

# Dostoevsky's *Idiot*: Prince Myshkin As Anti- Christ

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*"I kept fancying that if I walked straight on, far, far away and reached that line where sky and earth meet, there I should find the key to the mystery, there I should see a new life a thousand times richer and more turbulent than ours." – Myshkin (I 49)*

On January 12, 1868, at the time that he had written the first seven chapters of *The Idiot* (and after having discarded his first six plans for the novel, figuring a protagonist who was malicious, cruel, and evil), Dostoevsky wrote a letter to his friend, Apollon Maikov, indicating that he relished the idea of depicting in his latest work an *izobrazit' vpolne prekrasnogo cheloveka*, or "completely beautiful person" (Miller, *Dostoevsky*, 73). This letter is often noted as evidence that Dostoevsky attempted to craft in Prince Myshkin a Christ-like figure, for on the day following his Maikov letter, the Russian author wrote to his niece, Sofya Ivanova:

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The main idea of the novel is to portray a positively beautiful man. There is nothing more difficult in the world and especially now. All writers, not only ours, but even all European writers, who have merely attempted to portray the positively beautiful, have always given up. Because the task is immeasurable. The beautiful is an ideal, but this ideal, whether ours or that of civilized Europe, is still far from being worked out. (Pevear, xi)<sup>2</sup>

Though Dostoevsky certainly hoped to create a “positively beautiful” person in his letters, his plan for *The Idiot* remained tentative as he crafted the novel, and he wrote several additional drafts after penning his letter. While some scholars argue that Myshkin fails as a hero because of the insufficiency of grace in the modern era (a fault primarily of Myshkin’s epoch), this reading presupposes Myshkin as a Christ-figure. Resisting Robert Lord’s view of Myshkin as a maniacal villain, critics such as Sarah Young and Elizabeth Dalton emphasize Myshkin’s concern for the downtrodden, humiliated, and abused (Young, 4; Dalton, 64-65; Lord, 83).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the tragic outcomes of those characters in the novel deeply influenced by Myshkin call into question the certainty of the Myshkin-Christ theory.

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<sup>2</sup> Ernest J. Simmons best articulates this critical consensus on Myshkin: “In *The Idiot*, the idea of the entirely good man is worked out by bringing the Christ-like character of Myshkin into contact with a world of greedy, sensual, sinning people” (202). Concurring critics are too numerous to cite, but see, for example, Richard Pevear, “Introduction” (vii-xix); D.M. Fiene, “Pushkin’s ‘Poor Knight’: The Key to Perceiving Dostoevsky’s *Idiot* as Allegory” (21); Howard H. Keller, “Prince Myshkin: Success or Failure” (18); Alexander Webster, “The Exemplary Kenotic Holiness of Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*” (198-99); Margaret Ziolkowski, “Dostoevsky and the Kenotic Tradition” (31-40); Richard Peace *Dostoevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels* (274).

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Lord, who writes, “Beneath a cloak of simulated innocence he makes the most of his talent for scheming, playing off the various characters one against the other, and never failing to exploit his charm and ingenuousness to the full” (83). In *Dostoevsky’s Idiot and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative*, Sarah Young argues that “Lord’s negative analysis is contradicted by aspects of the hero’s character. . . his gentle and compassionate nature, and unifying vision of a higher reality. Furthermore, it is also apparent from the notebooks that the malign features of the early ‘Idiot’ were transferred by the author into other characters, notably Rogozhin and Gania” (4). See also Elizabeth Dalton, *Unconscious Structure in ‘The Idiot’: A Study in Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Dalton contends that Lord’s summation is “a grotesque misinterpretation. . . *The Idiot* presents an image of sublime beauty and charity” (64-65).

