

**“Art as truth carried on the shoulders of individuals and courage as the quest for personal distinctiveness in Robert Letellier’s, *Paradigms of Freedom*’.**

But does it matter if it was a dream, if the dream made known to me the truth”, pondered the protagonist in Dostoevsky’s short story, *The Dream of Ridiculous Man*. Letellier too begins with the patriarch Jacob’s dream of a ladder reaching to heaven, as the first of many ‘vectors of transcendence’. The struggle for self-determinism, that is the quest for personal distinctiveness, is most clearly manifest in the life of the patriarch, whose struggle to overcome his duplicity and eventual attainment of the blessing through wrestling with the divine, has come to symbolise the human struggle to seize his destiny. “The imagery... is a transforming medium... an ascent associated with the attainment of the ultimate liberty of the spirit, and is associated with an inspiration that reflects the divine activities of creation and salvation.” This creative inspiration outworked in the world is what endows Art with its “sacred and consecrating mission.”

In such vectors Letellier identifies the Genesis 1:26 doctrine of the Imago Dei played out in history through the lives of distinctive individuals, ranging from politicians to reformers, poets to artists, composers and novelists. The vectors “proffer the idea of an ascent to new insights, wisdom, inspiration, and a creativity that are metaphors for transcendence.” The Russian critic Konstantin Barsht noted that in the artistic approach to knowledge, ‘truth is carried on the shoulders of individuals.’<sup>1</sup> This epithet captures the thrust of *Paradigms of Freedom*, that the courageous strand, present in all cultures and all ages, is marked by individual instances of a determination to surge forward and, as if wrestling a divine opponent, to lay hold of freedom. Letellier finds the promise of freedom in creativity. Ultimately, Letellier’s breath of historical engagement and willingness to engage with, and draw from, multiple fields and consider the tenets of contrasting disciplines, serves to enrich the central thrust, namely that the yearning for freedom, self-distinctiveness and truth exists, is a central feature even, in all artistic endeavours.

To Letellier, the journey from ‘image’ to ‘likeness’ – terms that rank alongside ‘nature’ as perhaps the most nebulous in the English language – can be considered the journey to freedom from a fallen nature, or transcendence, far surpassing the state of original innocence. Letellier’s work can be read as an apology for the necessity of the Incarnation – in terms of the reality signified by the term – that resides in the personal experience in history. These courageous individuals capture the imagination precisely because they are shadows, albeit pale imitations, of the Christ event. The Belinsky quote in the foreword – a meditation upon the horrors of the world in the context of the hope wrought by the promise of the eschatological fulfilment of all things in Christ - read as a hermeneutic key, is perhaps the crux and thrust of Letellier’s message. All these individual Paradigms of Freedom are not mere stars in the gloom of human history that bears witness to the tragic demise of the world. Rather, read in the context of an unfolding salvation history, they are linked to a trajectory that is foremost hope filled, envisioning a time when humanity will no longer ‘see it part’ in the context of the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth.

As Letellier acknowledges, ‘Paradigms’ is not a history, but “a consideration of mankind’s search to be free, his slow but inexorable journey into the light, a striving embodied in the poetry of liberation.” Letellier finds common strands that pervade cultures, like a golden thread running through time and history. As a study of the pursuit of freedom outworked in the Arts, it is unparalleled in scope and unrivalled in breadth. The array of illustrations helpfully serves to enhance and break up the text.

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<sup>1</sup> Barsht, Konstantin. Religious Thought and Scientific Knowledge in the Artistic System of Dostoevsky, *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 50, no. 3 (Winter 2011–12), pp. 34–47. Trans. by Stephen D. Shenfield. p35-36.

Letellier moves seamlessly from abstract philosophical theology, to history, from the personal example to the universal principle. Somewhere within the creative process the artist considers the nature of God's relationship with the created world. The novel examines human freedom through the consequences of choosing to live out belief or non-belief, or unwillingness to engage either. The innate capacity to assimilate and transcend, his "unity of answerability", and subsequent ability to journey from image to likeness, renders the person sacred.

