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Seeing and Believing in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

At the heart of Fyodor Dostoevsky's great, and murky, novel *The Idiot* lies a painting: Hans Holbein's naturalistic-devotional masterpiece *Der Leichnam Christi im Grabe* (The Corpse of Christ in the Grave, 1521). As is well known, Dostoevsky's "encounter" with the painting, in the Basel Art Museum in August 1867, was a decisive and traumatic one, a desperately ecstatic viewing that nearly resulted in an epileptic seizure.¹ Given the dialectical nature of so much of Dostoevsky's thinking, it is perhaps no surprise that the painting's suffocatingly oppressive horizontality (its dimensions are 30.5 x 200 cm) and all too humanly-dead Christ should serve as a catalyst for the "solution" to the creative crisis surrounding the composition of *The Idiot*.² Fewer than five months later, on 1 January 1868, he was able to describe

¹ After describing the agony of the experience, Dostoevsky's wife, Anna Snitkina Dostoevsky, remarks that, upon leaving the museum, Dostoevsky insisted that they come back another time to see the painting again. See A. G. Dostoevskaja, *Vospominaniia* (Moscow, 1971), 165.

² As the *Notebooks* to the *The Idiot* attest, Dostoevsky had a very difficult time conceptualizing his protagonist (in the earlier drafts Myshkin was more like Raskol'nikov of *Crime and Punishment* than the Prince we know). It was only when Dostoevsky settled on a more static, less dynamic concept of Myshkin that he was able to write the novel. The letter to his niece below reflects that turn.

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his project to his beloved niece Sofia Ivanova in the following terms:

The idea of the novel is an old and favourite one of mine, but such a hard one that for a long time I didn't dare take it up, and if I have taken it up now, then absolutely because I was in a nearly desperate situation. The main idea of the novel is to portray a positively beautiful person. There's nothing more difficult than that in the whole world, and especially now. All the writers, and not just ours, but even all the European ones, who ever undertook the depiction of a *positively* [italics are Dostoevsky's] beautiful person, always had to pass. Because it's a measureless ideal. The beautiful is an ideal, and the ideal—both ours and that of civilized Europe—is far from having been achieved. There's only one positively beautiful person in the world—Christ, so that the appearance of this measurelessly, infinitely beautiful person is in fact of course an infinite miracle.³

Dostoevsky goes on in this letter to identify a revealing genealogy for his novel, comprising Don Quixote and the “infinitely weaker” but nevertheless “enormous” achievement of Dickens's Pickwick. Both of those, he argues, succeed because they present the beautiful in the form of the “ridiculous,” the comic, while Dostoevsky has in mind a tragedy and presciently adds, “I'm terribly afraid that it will be a positive failure.”⁴

³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters: 1868-1871*, edited and translated by David A. Lowe (New York: Ardis Publishing, 1990) 3: 17.

⁴ *Dostoevsky, Complete Letters*, 17. I have chosen to change one word in Lowe's translation of this phrase. While he has “absolute failure” I return to the more literal “positive failure” (положительная неудача in the Russian) because it more clearly links the “failure” of the novel with the attempt to depict Christ.



Hans Holbein
Der Leichnam Christi im Grabe
1521 (30,5 cm x 200 cm)
With permission from the Basel
Kunstmuseum.

What does Dostoevsky mean by this formulation? The word “positive,” as seen in the excerpted letter above, is initially used by Dostoevsky to describe the incarnation, the making visible of the absolutely good and the beautiful in human form. For Dostoevsky, and for Christianity, this is of course a unique event; its appearance now, again, can only be in the form of imitation and will be, to take the second word, a necessary “failure” because the world in which it appears (or into which it descends, to use Vyacheslav Ivanov’s formulation⁵) is neither positive nor beautiful. In the measurable, “real world” of nature and history, Myshkin’s goodness and beauty are perceived as “idiocy” and, still more troubling, prove to be a catalyst for chaos and tragedy, including his own. Myshkin is an enigma to those around him, understood and misunderstood in a variety of changing, literally contradictory ways. By Book 4 even the narrator is unable to grasp him, or the goings-on swirling around him, fully.