Surmising the aftermath of Myshkin's stay in St. Petersburg, René Girard rejects the idea that Myshkin is Dostoevsky's Christ. He writes that *The Idiot* is the "darkest of all" of Dostoevsky's novels and that Myshkin is

a Christ more romantic than Christian . . . a Christ always isolated from human beings and from his Father in a perpetual and somewhat theatrical agony . . . a Christ impotent to redeem humankind, a Christ who dies without resurrection. (34)

Louise Cowan, too, long noted Myshkin's sinister nature in her Russian Novel courses at the University of Dallas. Concurring with Girard and Cowan, Janet Tucker, Dennis Slattery, and Simon Lesser have linked Myshkin to some of Dostoevsky's darkest characters, cataloguing the many ways in which his influence causes the devastation of others.<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams has also addressed Myshkin's "lethal weakness" and the powerful "force of destruction" that he wields in the novel (54), and Malcolm Jones has shown the ways in which Myshkin diverges from Christ, demonstrating what he calls a "dark side" (108).

In addition to these readings of the text, there are two additional difficulties with the Myshkin-Christ equation. First, when considered alongside Dostoevsky's other novels, particularly *The Brothers Karamazov*, with its emphasis on active love, *The Idiot* seems to imply that the chaos that Myshkin engenders in St. Petersburg can be attributed to his insistence on demonstrating pity and compassion—abstract and deficient substitutes for love. Secondly, even if one takes his letters as a primary source, Dostoevsky does not insist that his "beautiful person" will imitate Christ. Rather, he finishes his often-quoted letter to his niece, "There is only one perfectly beautiful person—Christ—so that the appearance of this immeasurably, infinitely beautiful person is, of course, already a miracle. (That is the sense of the whole Gospel of John: it finds the whole miracle in the incarnation alone, in the manifestation of the beautiful alone)" (Pevear, xi). The perfect "manifestation of the beautiful," then, at least as articulated by Dostoevsky in his letters, is expressed exclusively

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<sup>4</sup> See Janet Tucker, "Dostoevsky's *Idiot*: Defining Myshkin" (23-40); Dennis Slattery, *Dostoevsky's Fantastic Prince: A Phenomenological Approach*; Simon Lesser and Richard Noland, "Saint and Sinner—Dostoevsky's *Idiot*" (387-404), and Robert Lord, *Dostoevsky: Essays and Perspectives* (833, 88).

in the Incarnation. If the novel bears out Dostoevsky's discursive argument that the "perfectly beautiful person" is one who conjoins flesh with spirit, then Myshkin, the prince who enjoys the rapturous spiritual ecstasy of his epileptic seizures more than the realities of earthly life, is most certainly not he.

### DOSTOEVSKY, ROUSSEAU, AND MYSHKIN

How did Dostoevsky's initial idea of the "beautiful person" result in such profound darkness in the final text? According to Tanya Mairs, after reading Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (while writing *The Idiot*),<sup>5</sup> Dostoevsky attributed Myshkin-like qualities—dismissal of sin and naïve sincerity—not to a Christ-like hero but to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he associated with Tolstoy's hero, Pierre Bezukhov (147). Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., has called Pierre an "incarnated" figure of Rousseau—one who rejects the social corruption of his age and supports, as Tolstoy writes, "the rights of man, emancipation from prejudices, and equality of citizenship," all ideals of Rousseauian democracy, as Dostoevsky perceived them (Mairs, 147; Tolstoy, 13). Dostoevsky's association of Rousseau with Tolstoy and Rousseau with Myshkin was so compelling that after reading *War and Peace*, he changed Prince Myshkin's full name in an earlier manuscript from Ivan Nikolaevich to "Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin." As Robin Miller notes, "Lev Nikolaevich" is Tolstoy's name and patronymic; the antonym of Lev (lion) is Myshkin, or "mousekin" (*Dostoevsky*, 59). Dostoevsky thus calls the Rousseauian "lion" a "mouse."

The biographical similarities between Dostoevsky's Prince and Rousseau are substantial: prior to his arrival in St. Petersburg, Myshkin lives in Switzerland, Rousseau's birthplace, and, as Miller notes, the land from which Tolstoy's Pierre has returned with a sizeable inheritance (*Dostoevsky*, 59). Mairs observes that the Prince shows up carrying a "bundle" (reminiscent of Rousseau's description of himself as a vagabond in his *Confessions*), works as a calligrapher for General Yepanchin (akin to Rousseau's work as a letter copier for Abbé de Gouvion), and like

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<sup>5</sup> See also Robin Fuer Miller's "The Notebooks for *The Idiot*" (53-104). Dostoevsky wrote a letter to A.N. Maikov on Feb 18/ March 1, 1868 noting that he had read Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. He complained that Tolstoy has included too many inconsequential psychological details.

