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## The Fate of an Idiot: What Myshkin Remembers

“My dear Prince,” Prince Shch. hastened to pick up somehow warily, exchanging glances with some of those present, “paradise on earth is not easily achieved; but all the same you are counting on paradise in a way; paradise is a difficult thing, Prince, much more difficult than it seems to your wonderful heart. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

There are two characters in *The Idiot* for whom memory is explicitly, and repeatedly, thematised: General Ivolgin and Prince Myshkin. This pairing may seem strange at first glance, but only until we recall their shared patrimony in *Don Quixote*. While Myshkin, as Dostoevsky wrote,<sup>2</sup> is among other things a tragic version of Quixote, General Ivolgin is a grand homage to Cervantes’s comic novel and certainly Dostoevsky’s own greatest comic creation.

As two sides of the Quixotean paradigm, Myshkin and Ivolgin have something essential in common: for both, memory (like the Don’s books of chivalry) structures perception and informs all relations in the world of experience. General Ivolgin, the “retired and unfortunate”<sup>3</sup> drunkard, titular head of a dysfunctional family (mortified by him, they hide him away in a back room to be tended to by the youngest son), seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Idiot* (Vintage 2003) Translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, pg. 341

<sup>2</sup> The connection between Myshkin and Quixote comes up both in Dostoevsky’s Notebooks to the novel and in letters. While for Dostoevsky only Jesus Christ can be deemed perfectly beautiful, Quixote is “a positively beautiful man.”

<sup>3</sup> Dostoevsky, *op. cit.*, pg. 94

has *only* memory to live for: he “dandled the prince”<sup>4</sup> in his arms in infancy, was best friend to the prince’s deceased father (and was of course in love with his mother), was a hero at the battle of Kars, and most famously, was page and confidant to Napoleon during the French occupation of Moscow. ‘Unfortunately,’ all of these memories (with the significant exception of his having played with Aglaya in her childhood), these paradises that serve as bulwarks against a humiliating and calamitous life, are imaginary, are indeed lies: at the heart of Ivolgin is a spiritual void that he compulsively brings to the surface and which finally kills him after he tells the biggest whopper (the Napoleon story) to the seemingly ever gullible prince.<sup>5</sup>

Myshkin’s memories are, of course, of a different order than Ivolgin’s. Nevertheless, they equally define him and, in ‘dialogue’ with the “unfortunate” General’s, are no less associated with the ambiguities of hope and despair, of desire and renunciation. Moreover, in both their cases the effects of memory are associated with social maladaptation (alcoholism, idiocy) and a certain cognitive deficit. In his first discussion of memory, which symbolically takes place at a lunch table with the Epanchin girls and their mother, Myshkin locates memory along a continuum bounded on one side by memory, on the other by epilepsy. Its middle ground is occupied by the horrifying experience of empty immanence, which is defined by isolation, loneliness, foreignness:

“The first impression was a very strong one,” the prince repeated. “When they brought me from Russia, through various German towns, I only looked on silently and, I remember, I didn’t even ask about anything. That was after a series of strong and painful fits of my illness, and whenever my illness worsened and I had several fits in a row, I always lapsed into a total stupor, lost my memory completely, and though my mind worked, the logical flow of thought was as if broken. I couldn’t put two or three ideas together coherently. So it seems to me. But when the fits subsided, I became healthy and strong again, as I am now. I remember a feeling of unbearable sadness; I even wanted to weep; I was surprised and anxious all the time: it affected me terribly that it was all *foreign*<sup>6</sup>—that much I understood. The foreign was killing me. I was completely awakened from that darkness, I remember, in the evening, in Basel, as we drove into Switzerland, and what roused me was the braying of an ass in the town market. The ass

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 96

<sup>5</sup> As I will try to show below, Myshkin’s apparently ‘destructive’ faith in an obvious liar is a last, desperate attempt to remain faithful to his memory of Switzerland.

<sup>6</sup> The italics are Dostoevsky’s. The Russian word behind it is “chuzhoj,” which means foreign in the sense of strange, alien, other. It is not associated with the concept of nationality.

struck me terribly and for some reason I took an extraordinary liking to it, and at the same time it was as if everything cleared up in my head.”<sup>7</sup>

It is here, at the outset of the novel, when the prince is still filled with energy and optimism, that the two themes that will obsess him over the entire novel, the linked mysteries of beauty and death, receive their most full and explicit treatment. While the girls are anxious to hear a love story, the ‘idiot’ Myshkin recalls two images, one of despair and hopelessness, the other of joy and faith.

