

Title: Reasonable to Ridiculous: Ecstatic Vision and Inarticulacy in Vladimir Odoevsky and Fyodor Dostoevsky

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The personal experience of truth through ecstatic vision is a problematic motif in works of Dostoevsky and his older contemporary, Prince Vladimir Odoevsky. The visionary witnesses truth for all mankind—yet his visionary power always bears a stigma or marginalizing stamp. The alleged madman of “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man” (1877) is scorned for voicing his dream of restored humanity. Odoevsky’s earlier hero in “The Sylph (From the Notes of a Reasonable Man)” (1837) is an initiate to visionary realms introduced to him by an elemental spirit. Subjected to medical treatment by his skeptical friend, the ‘reasonable man’ of the story’s subtitle, his forced recovery, robs him of contact with the higher, more authentic world, viz. “the soul of the soul,” where “poetry is truth.”

This paper looks closely at the ways two writers, both credited with a role in the development of Russian realism, never ceased to test the parameters of the ‘natural’ or the ‘real.’ In each author’s work, the encounter with truth is revelatory, epiphanic and emotionally cathartic. However, the Edenic harmony experienced by the dreamers is incommunicable to their modern contemporaries. Ecstatic vision in both authors speaks to contradictions in the emergent modern Self, where premodern enchantment is silenced and nullified by modern disengagement and the hegemony of instrumental reason. In spite of the shifting locus of orientation to inner nature, the post-Enlightenment positivist outlook, with its clear delineation of boundaries between the psychic and physical, prohibits moral and spiritual knowledge unverified by modern reason. Thus, inarticulacy is the underpinning condition of these visionary tales of modern moral and intellectual life and their aesthetic expressions. In these fictions exploring the contradictions of modernity vis-à-vis remedial ecstatic vision, the moral predicament of modern identities is itself a journey to fantastic worlds and testament to their inarticulacy.