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Dostoevsky's Christ and Silence at the Margins of *The Idiot*

And He answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly. (Matthew, 27:14)
But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled. (Mark, 15:5)
Then he questioned with Him in many words; but He answered him nothing. (Luke, 23:9)
Pilate saith unto Him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews... (John, 19:38)

While working on the first drafts of *The Idiot* in 1867 Dostoevsky sketched out the following dialogue between the male protagonist (the Idiot) and Olga Umetskaya (an early prototype for the character of Nastasya Filippovna):

- Death on the cross disconcerts reason. But he has overcome reason too.
- What is this – a miracle?
- Of course, a miracle, although…
- What?
- Although there was a terrible cry as well.
- What sort of cry?
- Eloi! Eloi!
- That was the eclipse.
- I don't know, but it is a terrible cry. (9: 184)[1]

[1] Quotations from Dostoevsky's novels, drafts and letters are given in English (with the Russian original given in footnotes) and are identified in the body of the text by a reference in parenthesis to the volume and page number of the thirty-volume Academy edition: F. M. Dostoevsky, F. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-1990.

- Но что казнь на кресте рассудок расстраивает. А он и рассудок победил.
- Что ж, это чудо?

Here Dostoevsky alludes to the first part of one of two controversial biblical quotations; the source is either Mark 15:34: "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'—which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" or Matthew 27:46: "About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'—which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

The remaining part of the quotation ('lama sabachthani?' which means 'why have you forsaken me?') never appears, either in Dostoevsky's novels, or in his notebooks and diaries; it is also left unmarked in the writer's own copy of the New Testament. The Dostoevsky scholar might find this perplexing since the quotation is one of the most controversial of all biblical passages, and the writer is unlikely to have overlooked it given his well-attested familiarity with the Old and New Testaments and his obsession with spiritual paradoxes and confusions. Dostoevsky shows a clear awareness of its existence by quoting the first part, but he proceeds no further. What might this omission signify? To what extent can we ascribe significance to this silence? Can we perceive Dostoevsky's reluctance to complete the quotation as part of *The Idiot*'s spiritual message which reveals certain aspects of his struggles with Christian faith?

Dostoevsky's decision not to proceed with the full quotation appears to have been inspired by the inherent ambiguity of the Gospels, which offer three rather different accounts of Christ's last words on the cross. Mark and Matthew's versions are almost identical, but according to Luke 23:46 "Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last." According to John 19:30, "When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." The nature of these words and the indication they give of Christ's state of mind just before he dies are of crucial importance. They provide Christians, who are obliged to imitate Christ's deeds, with spiritual guidance as to how one should cope with the notion of suffering and

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- Конечно чудо, а впрочем...
- Что?
- Был, впрочем ужасный крик.
- Какой?
- Элой! Элой!
- Так это затмение.
- Не знаю – но это ужасный крик. (9:184).

death; and how, more generally, one should perceive the figure of Christ (human or divine). Luke and John's words would stand as an affirmation of Christ's transcendental knowledge of his own divine destiny (and hence his relative peace of mind before his physical death), whereas Mark and Matthew appear to function as a negation of this knowledge; or, as Dostoevsky puts it, "this was the eclipse."[2]

This essay will argue that such a curtailed allusion to the Bible is in fact a highly dense rhetorical gesture, which reflects many controversies surrounding *The Idiot*. It seems calculated to explode the binary opposition between the notions of human and divine natures of Christ. Moreover, the partial quotation has the potential to stand as a microcosm for the concerns of the mature Dostoevsky, and well conveys his spiritual dialogism. The hesitation to acknowledge Christ's doubt on the cross is neither a discursive negation, nor an affirmation, since it incorporates both; yet, by virtue of this dual nature, this hesitation simultaneously lies beyond them. As Malcolm Jones puts it: "The devil is struggling with God. The battle is not yet won and the battlefield is Dostoevsky's text."[3]

I will also examine silence (broadly manifested in deviations, evasions, stammering, abrupt interruptions, etc.) as a vital rhetorical device which illuminates various aspects of Dostoevsky's (fictional) Christian faith. Miller's claim that *The Idiot* illustrates the view that "words can never fully express a thought"[4] is a valuable point of departure. In addition to the above-mentioned notebook selection, I will examine the discussions of Holbein's painting carried on by Myshkin, Rogozhin and Ippolit, together with the final scene of a vigil over Nastasya Filippovna's corpse, as passages suggesting that religious experience can never be captured by definitive statements. Silent gaps

