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The Idiot's Romantic Struggle

The Idiot does not immediately present itself as a romantic novel and critics have not generally regarded it in that light.¹ However, its dramatic structure centers on an essentially romantic struggle. Reacting against classicism and the pure reason of the Enlightenment, the German romantics of the late eighteenth century (who became a model for the later Russian romantics) struggled to bridge the gap between reason and creativity, reality and ideals. "Romanticism was accustomed to wanting the impossible, to striving for the unattainable."² Breaking with earlier convention, romantic texts were often left unpolished, their structures fragmentary. Their plotlines frequently involved bringing together opposing worlds, the typical heroes being dreamers and wanderers and typical settings including pristine lands untouched by the corrupting hand of civilization.

By the time Dostoevsky wrote *The Idiot*, twenty years had passed since his early romantic period and he was well established as a psychological writer in the new realist tradition, but "the school of romantic aesthetics... left a noticeable trace in his creative work."³ *The Idiot's* conception (written in chunks with no clear overall plan) and fragmented structure with jarring gaps between the four parts give it much that is akin to a romantic novel. At its heart is Dostoevsky's great experiment – to create a 'completely beautiful man' with childlike

¹ In his book on romantic realism, Fanger provides only one passing mention of *The Idiot* (1965: 132). His approach, with its focus on the city, offers a different perspective on the interaction between romanticism and realism than the one given here.

² Ginzberg: 1991, 21

³ Fridlender: 1972, 101, quoted in Grazhis: 1979, 37. Grazhis argues that while scholars traditionally talk about Dostoevsky's progression from romanticism to realism, they overlook the fact that in many of the mature works like *The Idiot* as well as *Dream of a Ridiculous Man* and even *The Brothers Karamazov*, there are more elements of romanticism than in Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk* (1979: 38-39).

goodness and naivety, place him in the realist context of St Petersburg society, and see if the dissonance between the ideal and the real could be overcome. This is a quintessentially romantic struggle.

What makes *The Idiot* different from a traditional romantic novel, however, is that Dostoevsky shifts the locus of this struggle to *within* his main hero. Instead of the author wrestling with bringing together the ideal and the real in his work, it is Myshkin, with his childlike goodness, who struggles to see St Petersburg society in the simple, positive terms he used in his Swiss village, while being bombarded with the cold, harsh realities of greed, lust, and cruelty that become unavoidable from his first day of arrival in Russia. With overly-simplistic childlike logic, he fears that to acknowledge baseness in others would be an admission that darkness had crept into his own soul and therefore he fights against his own knowledge, gradually breaking down by the end of the novel.

When this struggle between real and ideal belongs to the author, it shapes the form of the text (the fragment being considered a way to create movement towards an ideal, even when it was unattainable). Once Dostoevsky places it inside of Myshkin, however, he creates a new battleground in the realm of psychology. As Myshkin's inner struggle becomes the center of the novel, Myshkin himself becomes fragmented, taking on many of the traits of a traditional romantic text. This new focus allows for a kind of psychological development not present in earlier romantic novels in which the hero remained static or underwent one sudden moment of conversion. I believe that shifting the romantic struggle from the author's to the hero's plane of vision holds one of the keys to understanding how the psychological novel arose out of the legacy of romanticism.

Schiller and Bakhtin

Myshkin's struggle at the heart of *The Idiot* is an embodiment of the dynamic relationship Schiller saw between the stances he called 'naïve' and 'sentimental.' Although I know of no direct mention by Dostoevsky of Schiller's *On the Naïve and Sentimental in Literature* (1795), given the enormous influence Schiller had on Dostoevsky,⁴ we can be reasonably assured that Dostoevsky was familiar with these terms. To summarize Schiller's ideas briefly, the ancients were naïve, living in a natural way,

⁴ See Kostka: 1965, 214-250

whereas men in his present-day society had lost touch with their natural state. As a result, modern men came to appreciate nature and the natural as things they had lost – a stance Schiller calls sentimental.

There are moments in our life when we accord to nature in plants, minerals, animals, landscapes, as well as to human nature in children, in the customs of country people and of the primitive world, a sort of love and touching respect, not because it pleases our senses nor because it satisfies our intellect or taste... but merely because it is nature.⁵

Schiller believes that men of his society knew this natural state only in childhood and felt its loss as adults. “They [objects in nature] *are* what we *were*; they are what we *should become* again... They are, therefore, at the same time a representation of our lost childhood, which remains eternally the most precious to us... At the same time they are representations of our highest perfection in the ideal...”⁶ Once people find themselves outside of nature, they do not live with its immediacy, but instead become reflective upon their experiences as they strive to regain this lost ideal.

Schiller uses the terms naïve and sentimental to make a distinction between different stances the author can take: “The poet... either *is* nature or he will *seek* it. The former constitutes the naïve, the second the sentimental poet.”⁷ Neither of these viewpoints, however, feels appropriate for describing the stance Dostoevsky takes in *The Idiot*. What was for Schiller a question of the author’s stance, Dostoevsky makes into a question of his hero’s point of view.

Myshkin enters the novel in Part One embodying Schiller’s concept of the naïve. He is a unified being who experiences the world directly, without an intervening layer of reflection or self-consciousness. He is able to hold this viewpoint because in many ways he is a permanent child. After coming into contact with the realities of St Petersburg and Moscow society however, he undergoes a radical change. When Myshkin appears again in Part Two, instead of being a two dimensional character, he has become internally fragmented, living in the second-degree like Schiller’s sentimental. The novel traces the arc of his shift from naïve goodness to cynical understanding and then his gradual breakdown as he tries to regain his earlier state and experiences the impossibility of childlike innocence existing in the world of adult Petersburg society.