Rousseau is motherless, raised by guardians, and alludes to being beaten by Marfa Nikitishna while in her custody (as Rousseau was beaten by Mademoiselle Lambercier as her boarder). Further, in his *Confessions*, Rousseau describes being mockingly called “a prince” by the husband of a woman to whom he indecently exposed himself, and to whom he pretended to be mentally deranged and of noble birth (91-92). Unlike the faux-royal Rousseau, Prince Myshkin is of true noble birth and has an actual cerebral disorder, epilepsy.

Of greater importance than the biographical parallels between Rousseau and Myshkin, however, is their ideological correspondence. Throughout *The Idiot*, there are many references to Myshkin as a representative of Rousseauian philosophy, particularly his assertion in the *Social Contract* that “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains” and also his contention in his *Second Discourse* that in the pre-political society, equality abounds in great part because “compassion is a natural feeling which . . . contributes to the preservation of the whole species” (*Social Contract*, 5; *Second Discourse*, 199). Thus, when Myshkin first meets the Yepanchins and shows compassion for their servant by speaking freely to him, Aglaya calls the Prince a “democrat” (I 53). Also, when Myshkin describes his ecstatic experience alone in nature while viewing a waterfall in Switzerland (like Rousseau’s experiences described in his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*), Adelaida tells him, “You are a philosopher, and you’ve come to instruct us.” Myshkin affirms, “Perhaps you are right . . . I am really a philosopher perhaps, and—who knows—perhaps I really have a notion of instructing” (49).<sup>6</sup>

#### MYSHKIN’S PITY AS ABSTRACTION OF LOVE

Thus, it seems that the Western philosophy that Myshkin introduces to Russia is most closely the thought of Rousseau. But Dostoevsky saw the French philosopher’s secularized values as abstractions, as dreamy, ethereal, inadequate substitutes for active love. In 1871, at the end of his

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<sup>6</sup> Myshkin is not the only one who identifies as a “philosopher” in the novel, however. General Ivolgin, too, describes himself as living “like a philosopher” (93). He boasts, “I walk, I play draughts at my café like any bourgeois retired from business, and read the *Indépendance*,” just before telling a tale of flinging a small lap dog out the window of his moving train and being caught by Nastasya for lying about the incident, one that was reported the week earlier in the French newspaper (94). General Ivolgin’s farce implies what Dostoevsky thought of philosophers, particularly those who read French: they lie.

four-year stay with his wife in Europe for the treatment of his epilepsy, Dostoevsky wrote to his friend Strakhov to share his opposition to Rousseau's ideals:

But consider the Paris Commune. . . . In essence, it's all the same Rousseau and the dream of recreating the world anew through reason and experience (positivism). They desire the happiness of man and stop at Rousseau's definition of the word 'happiness,' i.e., at fantasy, not even justified by experience. . . . [T]o them (yes, and to many), this delirium does not seem a monstrosity, but, on the contrary, beauty. And so the aesthetic idea has become muddled in the new humanity. (Mochulsky, 385)

The Paris Commune, a group that ruled in Paris from March 18 to May 28, 1871, sought to establish a radically socialist, secularized government in France. This European dream of recreating the "world anew" through positivism—the rejection of metaphysics and acceptance of rationalism and empiricism as superior alternatives— was troubling to Dostoevsky. He perceived that it produced a fantastical "delirium" in its adherents. Further, he thought, without belief in the "immortality of the human soul," humanitarianism could transform love for mankind into actual hate.