[2] G. Kjetsaa (*Dostoevsky and His New Testament*. Oslo: Solum Forlag A.S., 1984) emphasizes the importance of St. John's Gospel for Dostoevsky. The text was marked more densely in his copy than any of the remaining three gospels. Moreover, according to Kirillova ("Dostoevsky's Markings in the Gospel According to St John." In: *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*. Edited by G. Pattison & D. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 41-50.), the large majority of markings in the Gospel (which, in addition, founds its discourse on the notion of love) relate to the question of the divinity of Christ, which is acknowledged by means of the recurring assertion of the Son's Oneness with the Father. This affirmative side of the text is also acknowledged by Dostoevsky himself in his diary (28(2): 251).

[3] Jones, M. *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience*. London: Anthem Press, 2005, x. Jones's book emphasizes the spiritual significance of silence (though mainly in relation to *The Brothers Karamazov*). The highlighted *evasiveness* of Dostoevsky's text on religious issues (ibid., 63) is taken in this essay as a valuable standpoint.

[4] Miller, R. F. *Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981, 2.

become a device (both aesthetic and rhetorical) which enables the text to leave the ultimate final word unpronounced, while at the same time they remain a meaningful act of communication. Thus, the aim of the paper is not to produce a discursive taxonomy or to argue for its absence but to reveal these silent gaps.

My use of the draft entry corresponds to the overall strategy of this essay. Dostoevsky's notebooks constitute an ultimately marginal source. They can illuminate published novels in the traditional sense of literary studies as they reflect a laborious process of composition of the novel's structure and its discursive developments. However, notes also constitute a *supplement* to the main body of Dostoevsky's works in the Derridean sense. According to Derrida: "[t]he supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude."[5] In a paradoxical manner, *supplement*, which is introduced from outside as an alien addition, enriches something which should be self-sufficient and complete. Similarly, Dostoevsky's silence and refusal to consummate the quotation is a supplementary performance with twofold consequences. Firstly, the entry belongs to the domain of notebooks (the ultimate supplement) and its force and significance lie precisely in this intermediary position, which aspires to enrich the self-sufficient discourse of *The Idiot*. Secondly, the entry's very content with its abortive nature rests in rendering the incomplete complete or the complete incomplete, which forms the very 'essence' of the supplement mechanism.

Furthermore, the simultaneous absence and presence of the problematic quotation might epitomize Dostoevsky's own stance in relation to Russian Orthodoxy. Dostoevsky's spiritual quest has never been a subject of a single dominant interpretation—indeed, the difference of opinion started to arise in his life-time. The Russian Christian thinker Konstantin Leont'ev wrote in 1880 apropos of Dostoevsky's "Pushkin Speech:" "The overly rosy tone which Dostoevsky's speech introduces into Christianity is a novelty to the Church, which itself does not expect anything decent to come of humanity in the future."[6] A year later, however, the obituary published in the official Church journal *Strannik* described Dostoevsky as a "genuinely faithful and profound Russian Christian" who was wrongly accused of mysticism. It also claimed that

[5] Derrida, J. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by G. C. Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, 144.

[6] Leont'ev, K. *O vsemirnoi lyubvi (Rech' F.M. Dostoevskogo na pushkinskom prazdnike)* In *F.M. Dostoevsky i Pravoslavie*. Edited by A. Strizhev. Moscow: Otchii dom, 1997, pp. 261-297, 283.

Dostoevsky demonstrated the "greatness" of Russian Orthodoxy.[7] These divergent interpretations constitute attempts to finalise and appropriate the writer's spiritual discourse—to include it into their own agenda. However, Dostoevsky's statements on the subject of religion are famously diverse and at times confusing. Their totality lies in their very incompleteness and the marginal, abortive quotation under discussion exposes this paradox to the greatest extent.

The biblical reference discussed here, ending with the powerful line "I don't know, but it is a terrible cry," is immediately followed in the notebooks by the following: "A story of Holbein's Christ from Basel." It appears that for Dostoevsky there is a clear link between Christ's last words according to Mark and Matthew and the Saviour's representation in the painting by Hans Holbein (1497-1543), "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb." The painting depicts Christ's corpse immediately before the Resurrection—it shows obvious signs of corruption, especially around the wounds, the face, and the extremities. Apart from various discursive consequences which will be discussed later, the painting has direct connections with Dostoevsky's personal silence in the most literal sense: in 1867 the writer made a detour especially to see the picture in Basel, gazed at it for some fifteen to twenty minutes, and appeared, when his wife found him, to be on the brink of an epileptic fit.[8] Evidently he had stood in silence before this visual equivalent of the "terrible cry."