The first is the description of a public execution in Lyon witnessed by Myshkin. (This is a memory he has already shared once, quite inappropriately, with the Epanchin footman; he will discuss it again later, and it will appear in other forms, from other mouths, throughout the novel.) What he emphasizes in the act of execution is the inner torment of the condemned man. Without hope, without any horizon of freedom, a slave to fate, the condemned man is reduced to utter despair, the ultimate form of human suffering.<sup>8</sup>

The second memory, the narrative of joy and faith, Myshkin calls his greatest experience of “happiness” (which he is extremely anxious to dissociate from any form of erotic attraction). This is the story of Marie, of Myshkin’s convalescence and ‘rebirth’ in the Swiss valley under Dr. Schneider’s care. It is, of course, a story of paradise — but not a prelapsarian paradise of innocence: Myshkin’s memory reveals a postlapsarian one (‘ours’) of suffering beauty.

Admittedly, and surely Dostoevsky was conscious of this, the Marie memory is a problematic one, in some sense Quixotic. Narrated as a personal memory, a biographical fact in which the teller — Myshkin — must believe, the Marie memory *reads* like collective or cultural ‘memory,’ that is to say it is supersaturated with intertext: New Testament allusion and quotation, pastoral imagery, and a parabolic narrative structure. ‘Everything’ is there: innocent children and uncomprehending adults; the betrayal of feminine innocence (Marie); her rejection by the community, including her mother; her shame and repentance; Myshkin’s joy at her as a salvific model of self-sacrifice; his

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 56.

<sup>8</sup> The complexity of this image is magnified when we realize that it is also an image of the fully human passion of Jesus Christ.

caritas; their chaste kiss (in spite of its ‘misinterpretation’ by the community of children); feet washed, rocks thrown; then more suffering and a beautiful death. Finally, his ‘expulsion from paradise’ (he is out of money!) and the entry into Petersburg-Jerusalem. In other words, the ‘simple’ memories of an idiot. Are we to ‘believe’ in his memories or merely understand them as a product of innocence (idiocy)? In other words, Myshkin’s ‘reality’ is in question from the start.

One thing is certain: Dostoevsky’s “beautiful man” is a tragic, not a comic, hero. The world he is thrust into is fated and unforgiving: Myshkin’s innocent, self-sacrificing goodness produces ambivalence in everyone it touches, ultimately including himself. Should he be loved or hated? Worshipped or laughed at? He is of course both. What makes the situation still more ambiguous is that the prince himself does not know how to mediate between his paradisaical memory and the fallen world: he does know that “beauty will save the world,” that it is a “riddle” or “enigma” centred in suffering and self-sacrifice; but what it *means* he cannot say. Rather all he can do is attempt to recollect and live it. The upshot of this tragic collision of faith (Myshkin) and despair (world), of which Holbein’s painting *Christ’s Body in the Tomb* becomes the central symbol, is epilepsy — epileptic fits that render him ‘inhuman’ in the eyes of others yet fill him with an ecstatic joy (beyond memory and language) that puts an end to all the torments of chronos. As Dostoevsky, quoting the *Book of Revelation*, puts in the thoughts of Myshkin just prior to one of his fits, the epileptic fit is a foretaste of that time when “time shall be no more.”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately for Myshkin, in between memory and epilepsy he must live in a world where time is everything.

Not surprisingly, it is Myshkin’s encounter with Nastasya Filippovna that first brings memory, and its connection to beauty, explicitly to the surface. Originally hearing about Nastasya Filippovna in Chapter One from Rogozhin as the beauty that he (Rogozhin) must possess, Myshkin sees a photograph of Nastasya Filippovna — an ironic ‘gift’ from her to Ganya Ivolgin — in Chapter Three at the Epanchin’s. Myshkin is as if

thunderstruck by it (as Adelaida has said, beauty “overturns” the world), in particular by the way Nastasya’s beauty appears to be inextricably linked to suffering. As becomes apparent, Myshkin is not so much looking at a photograph of her, a mere reproduction of a material reality, as at an icon, an incarnation of God’s ‘good news’ to man mediated via the image. Finally, in Chapter Nine of Part I, the prince and Nastasya Filippovna meet in the flesh, at the Ivolgin’s; but this meeting turns out to be more than a meeting in flesh, in time: it is a meeting in memory, in dream, perhaps in eternity.