Reflecting further on European secularism, Dostoevsky writes in his *Diary* (November 1876) that humanitarian efforts eventually fail to solve the problems of human existence:

I assert that the consciousness of our own utter inability to help or bring, if only some, benefit or relief to suffering mankind, while at the same time remaining completely convinced of this suffering, can even transform the love of mankind in your heart into hatred for it. . . . love for mankind is even altogether unthinkable, unintelligible, and altogether impossible without concomitant faith in the immortality of the human soul. . . . I even maintain and make bold to say that love for mankind is, as an idea, one of the most incomprehensible ideas to the human mind. (Mochulsky, 563)

Dostoevsky saw the democratic ideals of Rousseau as a potential cause of "hatred" for humanity, as well as a precursor to Russian nihilism and despair. In *Crime and Punishment*, for example, Razumikhin (Raskolnikov's university friend) encourages Raskolnikov to translate

Rousseau's *Confessions* alongside nihilist works for Kheruvinov, who has just joined "the Movement" (most likely the nihilist movement). Further, Kheruvinov calls Rousseau "a sort of Radishchev," referring to Alexander Radishchev, the author of *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, a Russian liberal and progressive who was considered the father of the Russian intelligentsia (CP 107). In an article written in 1860, Nicolai Chernyshevsky, the socialist intellectual adversary of Dostoevsky whom he confronts directly in *Notes from the Underground*, praised Rousseau as a "revolutionary democrat" (Ready, 529).

For Dostoevsky, the Christian virtues could not be abstracted from their biblical source by the social progressives without great cost. As Konstantin Mochulsky observes, "Humanists profess that love for others is naturally innate to man. Dostoevsky retorts: love for others is not natural, but supernatural" (563). And for Dostoevsky, love is also a very different thing than pity or even compassion. The difference between love and pity is articulated explicitly and unashamedly by Myshkin; he often distinguishes between the two, clarifying that he does not love others but pities them. Dostoevsky struggled throughout his artistic career to discern the nature of love, emphasizing its elusiveness to mastery. To Myshkin, however, pity is the superior action. Why?

### PITY FOR MARIE

Myshkin apparently endorses the ideology of Rousseau he learned in Switzerland. Rousseau writes in his *Second Discourse* that in the state of nature, the "natural feeling of compassion hurries us without reflection to the relief of those who are in distress" (200). For Rousseau, compassion is a quality both natural and necessary in the pre-political society, for, by it, morality or laws are not necessary to coerce equality. Like Rousseau's natural man, Myshkin hastens to relieve the sufferings of others "without reflection." Throughout the novel, Myshkin longs to rescue Marie and Nastasya, two capable and potentially comic heroines, from their anguish. But in his alacrity, there is a major oversight: both women suffer not merely from physical agony but also from the consequences of their own unambiguous moral failings. They lack prudence in Christian terms; they also lack what Aristotle has called *phronesis* in book six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*—practical wisdom, an intellectual virtue that allows one to choose the proper course of action in a given situation (1141a, 109). Rousseau

would reject these two Western accounts of virtue—the ancient and the Christian prudence—in favor of a third way, secular humanitarianism. Myshkin’s trajectory appears to play out the modern, secular theories of Rousseau.

Myshkin first stumbles upon Marie while in Switzerland; now scorned by her community, she has returned after impulsively running away with a perfidious French salesman. Myshkin shows an act of kindness in giving Marie eight francs. He describes kissing her not because he is “in love with her,” but instead, “because I was very sorry for her, and that I had never, from the very beginning, thought of her as guilty but only as unhappy” (59). Here, one notes Myshkin’s pity (for he was “very sorry for her”), and also his exoneration of Marie’s wrongdoing. In spite of the opposition of the village school teacher and even of Marie’s mother, Myshkin does not view Marie’s actions as immoral, echoing Rousseau, who rejects all previous definitions of natural law, characterizing them as ambiguous and metaphysically obscure. He writes in his *Second Discourse*, “It is this [compassion] which in a state of nature supplies the place of laws, morals and virtues, with the advantage that none are tempted to disobey its gentle voice” (200). In other words, in Rousseau’s state of nature, compassion is a sufficient substitute for moral behavior and community standards.