The whole discourse of the novel, it has often been suggested,[9] turns upon an irreconcilable juxtaposition of the laws of a merciless nature (Christ's decomposing corpse) with manifestations of the eternal beauty of the Divine (the resurrected Christ). The clash is at its peak in the emotional layout of the painting which, according to Kristeva, does not offer the slightest hope of transcendence, and its physical parameters

[7] In Kunil'sky, A. *F.M. Dostoevsky v vospriyatii nekotorykh tserkovnykh avtorov* In *Evangel'skii tekst v russkoi literature XVIII-XX vekov: tsitata, reministsentsiia, motiv, siuzhet, zhanr: sbornik nauchnykh trudov*. Edited by V. Zakharov. Petrozavodsk: Izd-vo Petrozavodskogo universiteta, 2001, pp. 420-429, 423.

[8] Dostoevskaia, A. G. *Vospominaniia.* Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1971, 65.

[9] E.g. Kasatkina's ("'Khristos vne istiny' v tvorchestve Dostoevskogo." In *Dostoevsky i mirovaya kul'tura*: al'manakh №11. Edited by K. Stepanyan. Saint-Petersburg: Serebryanyi vek, 1998, pp. 113-120, 113) assertion that *The Idiot* constituted an attempt to remain with Christ outside of truth. The ambiguity represented in the painting leads critics to agree that it is the central visual reference within the text and its image is crucial for interpreting the novel. The function of Holbein's painting has been a subject of many studies (e.g. Meerson, "Ivolgin and Holbein: Non-Christ Risen vs. Christ Non-Risen." In: *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 39,2 [Summer 1995]:200-213) provides a thorough discussion of the painting and its function in the novel). Due to space constraints, this essay will concentrate on only one aspect of Holbein's canvas—its depiction of the ultimately silent (dead and decomposing) Christ.

profoundly intensify the feeling of "permanent death."[10]

The decomposing corpse of Christ is indeed depicted in all its repulsive grandeur just before the transfiguration. This transformational threshold (the not-yet-transcendent dead body) is a very important state. It represents a condition of being suspended between the earthly and divine realms, between a negation of the present glory and an affirmation of the future miracle: this is the already dead body which is to be resurrected. It can be argued that this very ambivalence of the transformational threshold was responsible for Dostoevsky's amazement at Basel, and shapes the central metaphor for *The Idiot.* The painting functions not merely as a visual reference; it emerges as an inanimate protagonist of the novel, capable of profound non-verbal communication which overcomes straightforward binary oppositions (such as death vs. life or celestial vs. terrestrial). In this sense, the image of Holbein's Christ is representative for the sentiment of the no less perplexing but more straightforward words 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' The ambiguity of the painting becomes an apposite replacement for the "terrible cry."

Holbein's painting is discussed by only three characters: Myshkin, Rogozhin, and Ippolit. It appears that the three protagonists form a spiritual triangle, occasionally violated by Lebedev in an extremely carnivalesque manner, which functions as the nucleus of the novel's discourse on the nature of evil and the possibility of faith. Their reaction to the painting varies greatly. Ippolit hysterically accuses nature of "laughing" at its most precious creation—Christ; Rogozhin confirms in an oblique manner that faith can disappear when it is looked at; and Myshkin remains confusingly and emotionally *silent*, unable to say anything coherent and significant – at one point he exclaims in puzzlement: "How strange that picture of Holbein's was, though!" (8: 192).[11][12] Whereas Ippolit and Rogozhin both appear to confirm the darkest side of the painting (though their reactions remain distinct), Myshkin seems to occupy the very space which includes both the reality of the fearful corpse and the yet unrealized miracle of the resurrected body. The prince's silence functions as a powerful rhetorical act—his reluctance to discuss Holbein's canvas does not produce a void; rather, it is animated by a

[10] Kristeva, J. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Translated by L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 110.

[11] English quotations from *The Idiot* are based on Constance Garnett's translation (Kingswood, Surrey: Windmill Press, 1954), and are modified as appropriate.

