

Thoughts on Dostevsky's "Idiot"

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Translated from German by
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Dostoevsky's Idiot, Prince Lyov Myshkin, has often been compared with Christ. Of course such a comparison can be made. One can compare with the Saviour every man who lays bare magical truth, who no longer separates thought from life and who on that account lives a life of solitude among hostile neighbours. From that point of view there seems to be no great likeness between Myshkin and Jesus. Only one trait in Myshkin's character, but that an important one, appears to me as Christlike. I allude to his timid, morbid purity. The secret fear of sex and of procreation is a trait which must be reckoned with in the message of Christ for it plays a distinct part in his world mission. Even the superficial portrait of Jesus by Renan does not entirely overlook this feature.

But it is curious — little as I sympathise with the constant comparison between Myshkin and Christ — that I also see the two intermingled in some strange fashion. This occurred to me only latterly and in connexion with a point of comparative insignificance. It came into my mind one day, while I was thinking of the Idiot, that my first thought of him was always an apparently secondary one. In the first flash of my imagination, I always see him in one particular minor side-scene, in itself not specially significant. And so it is with Christ. When any association suggests to me a presentation of Jesus or when the word of Christ meets my ear or my eye, then I never see

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Him on the Cross or in the desert, or as miracle worker or as a raiser of the dead. I see Him in that moment when He drinks the cup of solitude to the dregs in the Garden of Gethsemane, when His soul is torn by the agony of death through which He must pass to His higher birth and how He then in a last moving and child-like longing for comfort, turns to His disciples. He turns to them for a little human warmth, for a fleeting illusion of affection in the midst of His bitter loneliness. He turns to them - and the disciples are asleep. There lie excellent Peter and beautiful John; they are all asleep together, these worthy men about whom Christ in His goodness has experienced disappointments over and over again. He has shared His thoughts with them as though they understood His words, as though it were in actual fact possible to communicate His thoughts to such as these, to arouse in them something like a vibration of kinship, something akin to understanding, to relationship, to unity with Himself. And now in the moment of unbearable torment, He turns to these few comrades He has. He is so utterly human, so utterly alone, so utterly the Man of Suffering, that He would now approach them as never before, to find some poor solace, some poor support in any stupid word they might utter, even in a friendly gesture. But no, they are not even there ... they are sleeping-snoring.

This cruel moment, in what way I know not, seared itself into my mind in early youth, and when I think of Jesus, unfailingly it springs into my memory.

The parallel with Myshkin is this. When I think of *The Idiot*, an apparently unimportant moment bursts upon me in the same way. In that case also the moment is one of incredible isolation, of tragic solitude. The scene I have in mind is that evening in Paslovsk in the Lebedyev's house, when the prince, convalescent, some days after his epileptic attack, receives the visit of the whole Epanchin family. Into this society, serene and elegant, in spite of tensions and hidden fires beneath, there suddenly bursts a band of young revolutionaries and

nihilists. The wretched youth Ippolit with the pretended “Son of Pavlishtchev”, with the “Boxer” and the other individual make their appearance. Then comes that disagreeable, repellent scene, a scene which one reads with equal excitement and disgust. These shallow-minded and misled youths stand upon the stage, naked in their helpless malignity. Every single one of their words inflicts a double pain upon Myshkin, the pain of their effect upon himself and the pain caused by the revelation of their own souls through every words they utter. This strange and unforgettable scene, though not in itself particularly weighty, is the one to which I referred. On the one side a company of elegant people, people of the world, rich, powerful and conservative. On the other the raging young anarchists, inexorable in their hostility, caring only to gratify their spite against everything that exists, with consideration for no one and, in spite of their rhetorical pretence of intellectuality, wild, foolish, trashy. Between these two parties, the prince, alone, exposed to the fire of both, regarded with equal distrust by both. And how does the situation end? Myshkin, in spite of small mistakes, due to his agitation, reveals his sweet, tender, child-like nature. He smilingly accepts affront and insult, answers the most shameless with a Christ-like selflessness, is ready to accept all the fault, to take upon himself all the blame and exactly in such a way as to incur the full weight of odium, displeasure and contempt from both sides-not from one side or the other — but from both. All turn away from him, for he has trodden on the toes of all. One moment more and the extremest social antagonisms, differences in ages and opinions are wiped out. All are completely united in a common resentment against the single clean one amongst them.

Upon what turns the impracticability of a being such as The Idiot in this world? Why does no-one understand this man whom almost all somehow or other love, whose tenderness is so sympathetic to all as to lead to a sort of transfiguration? What separates this magical creature from ordinary men? Why are they right when they turn aside from him? Why must they necessarily do so? Why must he

be like Christ who was deserted not only by the world but even by His own disciples?

It is because the Idiot thinks other thoughts than the rest of the world. It is not because his thinking is less logical or more child-like than theirs. His thinking is that which I call "magical." This compassionate Idiot denies the whole of Life, all thinking and feeling, all that the world and reality mean to others. For him Reality is something entirely different than for them. Their Reality is for him a shadow. For that reason, because he sees and offers a new Reality, he becomes the enemy. The difference is not that they esteem highly such values as power and wealth, family and state and that he does not. It is not that he stands for the Spirit while they stand for the Material or whatever way one likes to put it. That is not the reason. For the Idiot too, material concerns matter, he invariably recognizes the significance of such things, even though he does not consider them of prime importance. His gospel is not an ascetic-Indian ideal, a dying to the world of apparent reality to make the joy of the immortal soul which alone shall know Truth.