Dostoevsky is able to locate this struggle between naïve and sentimental in Myshkin because he has created a new relationship

⁵ Schiller: 1981, 21

⁶ Schiller: 1981, 22

⁷ Schiller: 1981, 38

between author and hero. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that unlike earlier monologic authors, Dostoevsky invented a new kind of polyphonic novel: “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels.”⁸ According to Bakhtin: “Dostoevsky’s hero is not an objectified image but an autonomous discourse, *pure voice*; we do not see him, we hear him...”⁹ No longer subordinated to a monologizing authorial view, the characters’ own outlooks gain in importance. “The character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky’s finalizing artistic vision.”¹⁰ Given this treatment of the hero, it becomes possible for the romantic struggle between naïve and sentimental to be lodged in his viewpoint instead of the author’s.

Bakhtin’s theories show that in making this move from author to hero, the struggle shifts from the aesthetic to the ethical plane. In his early writing on the relationship of the author and hero, Bakhtin argues that the author, standing outside the work, operates on the aesthetic level of the text: “The author’s actual creative act...always proceeds along the boundaries...of the aesthetic world.”¹¹ In contrast, the hero who is situated inside the reality of the text: “lives his life cognitively and ethically: he orients his actions within the open ethical event of his lived life or within the projected world of cognition.”¹² Ruth Coates concisely summarizes this point from Bakhtin’s *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*:

The consciousness of the creator must exist on a qualitatively different level from that of the one created. He or she must occupy a position external in every respect to the aesthetic object (whether person or thing) in order to be able to complete (*zavershat*) it by bringing to bear on its final image all of those spatial, temporal and semantic features of which it itself, on its limited level of consciousness, cannot be aware; this privileged viewpoint is described as the

⁸ 1984: 6. This effect actually has its roots in romanticism and can be seen in the earlier Russian romantics. Influenced by Byron, Pushkin learned “the possibility of juxtaposing in a single work utterly different, simultaneous points of view on the same subject matter.” (Greenleaf: 1994, 45) The difference between what Pushkin does and what Dostoevsky does lies in the fact that in *Eugene Onegin*, for example, all these views are conveyed by the narrator, while in *The Idiot*, they are voiced by independently authoritative characters.

⁹ Bakhtin: 1984, 53

¹⁰ Bakhtin: 1984, 5

¹¹ Bakhtin: 1990, 206

¹² Bakhtin: 1990, 12

‘surplus of vision’ (*izbytok videniya*) of the creator.¹³

Dostoevsky, standing outside of the work, has this kind of excess vision and can concern himself with the large structures of “ideal” and “real.”

Myshkin, on the other hand, cannot see this totalizing level or engage with goodness as a *concept*. Instead, standing within the reality of the novel, he is concerned about the ethical choices he is forced to make. “To live means to take an axiological stand in every moment of one’s life or to position oneself with respect to values.”¹⁴ Myshkin struggles because he wants to live sincerely and directly, believing in everyone’s goodness, but is faced with a multitude of instances when the selfish, lustful, and cruel sides of people around him become unavoidable. As a result, he becomes increasingly cut off from himself and plagued with doubts about his own thoughts. Dostoevsky sets up *The Idiot* so that the whole arc from naïve to sentimental, and then the striving to reunite with the naïve is described by the arc of Myshkin’s internal struggle.

Myshkin as a Naïve Figure

Though the hero Dostoevsky came up with for his ‘completely beautiful man’ does not seem like the obvious type – an uneducated epileptic recovering from “idiocy” who has been living abroad in an asylum at other people’s expense – from the point of view of the romantic struggle at the heart of the novel, he is in a unique position to fill this role because he embodies Schiller’s ideal of the naïve as no ordinary person could. When Myshkin appears on the train at the beginning of Part One, he is coming from the pristine setting of a village in the Swiss countryside where he has enjoyed a simple, quiet life surrounded by the beauties of nature and a band of children for his companions – the classic Romantic idyll.¹⁵ More importantly, he himself is a permanent child.¹⁶ Myshkin reports that in his doctor’s words: “I am a complete child, a child, that is, in every sense, that only in my face and stature do I resemble an adult, but that in development, soul, character, and perhaps even intelligence I am

¹³ 1998, 41

¹⁴ Bakhtin: 1990, 188

¹⁵ Switzerland for Myshkin is an example of Bakhtin’s idyllic chronotope – a place that exists independent of the rest of the world, untouched by the passage of time (Bakhtin: 1981, 227).

¹⁶ Pomerants notes that: “Adult children are also a rather old romantic discovery” (1989: 200).

not an adult, and thus I will remain . . .”¹⁷ Sarah Young argues that: “It is his very childlikeness which lies at the basis of his image as a truly humane, ‘positively beautiful man’ . . .”¹⁸

This permanent childhood in an adult body puts Myshkin in a unique position to embody Schiller’s naïve stance: “The naïve is a *childlike quality where it is no longer expected* and cannot therefore be attributed in the strictest sense to real childhood”.¹⁹ When Myshkin appears in the novel at age twenty-six, he is still in the childlike state of innocence and unity with nature that the romantics idealized and strove to attain. He is also in unity with himself. During the opening lines of Myshkin’s first conversation with Rogozhin on the train, the narrator comments on Myshkin’s “readiness . . . to answer all questions,” and Rogozhin is struck by his frankness and lack of embarrassment about his illness.²⁰ Myshkin’s inner unity permeates his speech, appearing in the promptness of his answers to all types of questions – moral, aesthetic, and personal – which demonstrates his lack of need to reflect. He tells the Yepanchins quite directly in their first meeting: “I’m well aware that everyone finds it embarrassing to talk about their feelings, and yet here I am talking to you about them and with you I don’t feel embarrassed.”²¹