But Marie does not want to be excused by Myshkin any more than she wants to be shamed by her village; she wants to be forgiven. Tone-deaf to the situation at hand, Myshkin recalls, with an irony discerned only by the reader

I wanted very much to comfort her at once and to persuade her that she shouldn’t consider herself below everyone, but I think she didn’t understand. I saw that at once, though she scarcely spoke all the time and stood before me looking down and horribly abashed. (59)

Why is she “abashed”? Marie is embarrassed because of her indiscretion; she wishes to confess her sin—an actual material occurrence—and to be forgiven of it, but Myshkin insists on secular compassion. By its very nature, Myshkin’s ideal is an abstraction, for he denies the actual, real, embodied things that Marie has done as well as Marie’s desire to repent of her sin so that she might be absolved of her guilt. Myshkin rejects the actual. His philosophy denies the human need to “kiss the earth,” as

Father Zosima admonishes his congregants in *The Brothers Karamazov*, so that resurrection might be possible.

As Louise Cowan pointed out in her Russian Novel courses, Myshkin's treatment of Marie contrasts sharply with Christ's treatment of the woman caught in adultery, who is about to be stoned, in the Gospel of John. Christ acknowledges her sin, but also those of her accusers, challenging the Pharisees who would condemn her to "cast the first stone," and he charges the woman to "go and sin no more" (John 8.11). In Dostoevsky's Christian imagination, forgiveness is quite a different thing from excuse, for it requires truth-telling, or acknowledgment of the actual, before sin can be forgiven. It is fitting, then, that in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima insists that lying renders one unable to love. He chastens Fyodor Karamazov:

Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to such a pass that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love, and in order to occupy and distract himself without love he gives way to passions and coarse pleasures, and sinks to bestiality in his vices, all from continual lying to other men and to himself. (40)

By effectively telling Fyodor to "go and sin no more," Zosima presents him with the possibility of forgiveness. In contrast, without the acknowledgment of wrongdoing to her confessor and by her confessor, Marie will never be free from the guilt that haunts her and causes her to weep. Myshkin mistakes her tears of sorrow for tears of joy when he incites the children to pity her. He admits to deceiving the children for the sake of making them feel good: "I did not tell them that I was not in love with Marie, but simply felt very sorry for her. I wanted to have it as they imagined and had settled among themselves and so I said nothing and let it seem that they guessed right" (61). Marie ends up dying much sooner than expected, and her grave is decorated with flowers by the children, a sentimental afterthought. Myshkin has brought no comfort to the suffering woman. She has gone to the grave in despair; she is unforgiven and diminished as a human being.

**PITY FOR GENERAL IVOGLIN**

Another chilling instance of Myshkin's abstract pity-not-love concerns his sinister treatment of Kolya and his father, the lying General Ivolgin. Although Kolya has asked Myshkin to intervene in order to help his father to stop making a fool out of himself, and though Myshkin knows that the General is a habitual liar, Myshkin does not do anything to assist. Dostoevsky gives us insight into Myshkin's dark interiority as he ponders his relationship to the General:

He realized too that the old man had gone away enraptured by his success, yet he had a misgiving that he was one of that class of liars with whom lying has become a blinding passion, though at the very acme of their intoxication they secretly suspect that they are not believed, and that they cannot be believed. In his present position the old man might be overwhelmed with shame when he returned to the reality of things. He might suspect Myshkin of too great a compassion for him and feel insulted. (440)

Myshkin thinks about the way in which he actually harms the General by allowing him to lie unrebuked. But he abdicates himself of moral responsibility for provoking him:

Haven't I made it worse by leading him on to such flights? Myshkin wondered uneasily, and suddenly he could not restrain himself, and laughed violently for ten minutes. (440)

Myshkin's mocking laughter at the General indicates the Prince's sinister nature. Dostoevsky continues, "He was nearly beginning to reproach himself for his laughter, but at once realized *that he had nothing to reproach himself with, since he had an infinite pity for the general*" (440; emphasis mine). Myshkin's pity is a darkly veiled substitute for love. The Prince holds no one, not even himself, accountable for truth, since pity has replaced it. As a consequence, the General eventually runs into the street in an unhinged frenzy, raving in the midst of suffering from a stroke, and Kolya weeps, kissing his father's hands, realizing what has happened. Myshkin ought to be a guardian of the community, but he has failed both the young boy and his elder by his abstraction—by a refusal to show active, embodied love.