Their encounter famously begins with Nastasya Filippovna ‘mistaking’ Prince Myshkin for a servant (of course there is more truth in this misprision than she will later want to acknowledge), and an incompetent one at that (he drops her jacket instead of hanging it up). Even more disturbing for her, Myshkin *already knows* who she is: he announces her without asking her name. How can this be? On the natural level, as he explains to her, it is because he has seen her photograph. On another level, a more important and indeed an uncanny one, he *remembers* her, especially the eyes.<sup>10</sup> Nastasya remembers him too. But from where? Dream? Eternity? Suddenly the non-recognition scene becomes a super-recognition scene, especially for the reader: *they remember each other from paradise*. Myshkin, who interprets the world through the lens of his sacred memory, cannot help but ‘see’ Nastasya Filippovna as an incarnation of Marie -- she is that suffering beauty which will save the world.

But what about Nastasya? Through what prism does she see Myshkin? By their first meeting we have already learned about the ironically named “Delight” (Otradnoe), Totsky’s perverted paradise of innocence and sensuality that was the site of Nastasya’s violation, her memory of a living hell. For her, paradise on earth is simply not possible and its memory is agony, not consolation: the very idea of it is madness, and its ‘approach,’ in the form of Myshkin’s faith in her and her memory of her own goodness, drives her mad, makes life *more* unbearable and ultimately sends her into the arms of her ‘executioner,’ Rogozhin. Significantly for our purpose, Rogozhin is directly linked to memory through Solovyev’s book, *A History of Russia*, which Nastasya gives to the

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<sup>9</sup> Chapter 10, verse 6. The centrality of the *Book of Revelation* to *The Idiot* has been extensively commented upon. Let me only add here that *Revelation* is the book of memory par excellence of the New Testament. It is here that God will remember everything about everyone -- and judge.

<sup>10</sup> Here is another allusion to the theme of the icon, so central to *The Idiot*.

semi-literate Rogozhin in hopes of awakening him to himself. This, however, proves impossible. Rogozhin, a symbol of fate and enslavement to earth, lives completely outside any notion of the human person as spirit. He is bereft of personal memory, especially of the paradisaical sort. When he first introduces himself to Myshkin in Chapter One he very dramatically ‘forgets’ to include his patronymic, as if he either has no father or has forgotten him, the very roots from which he comes (and we understand why: not only has his father just died, but Rogozhin had been driven from the family home by his father because of his uncontrollable passion for Nastasya Filippovna). In addition, during Myshkin’s crucial meeting with Rogozhin at Rogozhin’s house, the latter confesses that he loves Myshkin as a brother in his presence, but hates him with almost homicidal fury as soon as he is out of sight, as if Rogozhin were incapable of remembering the real Myshkin but knows only his own insatiable jealousy.

Between Nastasya and Rogozhin stands Myshkin; but how can either of them believe in him and his idiotic memory? What does the joy of suffering beauty mean in a radically fallen world? It means *everything*; but here on earth such a memory is ‘framed’ by another image, which hangs menacingly over all three of their heads: Holbein’s acutely horizontal, dead Christ. In this world, the only one Rogozhin knows, the dead Christ, eternal death, is King. Nastasya Filippovna, like Myshkin, is caught between the dead Christ and eternal life: she is both fallen, perverse and proud, and unspeakably beautiful, innocent, faithful and self-sacrificing. Myshkin, who doesn’t “know” what faith means and for whom the Holbein painting holds no special meaning (although it heralds his fate), is pure goodness; but in this world his goodness produces chaos and his idiotic simplicity brings ruin for everyone around him.

As the Russian Symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov was the first to point out, Myshkin’s trajectory is “downward,” as he is evermore infleshed, drawn into the world.<sup>11</sup> In this process Myshkin’s sufferings increase, bringing suspiciousness, passivity, self-doubt and finally illness. Three times he contemplates renouncing his mission, three times he experiences an ‘agony in the garden.’ Three times he finds he cannot will, or remember,

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<sup>11</sup> Ivanov, Vyacheslav. *Freedom and the Tragic Life: a study in Dostoevsky* (Wolfeboro 1989). Thanks to Anne Davenport for the word ‘infleshed.’

his way out. All three torments of doubt follow traumatic encounters with human perversity, threats to his vision of a saved world; and all three prompt re-assessments of his memory of Switzerland.