No, Myshkin would readily come to an understanding with other people regarding the mutual claims of Nature and Spirit and on the necessity of their working together. It is simply that while the simultaneity and equi-value of both worlds is for them an intellectual concept, for him these considerations constitute Life and Reality. This is not clear. Let us try to elucidate the matter.

Myshkin is different from others because, as an Idiot and an epileptic who is at the same time an exceptionally clever man, he has much closer and less obscure relationships with the Unconscious. He has had rare instants of intuitive perception, occasional seconds of transcendent exaltation. For a lightning moment he has felt the all-being, the all-feeling, the all-suffering, the all-understanding. He has known all that is in the world. There lies the kernel of his magical

being. He has not studied, and is not endowed with, mystical wisdom, he has not even aspired to it. He has simply experienced the thing itself. He has not merely had occasional significant thoughts and ideas. He has literally, once and more than once, stood on the magic borderland where everything is affirmed, where not only the remotest thought is true, but also the contrary of such thought.

That is the fearful part of it, that is the part of him rightly feared by others. He does not stand quite alone, not all the world is against him. There are a few people, very doubtful, risky, dangerous people who stand in close relationship to him. Rogozhin, Nastasya. He is understood by hystericals; he, the innocent, the gentle child. But this child is not so soft as he seems. His innocence is not so harmless and men are rightly in awe of him.

The Idiot is, as I said, from time to time near that borderland where every thought and its opposite are equally true. That is, he has an intuitive perception that no thought, no law, no mould, no form exist which are true and right except as regarded from one pole — and every pole has its opposite. The situation of a pole, the taking up, that is to say, of a position from which to view and order the world, is the first stage in the foundation of every cultural form, of every society and morality. Whosoever considers Spirit and Nature, Spirit and Freedom, Good and Evil as interchangeable, if only for a moment, is the deadliest foe of every order of civilization. For there begins the contrary of Order; there begins Chaos.

A line of thought which turns back to the Unconscious, to Chaos, disturbs every human system of order. It was once said to the Idiot that it was lamentable he no longer told only the truth. So it was. Truth is everything. It is possible to say “Yes” to everything. But, to order the world, to achieve material results, to render possible Law, Society, Organisation, Culture and Morality, No must follow Yes. The world must be polarised, it must be divided against itself

into Good and Evil. Establish every "No", every prohibited thing, every wickedness upon a foundation sufficiently solid to make it accepted law and as soon as such law is enforced, as soon as it becomes the basis of a new mode of viewing things, a new order, it equally becomes absolute and sacred. Highest Reality in the sense of human culture is the division of the World into Light and Dark, Good and Evil, Allowed and Forbidden.

Highest Reality for Myshkin is the magical experience of the reversability of all institutional forms, of the existence of a negative equivalent to all moral values. The Idiot, finally considered, introduces the Mother-claim of the Unconscious, he is the blaster of Civilisation. He does not break the Tables of the Law, he simply turns them round and shows that the contrary to them is written on the other side.

It is the secret of this terrifying book that this enemy of Order, this fearful destroyer does not appear as a malefactor but as a charming, shy creature full of child-like grace, full of warm-hearted, unselfish goodness. Dostoevsky drew upon the depths of his imagination when he made this man a diseased epileptic. All Dostoevsky's harbingers of a new and fearful and sinister future, all his forerunners of Chaos are enigmatic, burdened with pain and disease, Rogozhin, Nastasya, the four Karamazoffs. All are represented as strange, exceptional beings but in such a way that their eeriness and soul-sickness inspire that sort of awed veneration that the Asiatics feel for the insane. The remarkable and peculiar thing is not that a genial epileptic of between fifty and sixty years of age had such fantasies and made an epic of them. The significant, the ominous consideration is that during three decades the youth of Europe has more and more been accepting these books as full of prophetic gravity. Another strange thing is that we look these criminals, hystericals and idiots of Dostoevsky in the face in quite a different way from that in which we regard the criminals or fools in other novels we have affection for. It

is strange and uncanny to realise that in some curious way we love these bad people, to realise that there must be in us something akin to them, something that is like them.

This does not come about by chance and still less is it anything to do with the obvious, and literary in Dostoevsky's work. Puzzling as are certain of his characteristics — consider only the way he bears one forward towards a solidly constructed psychology of the Unconscious — we are not surprised at his work being the finished expression of a highly developed insight nor at its artistic interpretation of a daily world with which we are thoroughly familiar. What actually impresses us is its prophetic import, its foreshadowing of a disintegration and of a Chaos into which we have during these last years seen Europe obviously descending. It is not as though this world of Dostoevsky's were a picture of the future in an ideal sense. No one will accept it as that. No, we do not feel that Myshkin and the rest afford us a prefiguration in the sense of “This is what you must become.” It is something different but fully as significant: “We must pass through this. This is our destiny.”

The future is uncertain but the road which he shows have but one meaning. It means a new spiritual dispensation. This takes us beyond Myshkin, it points towards magical thinking, to the acceptance of Chaos, to return to anarchy, back into the beast, back far beyond the beast, back to the beginnings of everything. Not to stay there, not to become beast or primeval matter but to start in a fresh direction, to discover new springs of development and action deep down in the roots of our being in order to reach to a higher and nobler creation and valuation and division of the world. No programme can teach us to find this road, no revolution will cast down the walls that we may enter into it. Each one must approach it alone, each one for himself. Each one of us must in one hour of his life stand on the threshold of the borderland where Myshkin stood, where truths cease and new ones begin. Each one of us must once, for one

moment in his life, experience something of what Myshkin experienced in his flashlight seconds, of what Dostoevsky himself experienced in that moment when he stood facing his condemnation and, with prophetic vision, took his way onward.
