INTRODUCTION

Dostoevsky's great novel *The Idiot*, one of the finest works ever written inspired by the image and the ideal of Christ, was composed during a particularly difficult period of the author's life. Not that some other periods had not been equally tumultuous and agitated. There had been, after all, his arrest as a political conspirator in 1849, the agonizing mock execution to which he had been exposed, his four years in the prison camp, and the succeeding six of service in the Russian army. But while such events were nerve-racking and tormenting, Dostoevsky was not during those times attempting to carry on his literary career. And if we examine the conditions under which he wrote his other great novels, it is clear that none were created in circumstances as harassing and distracting as those in which he wrote *The Idiot*.

For one thing, Dostoevsky was then living in Europe, whose culture he admired but whose social and political mores he abhorred—and came to detest even more rancorously the more he remained abroad. He had left Russia with a new bride, twenty years younger than himself, presumably for a vacation visit of a few months, but the absence from his homeland lasted for four years. Just before leaving he had been pursued by creditors, who threatened to throw him into debtor's prison, and he feared that if he returned as impoverished as he had left, the threat would be carried out. He and his devoted wife, Anna Grigoryevna, settled first in Dresden, then moved to Baden-Baden; next they went to Switzerland, living in Geneva and Vevey; finally they traveled to Italy, residing first in Milan and then Florence. To finance the trip, Dostoevsky had received an advance from Mikhail Katkov, the powerful editor of the *Russian Messenger*, in which *Crime and Punishment* had recently been published, and he continued to live on such advances all through this time. It was necessary for him to get to work as soon as possible, both to cover the funds already obtained and, by the installments of a new novel, to earn more for the future.

Aside from this peripatetic existence, several other factors also interfered with all his efforts to satisfy his literary obligations. During an earlier trip to Europe, Dostoevsky had been bitten by a passion for roulette (he never gambled in any other way) and had even written a novella, *The Gambler* (1866), in

which the depiction of the psychological ravages of such a gambling fever still remains unsurpassed. Ironically enough, he had proposed marriage to Anna Grigoryevna (whom he met when she had come to help him as a stenographer to meet a deadline with this text) by depicting himself as someone who had to choose between disastrously surrendering to a gambling mania and being rescued by the stability of a new loving attachment.

Once back in Europe, however, it became clear that Dostoevsky had not really overcome his addiction, and the hypnotic lure of the wheel, besides inevitably increasing the impoverishment of the couple, also drew him away from his writing table. The letters that Dostoevsky wrote to his wife from the various resorts with gambling casinos to which he traveled, often imploring her to send money for his return, are among the most pitiful, pathetic, and self-castigating that he ever penned. In the end, however, he managed to conquer his obsession before returning home in 1871; and from that time on, even when residing in Europe on several occasions, he never gambled again.

It was also while working on *The Idiot* that Dostoevsky first became a father. His daughter Sofya (Sonya) was born on March 5, 1868 (according to the European calendar), and Dostoevsky became so upset during the process of delivery that the midwife finally excluded him from the room. Anna herself later recalled that "at times I saw him sobbing, and I myself began to fear that I might be on the threshold of death." But nothing untoward occurred, and Dostoevsky wrote a week later to his friend the poet Apollon Maikov that "Sonya, my daughter, is a healthy, robust, lovable marvellous child, and I spend practically half the day kissing her and can't tear myself away." According to Anna, Dostoevsky was "the tenderest possible father," who would sit by [the baby's] crib for hours on end, now singing songs to her, now talking to her."

One can well imagine the depth of despair into which the Dostoevskys were plunged when, three months later Sofya caught a chill, contracted an inflammation of the lungs, and was carried away after a week. In another letter to Maikov, Dostoevsky expresses his grief in heart-rending words:

> This tiny, three months old being, so pitiful, so minuscule—for me was already a person, a character. She began to recognize me, to love me, to smile at me when I approached, when I, with my ridiculous voice, sang to her, she liked to listen . . . And now they tell me, in consolation, that I will have other children. But where is Sofya? Where is that little individual for whom, I dare to say, I would have accepted crucifixion so that she might live?

If the thematic motif of an all-too-untimely death resounds with such poignancy in the anguished outcries of Ippolit in *The Idiot*, one can surely trace them to the emotions experienced by the author with the death of his little Sonya.