Myshkin’s tragedy, as the novel amply demonstrates, is a paradoxical one—a tragedy of innocence, of the *necessary* guilt (and Myshkin repeatedly judges himself guilty) of innocence. The understanding of this doubleness, which ultimately pertains to all things, all experiences, comes to Myshkin gradually, in step with his growing simultaneous estrangement and participation in the world. It is fully half-way through the novel (Chapter 11, Book 2), and only in the form of comedy (another important duality in *The Idiot*), in a conversation with the boxer Keller, probably the novel’s most socially degraded figure who comes to the prince both to seek forgiveness for having conspired against the prince *and* to borrow 200 roubles, that Myshkin is able to give this perception a name: “double thoughts.”⁶ This insight, which is the foundation of the novel’s

⁵ Vyacheslav Ivanov, *Freedom and the Tragic Life: a study in Dostoevsky* (Wolfeboro, 1989).

⁶ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, 2001), 309. In the Russian Academy edition *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Leningrad, 1972), 8: 258.

tragedy, this experience that simultaneously exaggerates and subsumes difference, is repeatedly, obsessively explored in *The Idiot*: in dualities of character (for example: both *within* Nastasya Filippovna and between Nastasya Filippovna and Aglaya Ivanovna, between Myshkin and Rogozhin, between Myshkin and Ippolit, etc.); in the inseparability of suffering and beauty; the simultaneity of immanence and transcendence (at one point, Myshkin shockingly, and with a smile, calls himself a materialist⁷); the coupling of the real and the symbolic. Also, in a novel notable for its crucial autobiographical sources, there is a no less striking, and ongoing, exploration and commentary on the possibility of the novel itself, of the representability of "double thoughts," the collision between the planes of the divine and the earthly, in word and image. The extraordinary and repeated recourse to ekphrasis, the cornucopia of paintings (some real, some imaginary, some inconceivable) presented in the novel, and the explicit discussion of representation, combine to suggest that in *The Idiot*, more than in any other of Dostoevsky's novels, theological and existential discourses are inseparably linked to the question of the status, and especially to the limits, of artistic representation, that is to say to the "picturing" of the invisible.

The discourse on painting and vision begins rather early and, so to speak, innocently in the novel: with a small landscape painting of the Swiss canton of Uri that Myshkin notices, and recognizes, in General Epanchin's office (Chapter two, Book One). This image is immediately followed by the discovery of the photograph of Nastasya Filippovna (given to Ganya as a kind of punishment for his failure to give her a birthday present). These two images, and especially their narrative and symbolic connection, are not only crucial thematically (see below) but already determine and predetermine how Myshkin will "see" both Nastasya Filippovna and Aglaya Ivanovna. In the Swiss landscape, we realize several chapters later, lies Myshkin's memory of Marie, a privileged image of suffering

⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 387, Russian Academy edition, 321.

innocence that is simultaneously his own paradise lost and the beauty that will save the world. The photographic portrait of Nastasya Fillipovna, which he instinctively treats as an icon (including kissing it), offers to Myshkin a portal onto another world, also of suffering and beauty (and linked to what we learn of Nastasya Filippovna's childhood in the village of Delight⁸) that he is convinced is more *real* than anything he sees in the chaos of Petersburg.

The nature of Myshkin's vision, and of his status as a painter, in particular what *kind* of painter, receives explicit treatment in this and the following three chapters. To begin with, we learn that Myshkin is a calligrapher—a profession whose activity seeks to overcome the abstraction of letters by making them beautiful in themselves—who especially likes to *copy* the handwriting of the fourteenth century Russian monk Pafnuty.⁹ Then, after a single conversation with the prince, Adelaida Epanchin, herself an amateur painter, chooses Myshkin as her “art teacher” and explicitly requests that he find an appropriate subject for a painting. Strangely—but everything about Myshkin is strange—he gives two answers. The first combines an apophatic concept of understanding as not-understanding and a mimetic definition of artistic perception: “I don't understand anything about it. It seems to me that you just look and paint.”¹⁰ Then he proceeds—first as a memory, then as an actual portrait—to describe the very painting that he apparently doesn't understand but sees. In a brilliant feat of ekphrasis—which includes a reference to an actual painting, Hans Fries's *The Beheading of John the*

⁸ This is Pevear and Volokhonsky's translation of the Russian word Отрадное.

⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 33. The line he writes is: “The humble hegumen Pafnuty here sets his hand to it.” In the Russian Academy edition, 29.

¹⁰ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 58, Russian Academy edition, 50. In the Russian: “Я в этом ничего не понимаю. Мне кажется: взглянуть и писать.”

Baptist, like the Holbein, located in the Basel Kunstmuseum—Myshkin describes all the events leading up to a condemned man's last moments; his fears and illusions, the ride across the city, the final narrow stairs to the scaffold, even the rusty buttons on the executioner's jacket; but it is the last moment itself, what he calls the "the cross and his face,"¹¹ that is to be the portrait's actual subject. This existential moment of truth, this ideal painting provides a foreshadowing of the end of the novel (*both* Nastasya Filippovna's death and Myshkin's final fall into idiocy) and a foregrounding of one of the novel's central questions: what kind of beauty can there be, must there be in a world in which its most precious substance, the human being, is doomed to inevitable death? How to reconcile suffering and injustice with the beauty of the world, God's love, and the promise of eternal life? Perhaps most of all for men of the 19th century: how to—and why—maintain one's faith in an invisible beyond in the face of quite visible decay and death? A tentative and perhaps unsatisfactory answer to these questions is immediately supplied when, giddy with Myshkin's naïve honesty, the girls ask him to describe—to paint with words—their faces. Alexandra's beauty, which Myshkin admires, he nevertheless calls "not joyful," of the type of the Darmstadt Madonna (by Holbein, a copy of which Dostoevsky saw—and was much impressed by—in Dresden); of Aglaya (which means radiance in Greek), the nature of whose beauty will ever escape Myshkin, he can only say "Beauty is a riddle,"¹² apophatically renouncing the very possibility of finding the words/images to say or see it. He will, however, *love* her, that is to say will worship the very beauty that cannot be depicted (seen) because lacking a natural model from which to draw it (that is, Myshkin "sees" Aglaya Ivanovna as existing on the "innocent," non-mimetic¹³ side of experience). In the midst of this discussion

¹¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 66, Russian Academy edition, 56.

¹² Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 77, Russian Academy edition, 66. In Russian: красота — загадка.

¹³ By mimetic I mean here an ethical and aesthetic system based on

of the beauty of the Epanchin girls, the photographic portrait of Nastasya Filippovna is introduced, provoking scandal, outrage, and awe. How can such a combination of beauty and suffering *exist*? It is here that Adelaida famously comments about Nastasya Filippovna: "Such beauty has power. . . . You can overturn the world with such beauty."¹⁴ Although applied here to the icon-portrait, these words equally describe the "double thoughts," the contradictory nature of the beauty that not only Nastasya Filippovna but Myshkin reveal—that they bear and bare—to the world.

The inability to represent ideal, non-experiential beauty comes up again in Book Two, this time in connection to Myshkin himself. By now Aglaya Epanchin is under the ambiguous spell of the prince, alternately loving and hating, worshiping and scorning him. In her mind she has made of him a combination of Pushkin's Poor Knight and Cervantes's Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance. She has even, we learn, asked her sister Adelaida to paint him on the basis of her description. But Adelaida says it can't be done:

"How could I paint it? And whom? The subject says about this 'poor knight':

From his face the visor
He ne'er raised for anyone.

What sort of face could it be, then? What should I paint—a visor? An anonymity?"¹⁵

the imitation of a pre-existent, rule-bound natural order.

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 80, Russian Academy edition, 69. The Russian reads: Такая красота – сила – горячо сказала Аделаида – с такую красотой можно мир перевернуть.