Dostoevsky places this ideal, naïve character into a quintessentially realist setting: the troubled city of St Petersburg. This choice evokes associations to the bleak lives of Makar and Varenka, the destitution of Raskolnikov and Sonya, and a population of Gogol’s petty clerks and puffed-up bureaucrats. While in most of his other works, Dostoevsky writes of the lower levels of society, people wrestling with extreme poverty and degradation, by turning to a higher stratum in *The Idiot* he strengthens the contrast between Myshkin’s naturalness and the artifice of the wealthy and those who surround them looking for wealth. Within hours of his arrival, Myshkin is already caught up amidst scheming society members who draw him into their intrigues.

Putting Myshkin into St Petersburg, Dostoevsky creates an experiment very much in keeping with the tradition of earlier Russian

¹⁷ *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Leningrad, 1972-90) 8: 63. Reference to the Russian *Sobranie sochinenii* henceforth will be to PSS followed by volume and then page number. English translations of *The Idiot* are from McDuff, David (2004), with occasional slight alterations to convey a specific meaning needed. I am using McDuff’s transliterations of the Russian names.

¹⁸ 2004: 91

¹⁹ Schiller: 1981, 24

²⁰ PSS 8: 6

²¹ PSS 8: 65

romanticism. "Russian fiction of the 1830s, strongly influenced by Hoffmann and German Romanticism, is filled with the dissonance between the ideal and the real, the spiritual and the material."²² This is precisely the dissonance Dostoevsky creates in a literal, "realist" manner when he places his 'completely beautiful man' into the middle of a brewing society scandal.

We come to know Myshkin in Part One mainly through his own words and actions. Dostoevsky gives Myshkin a series of opportunities to speak at length about the things he has witnessed in Switzerland and the ideas that are important to him. Although our view of Myshkin is external, when the narrator does provide rare glimpses of his interior, Myshkin's inner life matches his speech. For example, when he is alone with Nastasya Filippovna's portrait, the narrator tells us Myshkin is trying to decipher what is hidden in her face, but Myshkin also says this much himself when others ask for his opinion of her. The narrator tells us Ganya's request to have a letter delivered to Aglaya was unpleasant to Myshkin, but Myshkin has already said this outright to Ganya. There is a unity between inner and outer because Myshkin is still at one with himself.

During his first day, Myshkin has a positive explanation for everything, projecting his own naïve vision onto the people around him. "There is no baseness in his person, and for that reason he cannot understand baseness in others."²³ At his first meeting with Nastasya Filippovna, when she is humiliating Ganya's family and causing a scandal, Myshkin cries out to her, "You're not like that, not like the person you pretended to be just now. Is it really possible!"²⁴ illustrating the one-sided image he has formed that leaves no place for her cruel side. Myshkin's attempts to "finalize others benevolently, to release them from their most desperate selves and even to deny the existence of those negative selves,"²⁵ are a product of his naïve stance.

Though others will eventually resist this monologizing, for the moment Myshkin is successful and remains confident of his outlook. Nastasya Filippovna completely changes her manner and agrees with Myshkin that she is not really so vindictive and cruel. When Ganya comes to apologize after slapping him, Myshkin declares that Ganya is not "base" but simply "the most ordinary man there could be." Dismissing the

²² Frank: 1976, 332

²³ Keller: 1972, 19

²⁴ PSS 8: 99

²⁵ Emerson: 1988, 515

slap he just received and Ganya's declaration that he is marrying a woman he despises for money, Myshkin sees Ganya as simply weak, not base. This way of seeing allows Myshkin to maintain his childlike naivety in the face of the dark realities of selfish motivations, petty intrigues, and greed that surround him. Seeing events through Myshkin's benevolent eyes as well as through the narrator's sharper ones gives us a unique dual perspective on the romantic struggle that we are not afforded in traditional romantic texts. We can view simultaneously the conflicting planes on which various characters are operating, and thus watch Myshkin's process of projecting his vision onto others from both the inside and the outside.²⁶

At first the focus is on how Myshkin affects others, but as the novel progresses, this focus shifts to an inward look at how Myshkin himself is affected. By the end of the first day, the collision of Myshkin's ideal vision and the realities of St Petersburg already causes a major explosion at Nastasya Filippovna's birthday celebration. Then the heroes disappear for six months and Dostoevsky uses the rest of the book to trace the results of his experiment, with a particular emphasis on how it affects Myshkin's psychology.

Myshkin as a Struggling Sentimental Figure

When Myshkin reappears after the six-month gap that precedes Part Two, he has undergone a radical shift. In the interval he has come into his inheritance and "the money brings Myshkin into contact with the material world... [giving him] an awareness that he has been compromised by his involvement with other people, partly because of his new-found wealth."²⁷ He is now firmly established in his realist setting.

The only thing we hear from Myshkin directly during the six months when he is absent from Petersburg is a letter that he writes to Aglaya:

At one time you honored me with your trust. It may be that you have now forgotten me entirely. How has it come to pass that I am writing to you? I do not know; but there has appeared in me an irrepressible longing to remind you of me, and you in particular. How many times I have needed all three of you, but of all three I saw only you. I need you, very much. I have nothing to write to you about myself, nothing to tell you. I did not want that, either; I should terribly

²⁶ For a discussion of the conflicting real and ideal spheres, see Grazhis: 1979, 160.