Critically, instead of a survey of people and institutions who have sought propagate a conceptual freedom, linked to a philosophical or political ideology; 'Paradigms' examines the contribution of the artist to various models of freedom, some of which may be identified as vectors of transcendence when, as Letellier notes, "image becomes likeness." Transcendence, for Letellier, is linked to individual expression of the artistic worldview. These are not anonymous gears in the machine, but beating hearts of men and women stepping into, and walking hand in hand with, their destiny. The notable outcome of 'Paradigms of Freedom' is to contextualise these courageous individuals, and locate their quest for personal distinctiveness, and their concern for the liberation of their families, nation, homeland, and race, in terms of the sweeping geopolitical moves, philosophical and theological, political and social.

Letellier's brilliance lies in his mastery of the 'art of omission' and the resultant ability to expertly navigate and sketch the canvas of human history, spanning decades decisively in mere sentences. The effect serves to draw the eye of the reader towards the 'vectors of transcendence' Letellier sees in history. In so doing, the scope is narrowed from universal to individual, in the context of a particular moment and individual in time, where the courage to act and to create as an individual is most clearly manifest. In this vein, Ibsen was correct to remark that "the most courageous individual is the one who stand most alone", that is most acutely separated and set apart from his fellow man. Letellier touches upon the Agony in the Garden and the sorrow of Gethsemane, noting that all these vectors are foremost Christological, so that ultimately 'all heroes are shadows of Christ'. Thus courage, as the struggle for liberty, whether national, racial, of supernatural, is marked, endowed even, by a Christological nature, so that each courageous act in history points to the courageous act that stands outside it, in order to define the historical pursuit of freedom.

This book provides a comprehensive and integrated approach to European thought—politics, literature, art, opera—as they relate to the concept of freedom. Letellier frames his work around the exposition of Friedrich Schiller and Sir Walter Scott, pivotal players who bridge the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and their exploration of freedom as manifest in their art. Letellier hits his stride in chapter four, beginning with Walter Scott's poetry and novels, confronting the tensions of nationalism and personal freedom, "a romantic allegiance to a dangerous but attractive past and the more prosaic but rational present." Virtually all artistic endeavour, somewhere along the line, takes a turn towards tragedy, that reflects the sorrow of the human condition. From the Greek mythos to Enlightenment philosophy, from 20<sup>th</sup> century absurdism and existentialism, to pessimism at hopelessness of man's yearning for freedom in the 'conflict, sorrow and depression' of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The tragedy of the lost cause immortalised in such characters as Icarus and Sisyphus captures the belief that the closer one comes to apprehending freedom, the more impossible the endeavour and unreachable the goal becomes.

In the context of this proclivity towards tragedy in the Arts, Letellier's thesis is built upon the acute observation that Operetta, a medium of arts marked by hopeful, even escapist optimism, is predominantly a Jewish phenomenon. The final chapter, which examines the Jewish connection to operetta, crowns the work. Operetta, "both in its librettos and its lilting, rhythmic dance music and song," is endowed with a "capacity for sharp even satirical observation of society so apparently friendly, yet able to turn overnight into persecutors, underlies the history of the Jewish people and their long

centuries of wandering and exclusion. Letellier sees operetta as “a metonym for the Jewish hope of a pastoral heritage restored and an eschatological hope reaffirmed.”

In summary, what is freedom but the power to think and to act as an individual? To embark on that most human journey: the quest for personal distinctiveness. Letellier notes the role of culture and history, notably art, as “an aspiration to an unfettered celestial realm of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace.” The individual acts and works of art are interpretations and attempts to work out, dialogue even, in an upward movement to meet with the divine. The ascent, towards the attainment of the ultimate liberty of spirit, is associated with an inspiration that reflects the divine activities of creation and salvation. Hence art, as transcendent vector, precludes a sacred and consecrating mission. As Letellier notes, each life can be read as a kind of quest towards this end, thus “Some Paradigms of freedom may be utilitarian, and others even dystopian, yet only some can be transcendent.” Cicero noted that “the memory of a well-spent life is eternal.” Indeed, if truth is carried on the shoulders of individuals then art becomes a quest for personal distinctiveness, an attempt to reach out and touch the divine. It is an ascent, in the words of Anglo-American aviator and poet John Gillespie Magee, to “the wind-swept heights with easy grace where never lark, or ever eagle flew – with silent, lifting mind to tread the high untrespassed sanctity of space. To put out one’s hand and touch the face of God.” -*John Hartley is a school teacher and local politician in his hometown of Droitwich Spa, United Kingdom. John studied under Robert Letellier and has recently completed a thesis in a similar area.*