earlier — passion vs. passion — dissolves when the value of any given passion is measured against Dostoevsky's criterion of *Istina*, and not the criterion of simple, even feeble, logic.

The two destinations, life and oblivion, that the Ridiculous Man sets before himself stand in crystalline opposition to each other. Yet he might have overlooked these two most important choices had his mind not been cleared of the unimportant encumbrances that everyday life offers. Faced with two routes, the Ridiculous Man returns to his hollow where he intends to follow the physical path of suicide – which, he believes, will lead to a physical death and oblivion. His plans are not carried out, however, and he ends up following a metaphysical “dream path,” one that begins with an ironic dream-suicide and a period of “oblivion” in the grave.

Even though Dostoevsky does not use the dream as a medium of tranquil expression, as Evagrius describes the dreams of those who have attained true dispassion, he does use it as a medium for the discovery of the true purpose of the Ridiculous Man's *apatheia*. It is possible to interpret the author's treatment of the Ridiculous Man's dream as a kind of expansion of Evagrius' insight into the psychological nature of dreams, showing them not only as mirrors of the soul's state, but as pathways for the soul's journey as well. Far from contradicting Evagrius' assertions, Dostoevsky broadens the intertextual dialogue to include his own insights into the spiritual nature of the unconscious mind.

Is this dreamed “death” then a vindication of the Ridiculous Man's conclusion that since nothing matters only oblivion is possible? Here Dostoevsky continues to bait his reader with a “logical vs. illogical” opposition. Yet if we view this “death” within the Patristic intertextual context we have established, it readily takes on a more Orthodox hue. For the Ridiculous Man to reach the truth he must, as the Christian tenet has it, “die to himself and the world.” Indeed, Evagrius speaks of the paradox of dying to the intellect for the sake of gaining knowledge:

Our intelligent nature, deadened by sin, Christ awakes (to repentance) by the contemplation of all ages (what was, what is and what will be); and His Father resurrects through knowledge of God this soul, which then dies by the death of Christ, death to sin. This is the meaning of the words of the Apostle, “For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him”<sup>15</sup> (Kadloubovsky & Palmer 1953:104).

Unlike the physical death that the Ridiculous Man initially sees as a portal to oblivion, but which ultimately is not important, the metaphorical death to the material world that he experiences in his dream has a moral and spiritual essence that is the very basis of

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<sup>15</sup> II Tim 2.11 reads Πιστός ὁ λόγος· εἰ γὰρ συναπεθάνομεν, καὶ συζήσομεν· (Faithful is the saying: Indeed, if we died with him, we shall also live with him).

the heightened awareness of the truth that the Ridiculous Man will achieve by the end of his journey.

As we have described it, dispassion's two versions can be either true or non-true. Since the enigma of the Ridiculous Man's journey finds a key to its understanding in the Greek Patristic theology of *apatheia*, dispassion in the face of human emotion can be made manifest either by future despair or by complete redemption. In the Ridiculous Man's case, he could experience either of these outcomes: in the end he experiences the latter.

The journey itself is not simply one of emotional or even spiritual valleys and peaks, as some analysts have suggested;<sup>16</sup> it is, rather, a relentlessly straight path on which the Ridiculous Man must keep his metaphorical foot steady lest he go astray. In Orthodox terms, his is the universal journey of all mankind and is therefore a path to salvation, whose end is available to all who voluntarily take up the same path as the Christian Savior. The Ridiculous Man is capable of following this arduous path only because he has become unaffected by overtly conscious thought and thus has become dispassionate about trifling human matters (Gregory of Nyssa 1893:352).

In some sense, the Ridiculous Man's "journey" to the truth would strain credibility if left couched in a dream. Indeed, the narrator himself questions whether he experiences a dream or another reality:

But on the other hand, how can I not believe that it all occurred? ... Even granted that it was a dream, all of it must have happened. You know, I will tell you a secret: maybe all of this was not a dream at all!<sup>17</sup>

As Robin Feuer Miller points out, the reader may view the question of whether the Ridiculous Man's experience is indeed a dream with the same skeptical eye as Ebenezer Scrooge's dream in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (Miller 1995:87–90). One may appreciate the profound truth in the convenient fiction found in both tales. Ironically, the narrator of the ridiculous dream is conscious of the convenience of his dream and assigns its lessons to reality. It is significant that the Greek Patristics do not dismiss dreams offhand as "unreal" or incapable of revealing significant truths. To them, truth is truth regardless of the individual's physical or mental status. In fact, as we have noted, Evagrius saw the dream as an often more reliable and more revealing source of certain truths than the waking state (Evagrius 1971:54; 56; 624–626).