²⁷ Young: 2004, 115

like you to be happy. Are you happy? That is all I wanted to say to you. Your brother Pr. L. Myshkin.²⁸

These are not the words of the naïve, confident, unreflective Myshkin of the book's beginning. Instead, they suggest a man who is full of uncertainty about his own feelings.²⁹ Myshkin spoke clearly in Part One and seemed untroubled by difficulties in expressing his thoughts, but here they come out muddled and ambiguous (the narrator calls the note "incoherent"). Myshkin says explicitly that he does not even know why he is writing. This is the first sign that his outlook has changed.

Upon his reentry into Petersburg, Myshkin goes straight to Lebedev in order to learn what has happened between Nastasya Filippovna and Rogozhin. There is none of his naivety in this conversation, but instead a cynical realism. He opens the topic with the words: "Well, enough, don't try to deceive me. Enough of serving two masters... I know it all. Have you managed to sell her to him, as you did last time, or not?"³⁰ When Lebedev gives a response, Myshkin accuses him: "You take me for a child, Lebedev." Myshkin no longer accepts others' words at face value, but has learned to be skeptical about what he hears. He is realistic about the base motivations of others and is not seeing the kinds of positive explanations for everything that he found so easily in Part One.³¹

This is not a simple shift in Myshkin because, as we see shortly after, he is not comfortable with his new outlook. Myshkin goes to visit Rogozhin, whom he suspects was watching him at the train station, and through the whole conversation he is in a kind of daze, continually fixating on Rogozhin's knife. Myshkin asks several questions about the knife and then suddenly comes to himself and says: "Forgive me, brother, when my head aches as it does now, and this illness... I become quite, quite absent-minded and absurd. I didn't mean to ask about this at all... can't remember what it was. Goodbye..."³² Myshkin is wrestling with the

²⁸ PSS 8: 157

²⁹ Internally a child, Myshkin cannot experience sexual love and is uncomfortable with the mere idea of it. He does not understand how provocatively like a love letter his note is or that others are holding him responsible for his actions like a man, while he still thinks in many ways like a child.

³⁰ PSS 8: 166

³¹ In analyzing this passage, Young writes: "From a worldly point of view, the hero is a more integrated human being [than in Part One], and is able to cope with the ambiguities of life far better than previously, although as we see in his fit, and in subsequent events in the novel, this move towards the norms of behaviour of the other protagonists has serious implications for Myshkin's entire ideology..." (2004: 112).

³² PSS 8: 181

thought that Rogozhin wants to kill him, trying not to let it surface.³³ He is now living in the second degree; cut off from his own thoughts, he looks in at them from the outside. He has lost the immediacy of experience that he once possessed.

During Myshkin's walk after leaving Rogozhin's, we are given access to the turmoil inside of him, and this inner plane becomes the whole field of action. Our vantage point follows the displacement of the romantic struggle to within Myshkin. The narrator describes Myshkin in "a tormented state of tension and anxiety,"³⁴ and then moves into Myshkin's own voice zone, providing a choppy and disjointed series of ideas that follow the flow and rhythm of Myshkin's thoughts. While formerly, Myshkin had been quick to form judgments of others, he now questions his ability to know another person at all: "But the soul of others is darkness, and so is the Russian soul – darkness to many. There was Rogozhin, with whom he had long been associating on close, 'brotherly' terms – but did he know Rogozhin?"³⁵ Eventually he realizes: "No, it is not that 'the Russian soul is darkness,' but that he himself has darkness in his soul..."³⁶ The idea that Rogozhin wants to kill him keeps reoccurring to Myshkin, but he cannot even express it to himself and refers to it in his thoughts simply as "the idea." This idea leads him to a conviction, which he does not know how to acknowledge to himself: "'Then say it, if you dare – conviction of what?' he kept saying to himself constantly, with reproach and challenge. 'Formulate it, dare to express the whole of your thought, clearly, precisely, without hesitation!'"³⁷ But Myshkin is no longer able.

Although Myshkin's conviction about Rogozhin turns out to be correct, justifying his suspicions, he cannot bear the idea that he holds such negative thoughts about someone for whom he cares. At another point, when correctly suspecting that some visitors had intentionally come when he had guests so as to cause a scandal, Myshkin "was very sad about his 'monstrous and wicked suspiciousness.' He would have died, he thought, if anyone had learned that he had such a thought in his mind..."³⁸

³³ Dalton (1989: 93-99) interprets the knife as a phallic symbol and reads the whole sequence of the meeting, Myshkin's wandering, and the attempted murder in Freudian terms, but this reading does not fully take into account the pervasive pattern of Myshkin's discomfort with having negative thoughts about anyone.

³⁴ PSS 8: 186

³⁵ PSS 8: 190

³⁶ PSS 8: 192

³⁷ PSS 8: 194

³⁸ PSS 8: 214

Thoughts like these do not fit with the naïve, positive view Myshkin used to hold of the world, and which he is futilely struggling to regain.