Another aspect of the book can also be linked with the events of Dostoevsky's life at this period. In their wanderings through Europe, the couple passed through Basel on their way to Geneva and paused for a one-day stopover to take in the sights. The cathedral and the museum were the objects of their interest, and it was the museum—or one of its paintings—that provided inspiration for the future novel. Along with much else, they saw the famous canvas of Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, which enjoyed a widespread notoriety. Indeed, in a book well-known to Dostoevsky, Nikolai Karamzin's *Letters of a Russian Traveller*, the author mentioned the painting as one of the attractions that no conscientious tourist should miss.

The picture depicts Christ isolated from all the traditional iconographic accoutrements that usually accompany his portrayal, and Karamzin records the legend that the painter used the corpse of a drowned Jew as his model. According to Anna's *Diary* (available in Russian as *Dnevnik A. G. Dostoevski*, 1867 g., Moscow, 1923), much closer to the event than her later *Reminiscences* (see "For Further Reading"), Dostoevsky was so impressed with the painting that he climbed on a chair to obtain a closer look; and Anna was terrified that the law-abiding Swiss would fine him for such a violation of museum decorum. He was so overcome by it that "he pronounced Holbein the Younger a painter and creator of the first rank." Anna's description of the work, which may be assumed to contain the impressions of her husband as well, stresses that while the body of Christ usually contains "no marks at all of pain and suffering," in this case the opposite was true. "But here the whole form is emaciated, the ribs and bones plain to see, hands and feet riddled with wounds, all blue and swollen, like a corpse on the point of decomposition. . . . The whole thing," she remarks, "bears such a strong resemblance to a real dead body that I should not like to be left with it in a room alone" (p. 185).

A copy of Holbein's painting turns up in chapter 4, part two, of *The Idiot*, where Prince Myshkin, who has seen it abroad in Switzerland, remarks: "Why, that picture might make some people lose their faith" (p. 201). It is referred to again later by the young Ippolit, well aware of being doomed to

an early death by tuberculosis, who wrestles with the problem that the picture poses for him, for Prince Myshkin, and, we may assume, for the author of these anguish-filled pages as well. Ippolit declares:

> Looking at such a picture, one conceives of nature in the shape of an immense, merciless, dumb beast, or more correctly, much more correctly, speaking, though it sounds strange, in the form of a huge machine of the most modern construction which, dull and insensible, has aimlessly clutched, crushed and swallowed up a great priceless Being, a Being worth all nature and its laws, worth the whole earth, which was created perhaps solely for the sake of the advent of that Being (p. 375).

Ippolit imagines the people who surrounded this dead man as being gripped by "the most terrible anguish and consternation" at the sight of his corpse, though when they parted, "each one bore within him a mighty thought which could never be wrested from him."

For Dostoevsky, we may speculate, the greatness of Holbein the Younger lay in the boldness with which his art confronted the anomalies of the Christian faith. (Modern scholars, though, tend to doubt whether he had any genuine concern with the religious quarrels of his time, and Erasmus, once a friend of whom he left a famous portrait, thought him opportunistic). It is a similar boldness, in any case, that Dostoevsky displays in *The Idiot*; and no one can doubt his sincerity.

II

Just as *The Idiot* was written under more adverse conditions than Dostoevsky's other major novels, so the external history of its composition involved a more far-reaching change than can be observed elsewhere. Dostoevsky often shifted plans as he made initial notes for his works, and even after embarking on what he thought would be the final text. *Crime and Punishment*, for example, began as a first-person novella exploring the psychology of a humanitarian murderer; but then it became a larger third-person work with many more characters and incorporating much of the original novella. Dostoevsky rewrote a good part of *The Devils*, of which he already had a considerable draft, when the glamorously lethal Byronic dandy Stavrogin emerged as his main character instead of the pathetically lovable member of an earlier generation, the liberal idealist Stepan Trofimovich. A change of creative plan in midcourse was therefore nothing unusual for Dostoevsky; but the case of *The Idiot* was

more extreme than all the others. In fact, the work that he initially outlined in his notebooks and began to write has only the loosest relationship to the text that finally emerged.

Three notebooks for *The Idiot* exist in the Dostoevsky corpus. Two contain scenarios written before the first chapters were published; the third shows Dostoevsky struggling to find his way amidst the plethora of possibilities opened by the thematic motifs already begun. The prepublication notes can best be described as a fertile creative chaos, and some notion of their bewildering diversity is conveyed by Edward Wasiolek, who supervised their translation into English. "The relationship between characters fluctuate from plan to plan: sisters are and are not sisters, nephews become sons, fathers become uncles. The idiot is sometimes the son of the Uncle, sometimes the nephew, sometimes the foster son, sometimes illegitimate, and sometimes legitimate; acts are committed and die abortively in the next plan, or even a few lines later; people hang themselves but then perhaps don't hang themselves; the same people die by hanging, poisoning, broken hearts or drowning. It is not always clear who is who, where they come from, and where they are going . . ." (Dostoevsky, *The Notebooks for* The Idiot, pp. 7–8). What is clear, however, is that, all through this time, Dostoevsky is searching for an inspiration that continues to elude his grasp.