The Ridiculous Man's course, whether waking or in a dream, is itself not without pitfalls; yet these pitfalls are not all individual, they are, rather, those of the entire human race. He faces a harsh fact (*pravda, правда*) as well: "Albeit that my heart

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<sup>16</sup>For example, Jackson, who sees the Ridiculous Man's struggle as one between rational thought and passion and Wasiolek who concludes that the narrator is ultimately blinded by his blasphemous intentions to be Christ.

<sup>17</sup> Но зато как же мне не верить, что все это было? ... Пусть это сон, но все это не могло не быть. Знаете ли, я скажу вам секрет: все это, может быть, было вовсе не сон! (436)

might have originated the dream, but would my heart alone really have had the power to originate this awful truth...?"<sup>18</sup> This "truth" that his heart bears him is the awful fact that he himself is corruption, because he is human and thus shares in the tendency of all humankind to evil. Indeed, his experience on his dream planet is the experience of all mankind, from the Garden of Eden through Adam's fall and to his redemption. This universalization of the narrator provides a vivid example of Evagrius "contemplation of all ages" mentioned above. The Ridiculous Man realizes that he is the cause of his hosts' downfall precisely because he is human – i.e. inclined to evil – and therefore a contaminant in their Edenic world. On the other hand, he is also desirous of the good, as represented in his will to redeem these people for what he has done. His inclination to redeem them is based on the one model he is keenly aware of, the crucifixion. Thus he struggles with the Fathers' "demons of evil" while remaining desirous of the good. Ironically, however, he is unable to redeem this world through crucifixion precisely because he is human and not God.

Edward Wasiolek's assertion that the Ridiculous Man's motive for presenting himself for crucifixion is blasphemous (Wasiolek 1964:147) ignores Christ's challenge to his disciples to "take up your cross and follow Me." The desire for crucifixion, the "taking up" of the cross, leads the Ridiculous Man along the right path at whose end stands the truth. There is, however, one crucial difference between the history of the human race on earth and the history of the Ridiculous Man's surreal race: in his dream, there is no need for him to be crucified since in real history the ultimate crucifixion has already occurred. Thus, the Ridiculous Man's redemption comes not in repeating the death of God at the crucifixion but in his realization that truth lies in adhering to the great commandment as preached by Jesus Christ – who took on death as God– "Love thy neighbor as thyself".<sup>19</sup> This commandment requires one to en flesh the Greek verb *agapein*, the word used so crucially in the Patristic understanding of the ultimate goal of *apatheia*.

Accepting and practicing this *agape*, as Evagrius and Gregory of Nyssa put it, is the ultimate goal on the golden path of *apatheia*, and it is the truth that Ridiculous Man ultimately finds. Evagrius likewise coordinates the three major attributes of dispassion (*apatheia*), knowledge (*gnosis*) and charity (*agape*) in the central portions of his *Ad Monachos*, considering their integration the highest attainment of the spiritual life while assigning their greatest significance to *agape* (Driscoll 1991:251–253). Indeed,

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<sup>18</sup> Пусть сон мой породило сердце мое, но разве одно сердце мое в силах было породить ту ужасную правду ...? (436)

<sup>19</sup> The number of occurrences alone of this dictum in the gospels would lend it importance enough for Dostoevsky's point that Ridiculous Man has reached the ultimate realization of the truth. The mandatum to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt 9.19) centers on the Greek *αγαπω* a verb that unambiguously expresses the type of selfless spiritual love demanded in Christian dogma. Cf. Mark 12.31, Luke 10.27, Rom 13.9, *inter alia*.

Evagrius sees knowledge as the course to wisdom and dispassion as the course to prudence, each of which in turn is the revelation of *agape*. Attaining this interrelatedness is the monk's – and by extension every Christian's – constant struggle. So it is also with the Ridiculous Man: as Jackson notes, the dreamer is a “man eternally striving for the ideal” (Jackson 1981:284). Thus, on his “return” to reality he seeks to put into practice this lesson begun in imperfect *apatheia* by constant preaching, which he begins by relating his dream.

The Ridiculous Man's story follows the spiritual journey that Patristic theology regards as mankind's process of striving for the ultimate truth, the realization that man's greatest fulfillment comes in accepting and practicing Christian charity. From an imperfect *apatheia*, to a mystical (dreamed) purification of his being, to the *gnosis* of the truth brought about by contemplation of all human history, to the practice of *agape*, the Ridiculous Man follows that very path to charity that the Fathers prescribe.

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