I trace this struggle carefully to show the process of fragmentation that is going on in Myshkin's psychology, which contrasts so strongly with the state he enjoyed during Part One. This shift marks the divide between Schiller's naïve and sentimental:

As long as man consists of pure, not of course of crude, nature, then he gives the impression of an undivided sensual unit and of a harmonious whole. The senses and the reason, the receptive and the spontaneous capacity, have not yet separated in their function, much less are they in opposition to each other... If man has entered into a state of culture and if art has placed her hand on him, then that *sensual* harmony has been removed from him and he can only express himself as a *moral* unity, i.e., as someone striving for unity.³⁹

His internal unity gone, Myshkin has now entered this state of striving.⁴⁰ For the author, this split between the senses and reason that marks the shift from naïve to sentimental is an aesthetic one. But for Myshkin, as the examples above illustrate, it takes on an ethical quality. He feels guilt over his new level of awareness. Living in the second degree he does not just have a thought, but instead analyzes each thought and is aware of the experience of a conflicted inner life. When Lizaveta Prokofyevna asks if he is telling the truth when he says that he is not in love with Aglaya, Myshkin answers "It seems it's the complete truth."⁴¹ This "it seems" shows that Myshkin is no longer in direct touch with his feelings, but instead, like Lizaveta Prokofyevna, he is looking at them from the outside.

As Myshkin's psychology becomes muddled, he not only loses direct touch with his thoughts, but also has increasing trouble articulating what is inside him to others. He becomes concerned with the inability to express his ideas, showing his awareness of the divide between inner and outer, another classic romantic preoccupation. As he tells the Yepanchins: "There are ideas, lofty ideas of which I must not start to speak, because I'll be bound to make you all laugh; Prince Shch. reminded me of that just now... I have no decent gestures, no sense of proportion; my words are different, and my thoughts do not conform, and that's a humiliation for those thoughts."⁴² Myshkin is concerned now about how his lofty ideas,

³⁹ Schiller: 1981, 39

⁴⁰ Holquist writes: "Myshkin is saintly one moment, silly the next; now he is certain, now confused – and what is more, he *knows* there is no unity in his life" (1977: 112).

⁴¹ PSS 8: 264

⁴² PSS 8: 283

once they have been put into words for the outside world, do not come out the way he means them. “The Enlightenment believed in the ability of language adequately to express thought. Romanticism scorned that complacency, simultaneously reveling and despairing at its discovery of a fatal crevice between the former and the latter.”⁴³ Faced with this divide, Myshkin becomes self-conscious and reticent about sharing what matters most to him, though in Part One these were the very ideas he would speak of first with strangers. He used to believe that through speaking of Switzerland and his ideal vision of the world, he could recreate that world in St Petersburg, but he has lost that certainty now. He cannot express himself clearly because he no longer sees the world in clear simple terms.

Like Schiller’s sentimental, Myshkin is striving in Parts Two–Four to regain the lost sense of unity and the complete sincerity that came with his naïve outlook when he first arrived in Russia. He betrays this desire to Kolya when the latter brings him a hedgehog from Aglaya, which brightens Myshkin’s mood. “‘What children we still are, Kolya! And...and...how good it is that we’re children!’ he exclaimed with rapture at last.”⁴⁴ For this moment, Myshkin feels himself whole and at peace, and he associates these simple, good feelings with the state of childhood like Schiller’s naïve.⁴⁵ “The return to the world of childhood is one of the means of returning to one’s authentic ‘I,’ opened anew by the romantics.”⁴⁶

However, these childlike moments are increasingly rare as the book progresses. The sphere of romantic love is most problematic for Myshkin because it is the least compatible with childhood and a childlike outlook, and the area where he feels most guilty before everyone. Myshkin becomes increasingly out of alignment with himself as he struggles against adult comprehension of the amorous overtones in his relationships. Despite the fact that his behavior seems like that of an active suitor (for two women!), in his thoughts Myshkin cannot accept himself in this role. When he muses about a note from Aglaya, inviting him to a rendezvous, the narrator tells us that Myshkin cannot acknowledge the Eros in the situation:

If anyone had told him at that moment that he had fallen in love, was passionately in love, he would have rejected the idea with astonishment and,

⁴³ Gasparov: 2006, 51

⁴⁴ PSS 8: 424

⁴⁵ Pomerants writes: “The internal movement of Dostoevsky’s novel is the fight to return to childhood” (1989: 212).

⁴⁶ Pomerants: 1989, 190

perhaps even with indignation. And if anyone had added to this that Aglaya's note was a love letter, the assignation of a lover's tryst, he would have burned with shame for that man... All this was completely sincere, and he never once doubted or had the slightest 'double' thoughts...⁴⁷

The passage reads like the narrator giving us Myshkin's thought process as he tries to convince himself that romantic love is not present, and indeed this interpretation is confirmed; the next morning Aglaya asks Myshkin if he thought she was in love with him and he answers: "I really was afraid of that yesterday."⁴⁸ As a child, he does not know how to deal with this side of life and wishes to ignore its existence. Unlike Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, Myshkin does not relish double thoughts and loopholes.

While in Part I, Myshkin would speak about any topic, after his return to St. Petersburg he will not let others speak to him of Aglaya's escapades – a concerted effort *not* to know. Myshkin admits to Ippolit that he is aware of a rendezvous between Aglaya and Ganya and then in the same breath claims to know nothing about it. Ippolit's reply highlights a key problem for Myshkin: "But how is this, you knew and yet you did not know?... That's why you're trusting, because you don't know."⁴⁹ Ippolit is only half-correct; Myshkin *wants* to be trusting and he does *not* want to know because with more complex understanding of others he cannot regain his former state of inner unity.