A character labeled "the idiot" appears in these early notes and is also described as subject to epileptic seizures; but his personality is the very opposite of what he will later become. At first, he is characterized as follows: "*The Idiot's* passions are violent, he has a burning need of love, a boundless pride, and out of pride he means to dominate himself, conquer himself. He takes delight in domination." This first conception of "the idiot" is thus more or less the reverse of the later one; but other figures in these notes are endowed with some of the moral qualities that he will later possess. At this point "the chief character of the novel" is called the Uncle, "who is a usurer, a hypochondriac, with a deep-seated vanity, pride" (p. 33). But his son is an ideal figure, called "a socialist" by his father, though Dostoevsky writes: "He is not a socialist: on the contrary; he finds in socialism little besides an unrealizable ideal. Economic redistribution, the problem of bread" (p. 42). The son also "preaches about how there is a great deal of happiness in life, that each moment is a happiness." The word "Christ" then suddenly appears, and the note: "To an extent the son has already impressed the idiot sometime earlier." It is as if Dostoevsky were on the point here of fusing the two, with the idiot taking on some of the attributes of the son; but the connection will not be made until much later. Nonetheless, it is striking that on the margin of this page

Dostoevsky scribbles the following sentence, repeated almost verbatim in the novel: "The one thing in the world is spontaneous compassion. As of justice—that is a secondary matter."

Dostoevsky continued to shuffle and reshuffle his various plot ingredients and characters for several months in the helter-skelter fashion indicated by Wasiolek. But while numerous situations and suggestions can be seen in retrospect as embryonic indicators of what lay ahead, "the idiot" still remains "an anguished, contemptuous, endlessly proud personality," though now "*in the end he is agonized by his own role*, and suddenly perceives a solution in love" [italics in text] (p. 85). Just how to present this mutation, however, remains unresolved.

In November, with only a month left before his first installment was due, and in the midst of setting down a tentative outline, Dostoevsky desperately adds in italics: "*Give me an idea!*" One can only speculate about what occurred at this time, but there is some reason to believe that the "idea" at which he finally arrived could well have come from a source other than the notes for his novel. Dostoevsky's creative imagination was intensely prolific, and he often jotted down ideas for various works simultaneously. One such jotting, which turns up amidst those for the future novel, may well have helped him to discover what that novel eventually became.

This plan, entitled "*A Thought* (Poem), Theme called 'The Emperor,'" was inspired by an article in a historical journal about an incident that occurred in the mid-eighteenth century. A one-year-old child had then inherited the Russian throne, and the new Empress kept him imprisoned for the remainder of his life. He died at the age of twenty-four, when a young army officer unsuccessfully tried to free him and reestablish him on the throne. Dostoevsky develops the various figures (the prisoner is now twenty years old) and dwells on the innocence and backwardness of the isolated captive (he even has to be taught to speak). The beauty of the world as he comes to discover it fills him with rapture, but he is overcome with dismay on learning of all its injustices. When his presumptive rescuer explains that they are not social equals, he replies: "If you are not my equal, I do not wish to be emperor." It may well be that the guilelessness of the princely prisoner, himself an "idiot" for so many years and now exposed to both good and evil for the first time, served as a transition figure between the tyrannical and egoistic idiot-character of Dostoevsky's first conception and the sudden appearance of "the idiot" in another incarnation.

In any case, the notes from early November contain a new idea: "He is a *Prince*. Idiot," and then, in the next sentence, "*Prince* Yurodivi. (He is with the children)?!" (A *yurodivi* is a Russian "holy fool," sometimes considered deranged or demented but also endowed with an unearthly aura of transcendence). Some of Dostoevsky's excitement here can be felt in the punctuation as a new image of "the idiot" begins to crystallize, and the formerly vengeful personality of this figure was shifted elsewhere. Of the son, now called Ganechka, Dostoevsky writes: "This is the character that was formerly the Idiot's: magnanimous, bitterness, pride and envy." Many of the definitive plot details now begin to surface in the notes ("the Idiot with the children . . . about Mont Blanc, Switzerland"). What occurred is then described in a letter at the end of December, in which Dostoevsky explains to his literary confidante Maikov that, although he had begun to write a novel (presumably in November), "I threw it all out" and on December 4 "set about the painful task of inventing *a new novel*." The Prince Yurodivi could not be incorporated into any of the earlier scenarios, and his appearance, moreover, confronted Dostoevsky with a challenge he had long endeavored to avoid.

