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The Peasant in Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* and "Muzhik Marei"

In this paper I will look at the role of the peasant in Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* and "Muzhik Marei". In both works, the peasant is the site of a collective "revelation" that breaks the hero (Gorianchikov, Dostoevsky's autobiographical narrator) out of the confines of linear time. The hero's revelations are collective insofar as they concern not just the soul of the hero who experiences it, but offer a solution to an epochal problem – one that is both philosophical and social. It speaks to the whole Russian nation. The problem is philosophical (specifically one of Christian ontology) insofar as it asks: how can a person be determined by oppression, imprisoned in a body, and yet hold the image of God within him? The problem is social because it asks: how will society – and the educated elite in particular – be able to view the debauched peasant-convict as a fully conscious human capable of change (who is, moreover, defined by his hatred for them, the privileged)? How will we be able to view this man, a peasant trapped in the prison of his habits, as a soul possessed of free will? This involves, too, another question about the possibility for society at large to change: the improvement of the lot of the disenfranchised masses as well as their integration into society is the barometer of that change. "Does the peasant have the image of God in him, and am I a person who is able to see it" — this is the core question of Dostoevsky's "prison" narratives – in their very structure as well as content. And if the revelation about the peasants Dostoevsky's narrators achieve is collective, it is also narrative, worked out in an artistic medium capable of a certain "game with time" that resists the final word of linear causation and opens out beyond the restricted vision to which that linearity condemns us.