[12] А какая однако же странная эта картина Гольбейна. (8:192).

decision not to apply words to something beyond verbal comprehension.[13] Silence here is a conscious act of 'speaking' and it is distinct from mere quietude.

When the Prince visits Rogozhin's house he notices a copy of Holbein's canvas. The sight of it immediately provokes a strong emotion: "Myshkin glanced at it as though recalling something, but he was about to pass through the door without stopping. He felt very depressed and wanted to get out of this house as soon as possible" (8: 181).[14] Rogozhin, who also shows signs of emotional disturbance, intentionally draws Myshkin's attention to the painting and, after a brief digression on the history of this particular copy, poses a fatal question, obviously prompted by the content of the painting and thereby drawing Myshkin emotionally into the discussion:

> "And by the way, Lev Nikolaevich, I've long meant to ask you, do you believe in God?" said Rogozhin *suddenly*, after having gone a few steps.
> "How strangely you question me and … look at me!" Myshkin could not help observing.
> "I like looking at that picture," Rogozhin muttered after a pause, seeming again to have forgotten his question.
> "At that picture!" cried Myshkin, *struck by a sudden thought*. "At that picture! Why, that picture might make some people lose their faith."
> "Yes, that goes as well!" Rogozhin assented *unexpectedly*. (8: 182, italics added)[15]

Dostoevsky hints at an intense internal reaction: Myshkin cries out, "struck by a *sudden* thought." These typical Dostoevskian markers for non-discursive, intuitive understanding (*sudden*) are swiftly followed by the equally characteristic abruptness: "Rogozhin assented *unexpectedly*."

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[13] At a different point in the novel Myshkin expresses an explicit concern about his inability to communicate efficiently: "My gestures are inappropriate. I've no right sense of proportion. My words are incongruous, not befitting the subject, and that's a degradation for those ideas." ["У меня нет жеста приличного, чувства меры нет; у меня слова другие, а не соответственные мысли, а это унижение для этих мыслей."] (8: 283).

[14] Князь мельком взглянул на нее, как бы что-то припоминая, впрочем, не останавливаясь, хотел пройти в дверь. Ему было очень тяжело и хотелось поскорее из этого дома. (8:181).

[15] - А что, Лев Николаич, давно я хотел тебя спросить, веруешь ты в бога иль нет? – *вдруг* заговорил опять Рогожин, пройдя несколько шагов.

- *Как ты странно спрашиваешь и... глядишь?* – заметил князь невольно.

- А на эту картину я люблю смотреть, – пробормотал, помолчав, Рогожин, точно опять забыв свой вопрос.

- На эту картину! – вскричал *вдруг* князь, *под впечатлением внезапной мысли*, – на эту картину! Да от этой картины у иного еще вера может пропасть!

- Пропадает и то, – неожиданно подтвердил вдруг Рогожин. (8:182, italics added).

The spiritual doubt raised by the vision of the decaying corpse of the Saviour destabilises Myshkin and renders his speech intellectually unsteady but emotionally honest. One is not sure whether the Prince confirms or negates the message conveyed by the painting. For him the painting *might* serve as a denial of transcendence: "that picture *might* make some people lose their faith." Apparently, Myshkin is unable to provide a coherent argument which would resolve the mystery of the painting. What is important here, one might suggest using Bakhtin's terminology, is the Prince's *emotional-volitional stance,* which surpasses mere words.

At the same time, Rogozhin's mysterious and abrupt "yes, that goes as well!" appears eagerly to confirm Myshkin's suggestion. Myshkin's gloomy interlocutor seems to have reached a certain affirmation. However, his emotional-volitional stance is not tranquil either: he himself abruptly drops the subject several times. Rogozhin's affirmative utterances are accompanied by other forms of silence—interruptions and evasions—as Myshkin observes: "his preoccupation and a peculiar, strangely irritable mood which had so suddenly shown itself in him might have explained this abruptness. Yet it seemed strange to Myshkin that the conversation, which had not been begun by him, should have been broken off so suddenly without Rogozhin's answering him" (8: 181).[16] Rogozhin's words appear straightforward and clear, but the actions they accompany are utterly senseless. Both protagonists seem to be confused: "They stood facing one another, as though neither knew where they were and what they had to do next" (8: 182).[17]