"For a long time already," he confesses, "there was an idea that had been bothering me, but I was afraid to make a novel out of it because it was a very difficult idea and I was not ready to tackle it. . . . The idea is—*to portray a perfectly beautiful man*. . . . The idea used to flash through my mind in a somewhat artistic form but only *somewhat*, not in the full-blown form that was needed [italics in text]. It was only the desperate situation in which I found myself that made me embark upon an idea that had not yet reached full maturity. I took a chance, as at roulette." Starting on December 18, Dostoevsky thus set out to write a novel about "a perfectly beautiful man," and in a burst of inspiration was able to send seven chapters to the journal by January 11.

A day later, in a letter to his favorite niece to whom the novel was originally dedicated, Dostoevsky elaborated on his conception of "the perfectly beautiful man." There is only one such, he explains, and that is Christ, "so that the phenomenon of that boundlessly, infinitely good figure is already in itself an infinite miracle." Earlier attempts had been made in Christian literature to represent such a figure, and for him the finest of all was Don Quixote; but this character was essentially comic, someone at whom the reader was supposed to laugh—tenderly, to be sure. The same was true of Dickens's Mr. Pickwick, "a conception infinitely weaker but still . . . tremendous," who generates sympathy because unaware of his own worth. Jean Valjean in Hugo's *Les Misérables* is also a Christ-figure but of a different calibre: "He engenders sympathy because of his terrible misfortune and society's injustice toward him. . . . But there is nothing of this sort in my novel, absolutely nothing, and that's why I am afraid it will be a positive failure." Prince Myshkin, indeed, inherits a fortune just after

the action gets underway; and while the other characters are struck by his "strangeness," they find his moral purity to be more impressive and disturbing than a source of merriment.

III

This first section of the novel plunges the prince into the superficially respectable but inwardly corrupt world of Petersburg high society, with a plot intrigue similar to that of *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils, a work referred to in the text (it also served Giuseppe Verdi for his opera *La Traviata*). In both works, a beautiful and spiritually virtuous woman, who has been socially disgraced, is asked to sacrifice herself in the name of family honor. For Dumas, the woman is the demimondaine Marguerite Gautier, who submits to the implacable condemnation of society so that the sister of her aristocratic beloved can enter into a proper marriage. For Dostoevsky she is the queenly Nastasya Filippovna, once the innocent ward and then the helpless mistress of the elegant high official Totsky (a variant of his name is Trotsky, and one rather regrets that it was not used). Totsky now wishes to marry her off so that he can wed one of the daughters of General Epanchin; but the proudly resentful Nastasya refuses to allow herself to be bought and sold in this disgraceful if socially acceptable fashion.

In part one, the prince finds himself in the midst of this drama, instantly recognizing Nastasya's fineness of spirit and sympathizing with her rage and resentment, although appalled at the self-destructive form it has assumed. Indeed, in the riotous party scene that terminates this first section, he attempts to thwart her decision to debase herself even further by running off with the immensely wealthy merchant's son Rogozhin, who is consumed by a mad, all-consuming passion for her that bodes no good. When the prince unexpectedly, and to everyone's astonishment, offers her marriage, she replies: "Thank you, prince. No one has ever talked to me like that before. . . . They've always been trying to buy me, but no decent man has ever thought of marrying me" (p. 156). But of course she refuses ("Did you really think I meant [to] . . . ruin a child like that?"), and departs with Rogozhin and his disreputable group to express her contempt for the outwardly estimable but inwardly depraved society that had corrupted her own life.

These early chapters, written at white heat, also contain other notable features. *The Idiot* is the most autobiographical of Dostoevsky's novels, or at least the one in which autobiography obtrudes most overtly. There is the scene, for example, in which the prince attempts to gain admission to the Epanchin mansion from a recalcitrant footman, who is inclined to think him an impostor because of his far-from-fashionable clothes and modest manner. The prince succeeds in gaining entry, however, after recounting his impressions of an execution by the guillotine that he had witnessed in Europe. Intuiting the agony undergone by the condemned man as he faced the ineluctable certainty of death, which the prince compares with the "torture" and "agony" of which "Christ spoke too," he then muses: "Perhaps there is some man who has been sentenced to death . . . and then has been told 'you can go, you are pardoned.' Perhaps such a man could tell us" (p. 22).