**PITY FOR NASTASYA: THE ANTI-HIEROS GAMOS**

Myshkin's dealings with Marie and General Ivoglin are but a prelude to the devastation that the Prince exacts on Nastasya Filippovna's life. Nastasya, the fearless, mysterious, elusive woman, ought to be a Beatrice figure—an embodiment of the highest ideals—but instead, she is ruined by her many failed bridegrooms. Totsky, who has raised her and taken advantage of her as his mistress, offers her 75,000 rubles as compensation for her diminished position; Ganya, too, tries to buy her; and Rogozhin buys, beats, and eventually murders her. The damage that Myshkin causes to her, however, is far more subtle, but perhaps also more subversive. Though she is culpable for consenting to Totsky's payment, he tells her "you are not to blame." But abstract compassion cannot compare to agape, and Myshkin's childlike virtues of honesty, openness, sympathy, and compassion are not enough to save the bride.

Myshkin is so consumed with Rousseauian compassion that he decides that that he will marry Nastasya not because he loves her but because he pities her. He admits to Rogozhin, "I explained to you before that I do not love her with love, but with pity. I define it exactly" (181). Rogozhin tells Myshkin, "One might almost believe that your pity is greater than my love" (185). Myshkin forgives Nastasya when she should not be forgiven, for though she feels guilt, she refuses to repent, unlike Dostoevsky's "Ridiculous Man," who acknowledges his error at the end of the Russian author's short story. Nastasya has most certainly been victimized in the novel, but she fails to humbly rise beyond her pain like Dostoevsky's other heroes, Sonia, Zosima, and Alyosha. Instead, Nastasya turns to a self-centered existence. As Mairs argues, "Nastasya Filippovna is not worthy of grace until she has acknowledged her sin and repented, but Myshkin's democratic humanitarianism and sense of equality blind him to this fact" (151). The narrator of *The Idiot* gives what he calls a "probable interpretation" of the Prince's behavior in choosing to marry Nastasya over Aglaya by saying that Myshkin is "a democrat who had gone crazy over contemporary nihilism" (503). The Prince's democratic liberalism becomes the impetus for Rogozhin's jealousy and Nastasya's murder. Tellingly, both Myshkin and Rogozhin stand over Nastasya's dead body. Myshkin is culpable for excusing Rogozhin's savagery, for Myshkin has earlier exchanged crosses with a man who has not confessed his wrongdoing and has never offered an apology for trying to kill him.

As Mairs argues, “[N]either democrats nor nihilists have the right to forgive or exonerate a sin which can be repented for only by the sinner and forgiven only by God” (153).

In his “Notes to Part II” of *The Idiot* (dated March-July 1868, a few months after his Maikov letter), Dostoevsky derides Myshkin’s “democratic” forgiveness of Nastasya and castigates his “way of looking at the world.” He critiques the Prince, who “forgives everything, sees reasons for everything, does not recognize that any sin is unforgivable, and excuses everything” (*Notebooks for the Idiot* 168). This behavior is a problem, of course, for the Russian artist who saw profound beauty in the mystery of participation in the suffering of Christ. As Williams notes, “[T]he person [Myshkin] who is presented as innocent and compassionate in Christ-like mode is in fact unwittingly a force of destruction” (54). The *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage of earth and sky by which the whole world is rejuvenated, will not take place with the bride, Nastasya. Rather, as Louise Cowan notes, the anti-*hieros gamos* occurs, a sacred marriage with death as the bridegroom, when Rogozhin takes Nastasya away and kills her without a drop of blood (“*The Idiot*”).