The type of cognitive dissonance Myshkin is experiencing cannot be maintained. Under the strain of trying to attain the unattainable, he begins to break down. At first he finds himself in a feverish state, and then the increased tension of the Yepanchins' soiree brings on an epileptic fit which signals the beginning of his return to childlike non-comprehension and then eventual "idiocy." Tracing Myshkin's speeches during the soiree, we can see how the naïve and sentimental viewpoints are literally at war within him. The signs of his internal strain become visible to everyone present: "The Prince was trembling all over. Why he had suddenly become so anxious, why he had fallen into such an obsequious rapture, for no apparent reason and, it seemed, quite out of proportion to the subject they were discussing – it would have been hard to determine."⁵⁰ Myshkin begins to babble. He is trying to express an idea

⁴⁷ PSS 8: 378-379

⁴⁸ PSS 8: 450

⁴⁹ PSS 8: 582

⁵⁰ PSS 8: 448

about Catholicism being worse than atheism, but has lost the ability to speak clearly and to put his thoughts in order.

At moments, it looks like Myshkin may truly be returning to the naïve. After finding that people are not angry with him for knocking over an expensive vase, he suddenly feels intimate with everyone in the room. Becoming joyful, he attempts to share with them openly, as he had when he first arrived in Russia. However, now: “Everything about him was jerky, troubled and feverish; it was very possible that the words he was uttering were often not the ones he wanted to say.”⁵¹

Myshkin’s speech at this point shows his attempt to return to his naïve way of seeing and to project this naïve view onto the people around him. “‘I came in here with torment in my heart,’ the prince continued in a kind of growing confusion, more and more quickly, with increasing strangeness and animation, ‘I...I was afraid of you, and afraid of myself. Most of all, myself.’”⁵² This fear of himself relates to Myshkin’s awareness of how he has become fragmented and filled with negative thoughts. He continues:

‘Returning here, to St Petersburg, I vowed to myself that I would without fail see the first people in our land, the seniors, the long-established, to whom I myself belong, among whom I myself am one of the first in line ... I have always heard so much about you that is bad, more than is good, about the pettiness and exclusiveness of your interests, about your backwardness, your poor education, your ridiculous habits.’

Myshkin is afraid that he too is coming to belong to this category and wants to judge for himself whether what he has heard about his class is true. “‘And what did I see? I saw people who are elegant, open-hearted, intelligent; I saw an elder statesman who was kind and understanding and forgiving, good-natured Russian people, almost as good-natured and warm-hearted as those whom I met back there [in Switzerland], almost as good as them.’”

Myshkin is losing sight of all the petty intrigues and artifice, which we as readers see clearly in the people around him. Like a child, he now sees them as he wants to believe they are, linking them back to his time in Switzerland. This vision fits with Schiller’s description of the naïve: “We attribute a naïve disposition to a person when, in his judgments of things, he overlooks their affected and artificial circumstances and merely clings

⁵¹ PSS 8: 455

⁵² PSS 8: 456-457

to their simple nature.”⁵³ Right after making this speech, Myshkin tells the company: “I’m nearly twenty-seven, yet I know I’m like a child.”⁵⁴

Seemingly still in the same naïve spirit of openness, Myshkin acknowledges all the deception that has been at work in his own mind, as well as in his conversations with others, telling the guests: “only in Moscow, with Rogozhin, have I talked frankly.” Myshkin is finally owning up to all the thoughts he was afraid to express. Craving direct connection, he tells the company: “I want to explain everything, everything, everything!” But even as he is making this open speech, he is slipping back into his sentimental stance, seeing himself from the outside. The speech is fully dialogized,⁵⁵ as he predicts and tries to counter the responses he imagines from his listeners. This is not the behavior of a child, as children do not put themselves in the position of their interlocutor. Myshkin shows his external viewpoint with comments like: “You don’t believe it? You smile? ... earlier I thought as I was coming here: ‘Well, how shall I talk to them? What shall I say to begin with, so that they at least understand something?’” He is still living outside of himself, even at this moment when he is trying most intensely to become naïve again.

Eventually, Myshkin gets back to what might seem to be his simplest, most naïve ideas: “I cannot understand how one can walk past a tree and not be happy that one’s seeing it? To talk to someone and not be happy that one loves him... Look at a child, look at God’s dawn, look at the grass growing, look into the eyes that look back at you and love you...”⁵⁶ These are Myshkin’s final words before his fit and as such, they deserve special privileging because the narrator tells us that Myshkin experiences his moments of greatest clarity just before his fits. His final statement sounds just like Schiller’s words about appreciating nature (quoted at the beginning of this paper).⁵⁷

Yet Schiller argued that it was not the naïf, living in a state of nature, who appreciates the natural world around him, but instead the sentimental who is cut-off from it. “Not our greater *accord with nature*, quite on the

⁵³ 1981: 26

⁵⁴ PSS 8: 457

⁵⁵ Here I intend Bakhtin’s meaning when he writes: “A character’s self-consciousness in Dostoevsky is thoroughly dialogized: in its every aspect it is turned outward, intensely addressing itself, another, a third person” (1984: 251).

⁵⁶ PSS 8: 459

⁵⁷ Bakhtin writes that we have no point of view from which we can see ourselves except as reflected in the eyes of others (1996: v.5, 71). Viewed in this light, Myshkin’s final thought appears to be one of self acceptance as well as love for the outside world.

contrary our *opposition to nature* in our relationships, circumstances and customs, drives us to seek a satisfaction in the physical world which is not to be hoped for in the moral world.”⁵⁸ Thus Myshkin’s final speech proves that he is no longer in a natural state but instead has such a deep appreciation for trees, grass, and the beauties of dawn precisely because he is seeking the natural outside of himself. Even at this most intense moment of striving, Myshkin can only glimpse his former naïve state, but cannot fully return to it.