Dostoevsky himself was such a man, having experienced these same torments in 1850 during the mock execution staged by Nicholas I to punish the Petrashevsky Circle, all of whom were officially condemned to death and then pardoned. And he utilizes the ordeal of his mock execution again in Prince Myshkin's scene with the Epanchin sisters, who at first tend to regard the unassuming prince as something of a pious fraud. Not only does Dostoevsky here reproduce the exact details of this lacerating event, but he also expresses sentiments similar to those he employed in a letter to his older brother Mikhail just after returning to prison. "Life is a gift," he wrote then, "life is happiness, every minute can be an eternity of bliss." These are the very emotions that Prince Myshkin attributes to a condemned man who then was pardoned: "What if I could go back to life—what eternity! . . . I would turn every minute into an age; I would lose nothing" (p. 56). The mock execution again appears when the prince, asked to suggest a subject for a picture to be painted by Adelaida Epanchin, can think only of the face of a condemned man and a priest holding up a cross. The prince's sensibility is thus haunted by the shadow of eternity, and the absolute sense of moral obligation that he exhibits can be attributed to this overhanging presence.

In *The Idiot* as well Dostoevsky also draws on his own ailment of epilepsy more explicitly and directly than anywhere else in his writings. Just before the onset of a fit, when he loses consciousness and is overcome by spasmodic convulsions, the prince felt an "aura" of ecstatic plenitude that, as we know from other sources, reproduces the sensations felt by his creator. At such moments, the prince became aware of "the acme of harmony and beauty . . . a feeling, unknown and undivined till then, of completeness, of proportion, of reconciliation, and of ecstatic devotional merging in the highest synthesis of life" (p. 208). It was a moment of "infinite happiness," which "might well be worth the whole of life." And it was then that the prince "seem[ed]

somehow to understand the extraordinary saying [from the Bible, Book of Revelations 10:6] that *there shall be no more time*." Moments such as these may well have strengthened Dostoevsky's own belief in the existence of a supersensuous realm transcending ordinary earthly existence. If so, however, he did not employ it in *The Idiot* for such a purpose. On the contrary, the loftiness of the vision is depicted as a sublime illusion; and when the prince acts under its inspiration, he provokes Rogozhin into an attempt on his life.

This first section of *The Idiot* contains some unforgettable scenes in which the "angelic" character of the prince is superbly portrayed. One such is the story of Marie, a consumptive little slavey in the Swiss village where the prince is being treated for epilepsy. She has been seduced and abandoned by a traveling salesman, and then becomes a despised outcast mistreated by everyone and ridiculed by the village children. Moved by her misery, the prince gives her a few francs and persuades the children that she has been unjustly abused and condemned. The last days of her life are thus irradiated by the warmth of their love, and she dies surrounded by their care and devotion. The children, when they observe the prince kissing her out of compassion, are unable to distinguish between this and the kisses exchanged between their parents; this leitmotiv will later be developed on a large-scale in the rivalry between Nastasya Filippovna and Aglaia Epanchin.

The completion of this first part, however, posed new problems for Dostoevsky because he had written it without any overall plan, and it is clear from his letters and notebooks that he scarcely knew how to continue. "As I go along," he wrote to his niece, "various details crop up that I find fascinating and stimulating. But the whole? But the hero? Somehow the whole thing seems to turn on the figure of *the hero* . . . I must establish the character of the hero. Will it develop under my pen?" Even though Dostoevsky seemed to see other characters quite clearly, he confesses that "the main hero is still extremely pale." The notes reveal that he continued to struggle with this problem all through the remainder of the book. On the one hand, as he writes in a note, "it was necessary *to show the Prince in a field of action*" [italics in text]; but on the other, as Reinhold Niebuhr has written of Christianity, "it is impossible to symbolize the divine goodness in history in any other way than by complete powerlessness." Dostoevsky thus was faced with the dilemma of creating a hero lacking all the usual attributes associated with such a figure, but whose moral-religious purity would somehow shine through and redeem his practical impotence.