¹⁵ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 247, Russian Academy edition, 206. Pushkin's Russian verse reads: С лица стальной решётки / Ни пред кем не подымал. Significantly, although beyond the scope of these remarks, Nastasya Filippovna *is* able to create an imaginary portrait of Myshkin (as Christ). See Book Three, Chapter 10.

This confession of mimetic futility operates on at least two levels. *Within* the discourse of the novel, Adelaida's words refer to the incomprehensibility, for the visible eye, of Myshkin's pure innocence: he is a mirror that reflects but does not project. To others his face thus appears as a mask, offering an indecipherable and faintly ridiculous figure. As a comment *on* the novel being written, this scene expresses the inherent impossibility of succeeding at the task of adequately depicting Myshkin.¹⁶ As Myshkin will say of himself at the moment of his greatest self-understanding: "I lack the gesture. My gesture is always the opposite, and that provokes laughter and humiliates the idea. I have no sense of measure either, and that's the main thing; that's even the most main thing."¹⁷ In this sense, to remain true to his creation Dostoevsky can *only* hope that the novel be a "positive failure."

With the introduction of the Holbein painting, and its identification with Rogozhin, all the stakes in the relationship between beauty and suffering, visible and invisible, mimesis and apophasis, are revealed. Symptomatically, Myshkin finds Rogozhin's house by an act of mimetic perception: the house *looks like* Rogozhin, dark and foreboding. And of course it is in this house that Myshkin sees the reproduction of *Der Leichnam Christi im Grabe*, which Myshkin now admits he saw in Basel and that he "cannot forget."¹⁸ Moreover: "He felt very oppressed and wanted to be out of the house quickly."¹⁹ Myshkin, it becomes clear, is afraid of the painting, does not

¹⁶ Radomsky is perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon. As the novel's chief *raisonneur*, Radomsky rightly observes that Myshkin makes no sense, is self-contradictory; but by the end of the novel he nevertheless loves and serves the prince.

¹⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 552, Russian Academy edition, 458. This is part of the speech he gives at his failed coming-out party into Petersburg society. Also, note how Myshkin "quotes" Dostoevsky's letter of 1 January on the matter of his fatal lack of measure.

¹⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 218, Russian Academy edition, 181.

¹⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 218, Russian Academy edition, 181.

want to face its implications, its total absence of visible beauty. Perhaps this is why he has told and re-told the story of the moments leading up to (inevitable) death; moments when life is paradoxically never more present, intense, vital, and sacred: *this* side of nothingness. The Holbein painting, importantly, hangs in a liminal space (Rogozhin, the son of an Old Believer merchant, *owns* a fine print of it), above a doorway in one of the house's central rooms. As Rogozhin leads Myshkin out of the house, they come upon it. Rogozhin, semi-literate and inarticulate, initially says nothing but rather continues on his way, seemingly unconcerned. Suddenly he stops and says to Myshkin, "But I've long wanted to ask you something, Lev Nikolaevich: do you believe in God or not?" Myshkin doesn't know how to answer, Rogozhin seems faintly crazed. "I like looking at that painting," Rogozhin adds, which provokes an outburst from the prince, the only explicit commentary on the painting he will make in the entire novel:

"At that painting!" the prince suddenly cried out, under the impression of an unexpected thought.

"At that painting! A man could even lose his faith from that painting!"

"Lose it he does," Rogozhin agreed unexpectedly. They had already reached the front door.²⁰

Myshkin is terrified by Rogozhin's answer and tries to pretend that his own statement was a joke. But Rogozhin won't have it: for him, the dead Christ is a horribly *reassuring* image, one that denies the possibility of transcendence (of double thoughts) and that justifies his passion for possession and death, his chthonic and chronos-bound world. Indeed, in this sense Rogozhin is a figure of an absolute and one-sided mimesis—one that ends definitively, inevitably, but meaninglessly in death. For Myshkin, the encounter with the painting, with the image of Rogozhin, becomes a source of terrible guilt: instead of compassion and love—the promise of things unseen—he has

²⁰ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 218, Russian Academy edition, 181.

reacted to the painting in fear, in effect betraying Rogozhin. The challenge for Myshkin, the purpose of his earthly journey and the source of his tragedy, is beginning to become clear to him: he will both have to accept that mimesis (nature) ends in death and simultaneously believe in a beauty that will save the world: there is no gnostic solution for him. The result is idiocy, apophatic faith in an apophatic image (the dead Christ) through which he also sees the sufferings of Nastasya Filippovna.