The strain is too much for Myshkin, and after his fit he never fully recovers. Although he feels no derangement in his mind, the narrator tells us that his soul is sick. He is bombarded by a series of visitors, all hinting and making allusions to events, romantic liaisons, intrigues, and potential dangers he does not want to know about or believe. Myshkin breaks into a fever and becomes increasingly passive, overwhelmed by the circumstances around him. When Aglaya comes asking him to escort her to Nastasya Filippovna’s, he follows “like a slave.” Throughout their encounter he does nothing to intercede, almost not comprehending what is taking place (a stark contrast to his active interventions in the scandal scenes of Part I). He almost ceases to process information. Once engaged to Nastasya Filippovna, he goes to the Yepanchins’ every day to see Aglaya, is refused admittance, and then returns the next day as if he had forgotten. He seems unfazed when Nastasya Filippovna runs off with Rogozhin, leaving him alone at the altar.

While looking for Nastasya Filippovna in St Petersburg, Myshkin becomes increasingly impaired and eventually loses his mind after finding her murdered. During his search, Myshkin comes across Rogozhin in the street, and the narrator himself is baffled at how Myshkin suddenly begins to babble. He asks Rogozhin a question and it takes him two full minutes to process the three-word answer. Having been taken to Rogozhin’s silent room, Myshkin must literally be shown Nastasya Filippovna’s body before he understands that she has been murdered. His mind is doing everything it can to avoid this reality.

Once the murder becomes an unavoidable fact, Myshkin immediately begins to tremble, his legs go weak, and he starts asking irrelevant, trivial questions, as if his mind is looking for a way to escape. Next, he becomes focused on calming Rogozhin, stroking his hair when Rogozhin begins to mumble. The narrator comments that there was nothing more Myshkin could do. His foray into the world has ended in complete failure. Perhaps

⁵⁸ Schiller: 1981, 33

aware of this, “Some completely new sensation tormented his heart with infinite anguish.”⁵⁹ Pressing his face against Rogozhin’s, he lets his tears stream down the murderer’s cheeks, as if trying to correct the situation and put his good feelings into the other, but it is beyond all hope. By morning, he is stroking Rogozhin’s head with no understanding of what is taking place. Unable to handle the reality of the St Petersburg world he has entered, Myshkin retreats from reality, returning to his state of former “idiocy.” The arc he has been traveling is complete. This is the culmination of the author’s romantic struggle between ideal and real and of Myshkin’s struggle between naïve and sentimental.

Myshkin the Romantic Knight

This is not, however, the only level at which *The Idiot* draws on its romantic heritage. In broad terms, the novel as a whole follows a traditional romantic plotline: the protagonist begins as an outsider entering society from an exotic setting, he falls in love with a fallen woman, there is an attempt at union which fails, and this failure leads to the death of the woman.⁶⁰ Despite its overall outline, the novel does not read like a romantic text because the protagonist at its heart is not a traditional romantic hero. In creating Myshkin, Dostoevsky undertook one of his most ambitious challenges – to make a “completely beautiful man.”⁶¹ Dostoevsky wrote that in the world, only one such man had existed – Christ – while in literature the closest attempt at this ideal was Don Quixote, though he was only beautiful because he was also ridiculous.⁶² Dostoevsky’s beautiful man would follow a romantic plotline, but he would not be a romantic hero.

Both Myshkin and other characters in the novel attempt to script Myshkin into this traditional role, making him into the prince out of a fairytale. On his first day in St Petersburg, when Myshkin originally proposes to Nastasya Filippovna, he says he will take her as an honest woman. Nastasya Filippovna dismisses his words as “stuff out of novels,” but after rejecting him, she admits she used to dream of him: “I used to

⁵⁹ PSS 8: 506-507

⁶⁰ Many of these elements can be found in the plotlines of Chateaubriand’s *Atala*, Constant’s *Adolphe*, and Pushkin’s *Prisoner of the Caucasus*, to name only a few examples.

⁶¹ PSS 28,2:251

⁶² Many scholars have viewed Myshkin as a Christ figure, and although Myshkin’s actions bear many parallels to Christ’s for the purposes of this paper, the topic is too complex to be adequately addressed. For more on this, see for example: Egeberg: 1997 and Keller: 1972.

dream and dream – and always imagining someone like you, kind, honest, good, and a bit stupid, that you would suddenly arrive and say: ‘You bear no guilt, Nastasya Filippovna, and I adore you!’”⁶³ At the end of the scene Afanasy Ivanovich even uses the term “romantic” to describe all that has just come to pass.

As the book progresses, this romantic script is taken up and developed by other characters as they interpret Myshkin and also, it seems, by Myshkin himself. The idea comes back in the Yevanchin family, where Aglaya portrays Myshkin as the “Poor Knight” out of Pushkin’s poem. Before reciting the poem to Myshkin and an assembled audience, Aglaya explains: “It seems that the poet wanted to unite in one extreme image the whole enormous concept of medieval chivalrous platonic love in a pure and lofty knight; of course all that is an ideal... The ‘poor knight’ is Don Quixote, but a serious, not a comic one.”⁶⁴ This explanation of the poem links it with the fantastic and the high ideals of knights in shining armor from which the founders of the romantic movement took their name. And the mention of Don Quixote links Myshkin directly with Dostoevsky’s idea of the ‘completely beautiful man.’ However, as a serious version of the comic Quixote, he becomes a truly romantic ideal for this role.