IV

The Idiot is the most loosely constructed of Dostoevsky's major novels and after part one breaks up into three alternating narrative strands. One is the Nastasya-Myshkin relationship, which now, however, sinks into the background for lengthy stretches. What occupies the foreground is the prince's attraction to Aglaia Epanchin, the youngest, most beautiful, most headstrong, and most socially idealistic of the three Epanchin daughters. She has been attracted by Myshkin's defiance of social convention as he springs to the defense of Nastasya, externally dishonored but in fact the innocent victim of circumstances. Aglaia thus characterizes Myshkin, in a famous scene, as the "poor knight" of Pushkin's poem (known by its first line: "Once on earth lived a poor knight"), a work she recites in his presence after having spoken of the "poor knight" as "Don Quixote, only serious and not comic." The third narrative strand consists of all the ancillary episodes that Dostoevsky introduces in such profusion, and which, allowing him to roam far and wide, add so much vivacity and even grotesquerie to what is otherwise a hauntingly tragic story.

The first of these plot lines centers on the Nastasya-Myshkin-Rogozhin triangle, and on the prince's efforts to rescue the once-violated but now regal and commanding Nastasya from the self-destructive consequences of her own resentment and rage. She had fallen prey to what Dostoevsky called elsewhere (in his first post-Siberian novel, *The Insulted and Injured*) "the egoism of suffering"—that is, an egoism turned back upon itself in masochistic self-hatred, and using its own self-punishment as a means of exhibiting its contempt for others. Nastasya dabbles with the potentially murderous passion of the socially inferior Rogozhin so as to display her scorn for such "respectable" gentlemen as Totsky and General Epanchin, who wish to dispose of her life for their own totally selfish ends. Prince Myshkin provided the only exception to this rule that she had ever encountered.

While the threat of Rogozhin's violence hangs over Nastasya from the earliest pages, the notes reveal that Dostoevsky contemplated the possibility of averting what finally seemed the inevitable ending. At one point, he writes: "He [Myshkin] rehabilitates N. F. and asserts ascendancy over Rogozhin. He induces humility in Aglaia. . . ." Other notes, however, sketch the murder that will ultimately occur. "When Rogozhin shows him N. F.'s corpse. She was screaming. He kisses the corpse." No final choice was made until later, when Dostoevsky was writing part four of the novel; and he thought that readers would be surprised by such a conclusion. "If there are readers of *The Idiot*," he wrote in a letter, indicating

his doubts about the novel's success, "they perhaps will be somewhat stunned by the unexpectedness of the ending, but, on reflection, they will finally agree that it had to end this way." Perhaps he imagined that, given the Christian aura surrounding the prince, a more positive or "uplifting" termination would have been expected; but he found it impossible to satisfy such a presumed anticipation.

The second plot line centers on the prince's involvement with Aglaia, who is also being courted by the polished and sophisticated nobleman Radomsky. The latter serves additionally as a commentator on the action from a highly civilized and worldly point of view, both friendly but distant and quite skeptical. The tentative romance between the prince and Aglaia has posed something of a problem because Myshkin's capacity to maintain a normal love relationship remains ambiguous. Some commentators have believed him to be sexually impotent, and as evidence they can cite his remark to Rogozhin: "Perhaps you don't know that, owing to my illness, I know nothing of women" (p. 14). These words can be taken simply as a statement of fact about the prince's life up to that point, or as the indication of a more fundamental disability; but there are reasons to doubt that it refers to a physical infirmity. In the first place, although Dostoevsky himself was an epileptic, he was twice married, the father of four children, and is known to have been passionately involved with at least one mistress. Moreover, to interpret the prince in this way would weaken one of the important leitmotivs in the book—the conflict in the prince himself between his pure but carnal love for Aglaia and his compassionate love for Nastasya. These differing kinds of love are carefully distinguished in Dostoevsky's notes, and they ultimately come into conflict. Unless we accept the prince's desire to marry as flowing from a normal masculine urge, we seriously undermine the tragic nature of his dilemma.

The romance between Prince Myshkin and Aglaia provides some of the most charming scenes of the book, filled with a tender playfulness hard to find elsewhere in Dostoevsky's works. It is she who necessarily takes the lead in what would normally be the masculine prerogative of courtship; and even after she does so, the afflicted prince cannot imagine that it was possible for him to experience anything such as ordinary "love" for a woman. Indeed, as he wanders through the park at night in Pavlovsk waiting for Aglaia (a scene that Dostoevsky referred to later as one of his best), "if anyone had told him at that moment that he had fallen in love, that he was passionately in love, he would have rejected the idea with surprise and perhaps with indignation" (p. 332). Earlier, when Aglaia had read the "poor knight" poem, substituting the initial letters of

Nastasya's name for those in Pushkin's text, he took it as "a mockery," though everyone else understood it as an indication of her burgeoning romantic infatuation. The scene in which she tries to prepare him for the reception at which he will officially appear as her fiancé, both fearing his social ineptitude and denouncing those who might ridicule it, also beautifully captures the incongruity of their situation.