The first occurs three days after the epileptic fit that saved his life. Convalescing at Lebedev's Myshkin is visited by the unpredictable Epanchins. Soon Aglaya launches into a confusing mockery and praise of him as "the poor knight." Before he has time to make sense of it Myshkin must next face an 'invasion' by the band of young people (only later does Myshkin realize that his host Lebedev has orchestrated the whole thing) who come to slander Myshkin's benefactor Pavlishchev. Defeated by the very pity they revile, the band disperses, leaving the crestfallen Ippolit to suffer a breakdown and Mrs. Epanchin to storm with compassion. It all ends late in the night when Nastasya Filippovna, seemingly out of nowhere (Lebedev again!), appears in a carriage to shot bizarrely to Radomsky. Myshkin, filled with despair and gloom, worn down by chronos, flees into the park for relief. There he remembers, although not as concretely as he will later, the Swiss paradise, which promises escape from current troubles. But it is an escape that he realizes he cannot have:

The prince was very glad to be left alone at last; he went down from the terrace, crossed the road, and entered the park; he wanted to think over and decide about a certain step. Yet this "step" was not one of those that can be thought over, but precisely one of those that cannot be thought over, but simply resolved upon: he suddenly wanted terribly to leave all this here and go back from where he came from, to some far-off, forsaken place, to go at once and even without saying good-bye to anyone. He had the feeling that if he remained here just a few more days, he would certainly be drawn into this world irretrievably, and this world would henceforth be his lot. But he did not even reason for ten minutes and decided at once that to flee was "impossible," that it would be almost pusillanimous, that such tasks stood before him that he now did not even have any right to resolve them, or at least not to give all his strength to their resolution.<sup>12</sup>

The next stage of his descent occurs in the wake of a disturbing discussion, between Myshkin and Radomsky, concerning the meaning of Russian liberalism and Russian history. Myshkin, unaware that Radomsky is in part mocking him, sends Aglaya

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<sup>12</sup> Dostoevsky. *Op. cit.* pg. 307.

into a rage both against a world that isn't worth his "little finger" and against Myshkin himself, who fails to be the poor knight she requires. After an 'idiotic' scene in which Myshkin proposes to Aglaya that she *not* marry him, the entire Epanchin clan steps out for fresh air and escape from the general embarrassment. As he sits distracted next to Aglaya at the vauxhall just before — and he is surely anticipating it subconsciously — Nastasya Filippovna's scandalous appearance, the prince once again finds himself seized by the memory of Switzerland. This time the image is clearer but less real, more oniric, less assimilable to the world of St. Petersburg. Indeed he yearns for the memory to be separated from reality :

The prince did not even notice that other people were talking and paying court to Aglaya; he even all but forgot at moments that he was sitting next to her. Sometimes he wanted to go away somewhere, to disappear from there completely, and he would even have liked some dark, deserted place, only so that he could be alone with his thoughts and no one would know where he was. . . . At moments he imagined the mountains, and precisely one familiar spot in the mountains that he always liked to remember and where he had liked to walk when he still lived there, and to look down from there on the village, on the white thread of the waterfall barely glittering below, on the white clouds, on the abandoned old castle. Oh, how he wanted to be there now and to think about one thing--oh! all his life only about that--it would be enough for a thousand years! And let them, let them forget all about him here. Oh, it was even necessary, even better, that they not know him at all, and that this whole vision be nothing but a dream. And wasn't it all the same whether it was a dream or reality?<sup>13</sup>

The "thought" to which he refers is a memory of pure joy: it is the recollection of the Swiss village children and their faithful love, their *caritas*, for Marie.

Unfortunately, Myshkin's sacred memory, the very thing in which he believes, does not change the world, at least not for the better. Rather, a chasm is growing between it and the world. Seen from the perspective of the mortally ill seventeen year old consumptive Ippolit Terentyev, Myshkin's vision of beauty produces not acceptance but revulsion and revolt: Myshkin's pitying love is in fact the catalyst for Ippolit's attempted suicide, his project to vanquish the "trees of Pavlovsk" (Myshkin's vision) with his own negative infinity, "Meyer's wall."