In his essay, “The Hovering Fly,” Allen Tate notes that the horrific foot peeping out from the white sheet of Nastasya’s bed is an emblem of death; the bride, in the remains of her finery, is cut off. The reader is made aware that something terribly important has been lost. As Cowan notes, “[W]hatever Helen is to Greece, Beatrice is to Florence, Eula is to Faulkner’s American South, Nastasya is to Russia” (“*The Idiot*”). Aglaya and Nastasya are, in a sense, fallen Eve figures; rather than being fruitful and multiplying, in the end, Aglaya will enter into a sterile marriage, and the last image of Nastasya is one of a bloodless, cold piece of statuary.

#### EXCUSE AS ABSTRACTION

In a letter to his niece, Dostoevsky finds a great model for the “beautiful person” in literature in Don Quixote. He writes, “But I’ve gone on too long. I will only mention that of beautiful persons in Christian literature, the most fully realized is Don Quixote; but he is beautiful solely because he is at the same time ridiculous” (Pevear, xi). In this context, one notes the final influence of Cervantes’ hero on his community, compared to the effects that Myshkin renders on St. Petersburg. While Quixote insists upon confessing the truth, repenting of all falsehood, and seeking forgiveness

from those whom he has deceived, instructing them to seek salvation in Christ and to denounce all self-deceit, including the reading of chivalric romances (and the prohibition of his niece to marry anyone who reads these tales), Myshkin leaves a wake of destruction throughout St. Petersburg as he persists in his deceit. He has shown pity for Maria and Nastasya and even convinced others that he loves them (though he admits frequently that he does not). He has frequently excused the wrongdoing of others; thus, they have not been told the truth, repented, or received forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness requires acknowledgment of wrongdoing and self-deceit like Don Quixote, a truth upon which he insists not only for himself but for those around him. Prince Myshkin, on the other hand, reveals the final outcome of the abstract, philanthropic, secularized virtues of Rousseau put into motion.

#### MYSHKIN AS ANTI-CHRIST

Given Myshkin's angelic inclination toward the abstraction of love—pity—and given his destructive effects upon the people of St. Petersburg, it is conceivable that the Russian author's Prince is "beautiful" in a Luciferian sense. In his letter to the church at Corinth, St. Paul writes, "For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (I Cor. 11.13-14). In Dostoevsky's Christian imagination, at least, the external attributes of the apostle and of the false prophet are not easily distinguishable. In writing *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky discovered that his "beautiful person," his Prince, was more akin to the one whom Christ called the "prince of this world" than to the incarnate, risen Christ (John 14.30). As Williams notes:

Myshkin goes back into the darkness out of which he emerged at the start of the narrative. For him, at least, the future has been erased, and for several other characters too, it has been ruined or destroyed or corrupted. The premature embrace of harmony turns out to be an act of violence in its own way—including violence, suicidal violence, to the self. (50)

In surveying Myshkin's encounters with the people of Petersburg, his pity-driven humanitarianism is an abstraction and an inadequate substitute for active love, an attribute that, for Dostoevsky, always requires truth. As Mairs writes, "Prince Myshkin starts with Christian

principles, but perverts them through his liberal thinking: he takes them out of their Christian context and tries to assimilate them into the democratic foundation of his beliefs. He ceases to be Christ and becomes Antichrist" (156).

Myshkin ponders the moments before his epileptic seizures, which, though caused by "disease," are sensations of "completeness, of proportion, of reconciliation, and of ecstatic devotional merging in the highest synthesis of life" (225). He tells Rogozhin, "[A]t that same moment I seem somehow to understand the extraordinary saying that there shall be no more time" (225). But this is not the way a Christian thinks. In Dostoevsky's Christian imagination, infinite, eternal time finally belongs to the one who believes. In his *Diary* (November 1876), Dostoevsky writes, "Without being convinced of his own immortality, man's ties with the earth are severed" (Mochulsky, 563). At its very core, *The Idiot* calls for incarnation—for spirit to enter into the world, for the marriage of earth and sky, the *hieros gamos*. Dostoevsky fulfills this vision, finally, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the novel Louise Cowan most admired and whose vision of active love she lived.

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