Prince Myshkin dramatizes Dostoevsky's image of "a perfectly beautiful man," a being who comes as close as humanly possible to the Christian ideal; but for Dostoevsky there was only "one positively beautiful figure in the world—Christ," and the appearance of Christ had been "an infinite miracle." There could only be one God-man; and while He remained an eternal aspiration for humanity, such aspiration could never obviously receive its complete fulfillment. Many years before, holding a nighttime vigil at the bier of his dead first wife in 1864, Dostoevsky had jotted down some notes that provide the only direct first-hand glimpse into his religious convictions and can serve as a commentary on Prince Myshkin. Here he writes that "to love man *like oneself*, according to the commandment of Christ, is impossible. The law of personality on earth binds. The *Ego* stands in the way." And as an example of the nefarious effects of this "law of personality," obstructing the perfect fulfillment of Christ's commandment, Dostoevsky astonishingly cites the institution of marriage. "Marriage and the giving in marriage of a woman . . . [is] the greatest deviation from humanism, the complete isolation of the pair from everyone else . . . the family, that is the law of nature, but [it is] all the same abnormal, egotistical." The prince's attraction to Aglaia, which normally would lead to marriage, thus runs athwart of the Christian commandment to love all of mankind like oneself.

The two narrative strands of the book come together in the climactic scene in which the women confront each other as rivals, and demand that the prince choose between them. It is then that Myshkin must decide between his love-as-compassion for Nastasya and his flesh-and-blood love for Aglaia. Nastasya's suffering, her "frenzied, despairing face" (p. 524), stirs his heart first of all; he even appeals to Aglaia on her behalf, but this is enough to end his romance with her once and for all. The purest earthly love cannot be reconciled with the universal compassion embodied in the Christian ideal. In the final chapters, while making preparations to marry Nastasya Filippovna, the prince still wishes to visit Aglaia; and the narrator confesses that "we find it difficult in many instances to explain what occurred" (p. 525). The prince is inwardly torn, as the highly intelligent Radomsky recognizes, between "two different

sorts of love" (p. 535), one completely incompatible with the other. This is why his behavior can no longer be comprehended by the narrator, who only reflects the bewilderment of the community at Myshkin's unwillingness to surrender either one in accordance with existing social-religious norms. Like Christ with the Pharisees, Myshkin has now gone beyond the realm where such conditions have any relevance. In the eerie final scene, after Nastasya has fled back to Rogozhin's embittered love-hatred, the prince consoles the hysterical murderer beside the corpse of his victim; and he finally sinks back into the darkness of the epileptic oblivion from which he had emerged at the beginning of the novel.

V

The third of Dostoevsky's narrative strands contains a whole host of minor characters who enliven, enrich, and diversify the main thematic action in ways that are sometimes ludicrous and grotesque, and whose effect may be compared to the burlesque interludes often included in medieval mystery plays. All these figures are analogically related to Dostoevsky's central motif—the effort to incorporate the Christian ideal—and each exhibits a different level of the conflict between some form of moral behavior and the inherent egoism of the human personality. One of the most important is the dying adolescent Ippolit, the first of the metaphysical rebels the author later developed in such characters as Kirillov in *The Devils* and Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Ippolit emerges as an ideological rival to Prince Myshkin's meekness and humility, rising in revolt against a God who has condemned mankind to suffering and death. When the prince first sees the copy of Holbein's *Dead Christ* in Rogozhin's home, he tells of four encounters that had convinced him that "the essence of religious feeling does not come under any sort of reasoning or atheism, and has nothing to do with any crimes or misdemeanors. . . . But the chief thing is that you will notice it more clearly and quickly in the Russian heart than anywhere else" (p. 203). The prince can thus surmount this iconoclastic image of the dead Christ, whose contemplation can very well cause a loss of faith. But for Ippolit the canvas leads to a semi-comic public reading of his "Essential Explanation" (p. 355) which nobody really wants to listen to, terminated by an attempt at suicide that rather pathetically fails. Ippolit's youthful mawkishness and self-preoccupation, combined with the sadness of his fate, anticipates some of the black comedy of Samuel Beckett. One of the most poignant moments of the book, however, occurs when Ippolit pleadingly asks the prince how best he might die, and receives

the compassionate but also rather guilty reply: "Pass by us, and forgive us our happiness" (p. 479).