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 346-347.

As with everyone he meets, Myshkin, the instinctive Christian, attempts to bear Ippolit's cross — one that is weighed down with frustrated love of the world, rage against its injustice (“people are created to torment each other,” he says<sup>14</sup>), shame at his human weakness (“It is impossible to remain in a life that assumes such strange, offensive form,”<sup>15</sup>), and a profound loneliness that is its psychological counterpart. Significantly, Ippolit mourns that he will have lived without “managing to leave any memory.”<sup>16</sup> After the horror and chaos following Ippolit's attempted suicide, Myshkin once again flees into the ‘garden,’ the park, for solace. But this time he finds something wholly different in his paradise:

. . . A long-forgotten memory stirred in him and suddenly became clear at once.

It was in Switzerland, during the first year of his treatment, even during the first months. He was still quite like an idiot then, and could not even speak properly, and sometimes did not understand what was required of him. Once he went into the mountains on a clear, sunny day, and wandered about for a long time with a tormenting thought that refused to take shape. Before him was the shining sky, below him the lake, around him the horizon, bright and infinite, as if it went on forever. For a long time he looked and suffered. He remembered now how he had stretched out his arms to that bright, infinite blue and wept. What had tormented him was that he was a total stranger to it all. What was this banquet, what was this great everlasting feast, to which he had long been drawn, always, ever since childhood, and which he could never join. Every morning the same bright sun rises; every morning there is a rainbow over the waterfall; every evening the highest snowcapped mountain, there, far away, at the edge of the sky, burns with a crimson flame; every “little fly that buzzes near him in a hot ray of sunlight participates in this whole chorus, knows its place, loves it and is happy”; every little blade of grass grows and is happy! And everything has its path, and everything knows its path, goes with a song and comes back with a song; only he knows nothing, understands nothing, neither people nor sounds, a stranger to everything and a castaway.<sup>17</sup>

Seemingly returned to the original memory of “foreignness,” Myshkin can no longer bear the weight of the world. Instead of a grid to apply to the world, or even an alternative to it, Myshkin now finds in his memory solitude and despair, emblemized by Ippolit's horrible human fate: the quoted lines inside Myshkin's interior monologue are from

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 395.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 411.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 296.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 423-424.

Ippolit's article "My Necessary Explanation."<sup>18</sup> Like Ippolit, who has declared himself "already dead" and thus outside the human community, Myshkin is beginning to understand, or rather to accept (in this way fundamentally different from Ippolit), the riddle of divine beauty: its fate is suffering and rejection *in* faith.

From here Myshkin's descent — which is not a Fall — is swift and inexorable. Whatever he had previously thought might be his 'mission' no longer holds: whatever he thought he was, he must now sacrifice. In the crucial 'china vase' scene, which depicts Myshkin's failed entry (as a Prince) into society, he exclaims, "I don't remember a thing!"<sup>19</sup> (And he is ironically 'rewarded' for it with another epileptic seizure.) Unlike Proust's protagonist, Myshkin does not succeed in mastering his memory. Rather his trajectory describes a gradual surrender of it. Unlike Milton's lost paradise, Myshkin's must be forgotten, must be *sacrificed* to the beauty that will save the world. Unable to decide between Nastasya and Aglaya, to respect the basic law of thought, identity, he agrees to marry Nastasya even though "It makes no difference"<sup>20</sup> while 'idiotically' continuing to pursue his relationship with Aglaya. Having spent six hundred pages denying that he was an "idiot," Myshkin must finally accede to it, to the cards he has been dealt (I am referring here to the scene before his final seizure when he asks Rogozhin for Nastasya Filippovna's cards, as if he can bring her back from the dead, and then realizes the futility of his gesture). He must worship the dead Nastasya (the Holbein painting) and comfort the murderer Rogozhin even as the world (the reader) recoils in horror and perhaps disgust. Unlike us, he must love without cause or reason. Without even a salvific memory which was the promise of a *future* paradise. He must be the faithful servant in a faithless world. An epileptic. An idiot. Do we reject or pity him?

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<sup>18</sup> In typical Dostoevskian fashion, the quoted lines are not an exact quote; and there is also some unacknowledged/unconscious — such as the word 'castaway' — quoting of Ippolit.

<sup>19</sup> Dostoevsky, *op. cit.* pg. 540.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 582.