Viewing Myshkin as a Don Quixote, Yevgeny Pavlovich retells the events of the novel to Myshkin, highlighting their romantic quality. He begins with the day Myshkin arrived from Switzerland:

And then, that very same day, you were told the sad and heartrending story of an insulted woman – it was told to you, a knight, a virgin – and about a woman! That same day you saw this woman; you were entranced by her beauty, a fantastic, demonic beauty...add the whole of that day, in a city unknown to you and almost fantastic for you, a day of encounters and scenes, a day of unexpected acquaintances, a day of the most unexpected reality...⁶⁵

Yevgeny Pavlovich tells the story through the eyes of a man of reason and rationality, and in his version Myshkin is the “poor knight” striving to act chivalrously, in a world whose realities will not allow for his type of actions. “It is clear that you...rushed at the opportunity of publicly declaring the magnanimous thought that you, an ancestral prince and a man of purity, did not consider dishonorable a woman who had been

⁶³ PSS 8: 144. Nastasya Filippovna’s desire that he be “a bit stupid” either links him back to the tradition of Don Quixote, or alternatively it suggests a slightly more modern and realistic version of the romantic hero.

⁶⁴ PSS 8: 207

⁶⁵ PSS 8: 481-482

disgraced not through her own fault but through the fault of a disgusting high society profligate.”⁶⁶ Myshkin immediately agrees with this assessment. However, Yevgeny Pavlovich goes on to show how Myshkin's compassion was exaggerated and did not belong in the real world.

This problem of Myshkin's compassion and its place in the real world is more complex than Yevgeny Pavlovich makes it out to be because it does not only hinge on the tensions between ideal and real. Myshkin fails at his traditional knight-in-shining-armor quest because he is not a straightforward romantic hero. As I have attempted to show here, Dostoevsky has added a new psychological level to the traditional plotline by shifting the struggle between naïve and sentimental to within Myshkin. As a result, the real drama is now the struggle taking place *within* the central hero. Dostoevsky has made the shift to the psychological novel.

Conclusion: *Myshkin* as a Romantic Text or the Rise of the Psychological Novel

If we step back and look at the text as a whole, it is striking how similar Myshkin's inner state is to the structure of the novel. Both begin as a unified whole which proceeds to fracture under strain. Indeed, *The Idiot's* form is based on a key characteristic of romanticism – fragmentation. Dostoevsky had no clear overall plan when he was writing *The Idiot* and as a result, the text emerged organically as a series of loosely connected sections.

The first part of *The Idiot* was conceived and written as a self-contained unity, which may perhaps best be read as an independent novella. After this point, however, it is clear from Dostoevsky's notebooks and letters that he had no satisfactory idea of how to continue the action. This uncertainty persists all through the middle sections of the book (Parts II and III), where Dostoevsky is obviously writing from scene to scene with only the loosest thread of any central narrative line.⁶⁷

Important characters disappear for long periods, just as thoughts that seem important to Myshkin go without mention for chapters at a time. Ideas are raised once in the novel only to be dropped and never re-examined. The text leaps from one thing to another without giving a finalized account of

⁶⁶ PSS 8: 482

⁶⁷ Frank: 1969, 313-314, quoted in Hollander: 1974, 123-124.

how events turned out in the same way that Myshkin is unable to finish a thought.⁶⁸

The transitions between the four Parts of *The Idiot* are jarring. Six almost-unexplained months pass between the day presented in Part One, and the opening of Part Two. Part Two opens with a change of location, the addition of new characters, and a radically changed central hero. It closes with Lizaveta Prokofyevna dragging Myshkin to a meeting with Aglaya, but then instead of Part Three beginning with that meeting, it opens with the statement “People are forever complaining that we have no practical men...,”⁶⁹ and launches into a discussion of the lack of practicality in train staff and the army. Similarly, Part Three closes with an intense meeting between three of the principal characters, only to have the issues raised at their meeting dropped when Part Four opens two weeks later with an unrelated digression about Gogolian character types and the difficulty of portraying the ordinary. These breaks have much akin to the radical shift in Myshkin between Parts I and II that was discussed earlier.

Myshkin’s inner state and the state of the text are moving in unison. Fragmentation of the text only exists while Myshkin himself is internally fragmented. Part One when Myshkin is at one with himself is written as a unified whole with a smooth style of narration. In the conclusion, after Myshkin returns to “idiocy,” this same clear narration returns. Thus, as an aesthetic device, fragmentation helps us to understand Myshkin’s experience by making our experience as readers akin to his; when he is fragmented, we see a fragmented world. Just as Myshkin is faced with “double thoughts” and unfinished ideas which fill his mind and prevent him from seeing the world clearly, we face the same kind of unfinalized world in the novel, with nothing taken to its conclusion and no ultimate answers. In Myshkin we see the psychological consequences of the struggle, while in the text as a whole, we experience the tension between ideal and real as an aesthetic concern. Thus Myshkin’s struggle is a psychological parallel to the author’s aesthetic attempt to bring together ideal and real.

What is significant about this parallel is that it hints at the close ties between romanticism and the rise of the psychological novel. Because in *The Idiot* Dostoevsky took the struggle between naïve and sentimental away from himself and gave it to his hero, the novel functions as a test of what happens to this romantic idea when placed in a psychological, rather

⁶⁸ For a full discussion of this, see Miller (1986: 109).

⁶⁹ PSS 8: 268

than aesthetic setting. This new placement allows for Myshkin's gradual development over the course of the novel, a type of character evolution which became a central component of the psychological novel. At the same time, it marks a break with the romantic tradition, in which heroes either remained in a fixed mold or experienced a sudden, sharp conversion. At heart, however, both cases are still addressing the same romantic struggle. The psychological novel deals with the ethical version of romanticism's aesthetic concerns. In essence, Myshkin has become a human embodiment of the fragmented romantic text.

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