If Prince Myshkin embodies the purest and more-exalted expression of Dostoevsky's theme, other characters represent it in a completely opposite register. In their case, we see the almost miraculous survival of a moral sensibility in lives where it might be considered to have been completely extinguished. The rascally civil servant Lebedev, for example, is both a lawyer and a fervent expounder of the Apocalypse; and he narrates a gruesome story about medieval cannibalism in the parodistic style of a lawyer arguing for the defense. It appears that during times of extreme famine in the Middle Ages, cannibalism was widely resorted to. One such cannibal, who began by eating monks (usually well nourished) and little children, reduced his diet to laymen because he was tormented by his conscience. But finally he went and confessed to the authorities, though he might simply have desisted without saying a word and despite all the tortures that he knew would ensue. From this story Lebedev concludes that "there must have been an idea stronger than any misery, famine, torture, plague, leprosy, and all that hell, which mankind could not have endured without that idea, which bound men together, guided their hearts. . . . Show me anything like such a force in our age of vices and railways" (p. 348). Despite such a disillusioned conclusion, Lebedev himself and all the other minor characters manifest the workings of the same force that is so sarcastically exalted in this harrowing tale.

Such extreme dissonance of tone fills *The Idiot* to a much greater extent than it does other Dostoevsky novels. But there are also appealing touches of less grisly humor in the cock-and-bull stories of the discredited General Ivolgin, vainly striving to overcome his social degradation by the mythomaniacal adventures he recounts to dubious, half-amused listeners who do not believe a word that he utters. The anecdote about the lapdog tossed out of the window of the railway carriage, after its well-bred female owner had done the same with the general's cigar, demonstrates the narrator's refusal to accept so insulting a reprimand; but it turns out, alas, to have been taken from a recent newspaper article. The marvelous story about his relation to Napoleon as a child during the siege of Moscow, in which his innocent words lead to the disastrous French retreat in midwinter, is sheer braggadocio worthy of Falstaff and narrated with irresistible skill. Dostoevsky's talent as a satirical humorist has been generally overlooked because of the tragic nature of his themes; but nowhere is it better displayed than in *The Idiot*.

If we place *The Idiot* in the perspective of Dostoevsky's work as a whole, it may be considered his most courageous creation. Not, however, because he tackled the almost impossible creative task of presenting "a perfectly beautiful man" within the limits of a novel form whose "realism" he wished to respect. It was courageous because, in doing so, he was putting his own highest Christian values to the same test as those to which he had been most opposed. The inspiration for his best novels, before and after *The Idiot*, had been provided by his polemical relation to the doctrines of Russian nihilism. In the underground man and Raskolnikov, as later in Stavrogin and Ivan Karamazov, Dostoevsky had dramatized the disastrous consequences of such nihilist ideas if taken to their ultimate limits in human action. But this is exactly what he ends up by doing in *The Idiot* as well—except that the values in this instance are those that he himself cherished with a fervor made more ardent by his full awareness of their fragility.

With an integrity that cannot be too highly praised, Dostoevsky fearlessly submits his *own* most hallowed convictions to the same scrutiny that he had used for those of the nihilists. What would they mean for human life if taken seriously and literally, and lived out to their full extent as guides to conduct? The moral extremism of his own eschatological ideal, incarnated by the prince, is portrayed as being equally incompatible with the normal demands of social existence as the egoistic extremism of his tormented and tortured nihilist figures. Dostoevsky thus remained true to his deepest artistic instincts in narrating the career of Prince Myshkin, but no doubt for this reason the reactions of his closest literary allies, as well as the general public, were far from enthusiastic.

To Maikov he wrote, as he was working on the fourth section: "Now that I see, as through a magnifying glass, I am bitterly convinced that never in my literary life have I had a better and richer poetic idea than the one now becoming clear to me." But he complains about having to rush "full speed ahead," lacking the time even to re-read what he has written, and helplessly feeling that "if I had started writing this novel a year earlier and then could have spent two or three months correcting and re-writing, it would have come out differently." However that may be, the novel soon began to make its way, and nine years after it had been published Dostoevsky wrote to a correspondent who considered it his "masterpiece": "Let me tell you that I have heard such an opinion 50 times if not more. The book keeps selling every year, and more as time passes."

Posterity has justified the verdict of Dostoevsky's correspondent about

the novel that the author undertook as a gamble, as if he were playing roulette. One may say that it is the one and only time he emerged a winner.

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