



- or, *Before & After the Grand Inquisitor:*

The Wanderings of Our Lady through Hell

In France, clerks, as well as the monks in the monasteries, used to give regular performances in which the Madonna, the saints, the angels, Christ, and God himself were brought on the stage. In those days it was done in all simplicity. In Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* an edifying and gratuitous spectacle was provided for the people in the Hôtel de Ville of Paris in the reign of Louis XI. in honor of the birth of the dauphin. It was called *Le bon jugement de la très sainte et gracieuse Vierge Marie*, and she appears herself on the stage and pronounces her bon

The Ways of the Mother of God: A Paschal Story with an Epilogue*

Scris de Dostoievski et al.
Joi, 20 Aprilie 2023 21:02

jugement. Similar plays, chiefly from the Old Testament, were occasionally performed in Moscow too, up to the times of Peter the Great. But besides plays there were all sorts of legends and ballads scattered about the world, in which the saints and angels and all the powers of Heaven took part when required. In our monasteries the monks busied themselves in translating, copying, and even composing such poems—and even under the Tatars. There is, for instance, one such poem (of course, from the Greek), *The Wanderings of Our Lady through Hell*, with descriptions as bold as Dante's. Our Lady visits hell, and the Archangel Michael leads her through the torments. She sees the sinners and their punishment. There she sees among others one noteworthy set of sinners in a burning lake; some of them sink to the bottom of the lake so that they can't swim out, and 'these God forgets'—an expression of extraordinary depth and force. And so Our Lady, shocked and weeping, falls before the throne of God and begs for mercy for all in hell—for all she has seen there, indiscriminately. Her conversation with God is immensely interesting. She beseeches Him, she will not desist, and when God points to the hands and feet of her Son, nailed to the Cross, and asks, 'How can I forgive His tormentors?' she bids all the saints, all the martyrs, all the angels and archangels to fall down with her and pray for mercy on all without distinction. It ends by her winning from God a respite of suffering every year from Good Friday till Trinity Day, and the sinners at once raise a cry of thankfulness from hell, chanting, 'Thou art just, O Lord, in this judgment.' Well, my poem would have been of that kind if it had appeared at that time... (Constance Garnett, tr.)

[The Secret Ladder](#) ([A legend](#))

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Scris de Dostoievski et al.
Joi, 20 Aprilie 2023 21:02

The Lord called Peter the apostle to a reckoning
And said: "How negligent you have become!
No longer do you execute your sacred duty,
No longer do you follow My command.

The keys to paradise I've given to you, Peter,
For you to meet the souls of all who die,
To judge their earthly lives with strict impartiality
And only let the righteous come inside.

What do I see now, Peter? Millions of sinners
Sing praises, glorifying God in Eden!
Do you sleep sweetly at the pearly gates of heaven?
What can you say to Me in your defense?"

Apostle Peter stood there helplessly, declaring:
"I know not how they could have come inside!
The gates of heaven I have rigorously guarded
And stood here day and night, and held the keys."

Then, looking at the sinners' faces with alarm:
"I did not see these faces at the gates!
They have arrived here by some other way perhaps;
I did not let them through the pearly gates!

Allow me to inspect all Eden's hidden corners
And find the secret path to paradise."
"So be it as you wish!" – the Lord said then, arising:
"I, too, would like to know this matter's truth.

Give me the keys and I shall walk with you together,
And carefully inspect all heaven's corners.
But if I find you have been lax in duty, Peter,
Then I will have to tax you most severely!"....

The Lord then walked through Eden with Apostle Peter,
Already they have passed through all its lanes,
Already they have reached the other, furthest end,
But nowhere was a loophole to be found.

The Lord regarded Peter with reproachful eyes,
Not knowing how to solve this strangest puzzle.
His head bowed down, Apostle Peter stood and trembled,
And dared not raise his eyes for fear and sorrow....

The Ways of the Mother of God: A Paschal Story with an Epilogue*

Scris de Dostoievski et al.
Joi, 20 Aprilie 2023 21:02

Then very suddenly.... A tiny rustling noise
Was heard among the shadows in the bushes....
They stopped to listen.... And with firm and quiet steps
Approached.... And glanced behind the quivering bushes.

There stood the Holy Virgin, bent over an opening,
Her kindly eyes were firmly fixed upon it....
A silken rope snaked thinly in Her tender hands,
Descending straight into the pit of Hades.

And out of Hades many sinners climbed this rope,
And quietly came into heaven's haven.
Their tired eyes were filled with boundless hope and joy,
And glistened with the tears of their repentance.

Their Intercessor they approached with sacred hope,
And overwhelmed with penitence and tears,
They fell down on their knees with purifying prayer
And bitter crying over all their sins.

She covered all the sinners with Her Holy Veil,
And blessed their penitence and bitter tears,
And sinful souls shone forth as gold, anewly gleaming,
All pure and cleansed by Her divinest tears.

The Holy Virgin prayed for all repentant sinners,
And lifting quietly Her precious Veil,
With an embrace She blessed them, made the Cross' sign,
And gently let them into paradise....

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Joi, 20 Aprilie 2023 21:02

“Let us go now!” – the Lord said, covering His eyes,
“We must not know of what is going on!
What She achieves here with Her divine tears of grace,
We have no right or power to impede!

Pick up your keys and forthwith show no mercy, Peter!
And only let the righteous come inside!
But by this quiet path of genuine contrition,
Let all repentants enter paradise!”

(*) The first story is Ivan's introduction to his "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor", from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Constance Garnett, tr. It is, among other things, a dostoevskian Paschal story, and a possible key, or framework, for the whole novel, if not for the author's complete works. The second reads almost like its continuation in verse. Could it be Ivan's dream, or vision, from a sequel to the *Brothers Karamazov*, where [he becomes a hermit](#), a kind of Arsenius the Great, or Isaac the Syrian, capable of raising the likes of Smerdyakov from spiritual death? A small poem, somehow written and shared by Dostoevsky from beyond the grave? Or just something eligible by Anna Dostoevskaya as the definitive preface to the heavenly edition of Dostoevsky for Children (cf.

[Dr. Raffaella Vassena](#)

on the historical editions; and our online sampling of stories, plus a few more,

[here](#)

)? Also see

[here](#)

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