No less of a challenge to the kingdom of the positively beautiful is nineteen-year-old Ippolit Terentyev, who is dying of consumption. His reaction to the painting is not so much one of loss of faith as hatred for God's creation and for Myshkin himself (not only does Terentyev ironically utter the novel's most famous lines, "The world will be saved by beauty,"²¹ words that he attributes to the prince but which Myshkin silently refuses to confirm, but he also insistently pits Myshkin's love for "the trees of Pavlovsk" to his own love of the absurd, "Meyer's wall," onto which his squalid Petersburg room gives). In his reading of the painting, Ippolit emphasizes the futility of beauty, the sufferings of the human Christ, the monstrous disproportion between God and man. As he says about the image of the dead Christ in the grave: "Here the notion involuntarily occurs to you that if death is so terrible and the laws of nature are so powerful, how can they be overcome? . . . The painting seems precisely to express the notion of a dark, insolent and senselessly eternal power, to which everything is subjected, and it is conveyed to you involuntarily."²² This insight leads him to the following meditation on the very possibility of a transcendent image in a world based on death:

And if this same teacher could have seen his own image on the eve of the execution, would he have gone to the cross and died as he did? That

²¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 382, Russian Academy edition, 317.

²² Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 408, Russian Academy edition, 339.

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question also comes to you involuntarily as you look at the painting.

All this came to me in fragments, perhaps indeed through delirium, sometimes even in images, for a whole half hour after Kolya left. Can something that has no image come as an image?²³

Ippolit's words, indeed his life, are a direct challenge to Myshkin's attempted *faithful* reading of death, in which compassion, faith, and agape are the appropriate response to the sufferings of the mortal body. Ippolit's words also point explicitly to the 'idiocy' of Myshkin's form of sacrificial mimesis (his imitating an image that is beyond all conception, outside of time and space). For Ippolit, who lives but rejects Myshkin's path, there is only despair: rebellion against life, rage, envy, and (failed) suicide. A negative apophasis.

At the end of the novel, Myshkin is of course "saved," ironically, from spiritual death, which he has come to identify with experience, the fall into time, nature, and mimesis, by idiocy, epilepsy, the absurd that is faith. The world, however, is not so lucky: it remains bound by experience, by time, nature, and history. Like Dostoevsky before Holbein's painting, we stand before the novel. Nastasya Filippovna is dead, Myshkin an idiot, Aglaya ruined, Rogozhin unchanged. What does it all mean? *What* beauty? The frame of Holbein's painting, in the form of a coffin, can perhaps serve as an ideal frame for our reading, a demarcation between time and eternity, mimesis and apophasis. Within the frame we have nothing but the dead Christ (that is Myshkin, or almost Myshkin), a picture of absolute kenosis, an image of no image, where there is *nothing* to sustain the vision of beauty, divinity, eternity; on the other side of the frame, invisible, we have *only* faith, a reading not between but beyond the lines. The beauty that sustains us *is* beyond us, at least if we walk in Myshkin's

²³ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 408, Russian Academy edition, 339.

shoes. His terrible journey tracks the growing realization of the implications, indeed the salvific necessity, of his idiocy. Myshkin's meaning—and in this he is Nastasya Filippovna's double—is not fully accessible in this world, least of all to himself; and yet the story Dostoevsky tells can *only* be told in this world. It is this tragic task, this embodiment of the dissonance between aesthetic and existential planes, between the visible and invisible, that *The Idiot* seeks to incarnate.