These perplexities are further intensified by Myshkin's "edifying" narratives, which heighten the emotional ambivalence aroused by the painting. The Prince tells Rogozhin about a murder at an inn he had stayed in and a series of other encounters: one with an atheist who "seemed to be speaking completely off the subject" (8: 182);[18] one with a drunken soldier who sells him his cross; and one with a young peasant woman with a smiling infant. The four stories do not appear to have a positive moral conclusion and remain open for interpretation. Each of them employs one or another symbol of Christianity, which is presented

[16] […] рассеянность и особое, странно-раздражительное настроение, так внезапно обнаружившееся в Рогожине, могло бы, пожалуй, объяснить эту порывчатость; но все-таки как-то чудно стало князю, что так вдруг прервался разговор, который не им же и начат. (8:181).

[17] Оба стояли друг пред другом с таким видом, что, казалось, оба забыли, куда пришли и что теперь надо делать. (8:182).

[18] […] вовсе как будто не про то говорил. (8:182).

in an ambiguous manner. The narratives do not make up a synthesized discourse on faith but rather their combined effect is to undermine any simple binary opposition of negation-affirmation of faith. As Myshkin concludes: "The essence of religious feeling does not come under any sort of reasoning or atheism, and has nothing to do with any crimes or misdemeanours. There is something else here, and there will always be something else—atheism of any hue will never get a grip on it and will always end up *speaking off the subject*" (8: 184).[19] The way this first major discussion of the painting between the Prince and Rogozhin is brought to an end is noteworthy: the doubt, raised by the emotive vision of the decaying corpse on Holbein's canvas and by Myshkin's confounding stories, is followed by two acts of Christian affirmation: Rogozhin and Myshkin swear brotherhood by exchanging their crosses, and Rogozhin's mother (obviously a holy fool) blesses the Prince without uttering a single word.[20]

Ippolit's discussion of Holbein's painting, delivered in his 'Confession,' differs strikingly from Myshkin's and Rogozhin's encounter with the image of the dead Christ. Unlike the latter protagonists, who barely utter a word directly related to the painting, but still react to it in a very profound way, Ippolit spins a prolix discourse around it. This discourse gradually reveals his egoism and superficiality. However, Ippolit's verbosity is still counterbalanced by his own neurotic indecision over whether to read the 'Confession' or not (8: 319). The dilemma is resolved positively, to Ippolit's horror, by tossing a coin: "'I read it!' whispered Ippolit, as though crushed by the decision of destiny. He could not have turned more pale, if he had heard his death sentence" (8: 319).[21]

Ippolit's verbosity contrasts to Rogozhin's various appeals for silence: he expresses an uneasy and enigmatic interest in Ippolit's still sealed envelope containing the text "with a sort of peevish vexation, as though he understood what was coming" (8: 318).[22] In addition, after

[19] […] сущность религиозного чувства ни под какие рассуждения, ни под какие проступки и преступления и ни под какие атеизмы не подходит; тут что-то не то, и вечно будет не то; тут что-то такое, обо что вечно будут скользить атеизмы и вечно будут *не про то* говорить. (8:184).

[20] It should be noted that the two Christian acts of affirmation are immediately followed by Rogozhin's attempt to murder Myshkin. The fact reconfirms the ambivalent nature of Dostoevsky's text in which a coherent and unambiguous characterisation is withheld.

[21] Читать! – прошептал Ипполит, как будто раздавленный решением судьбы; он не побледнел бы более, если б ему прочли смертный приговор. (8:319).

[22] […] но с какою-то брюзгливою досадой, как бы понимая в чем дело. (8:318).

Ippolit reads out his epigraph, Rogozhin, "who had been silent till then" interjects: "'There's too much talk' […] 'It's not the way to set about this business, lad, it's not the way…'" (8: 320).[23] The utterance is mysterious and is not explained in the novel: what does Rogozhin mean by it and how can he know the as yet unrevealed content of Ippolit's 'Confession'? Though none can divine Rogozhin's meaning, all present are 'strangely' affected by his words, which distresses Ippolit: "he trembled so much that Myshkin put out his arm to support him, and he would certainly have cried out but that his voice failed him. For a whole minute he could not speak, and stared at Rogozhin, breathing painfully" (8: 320).[24] Recovering from the shock, Ippolit accuses Rogozhin of having visited him at night and having sat silently at his bedside for an hour. Ippolit will conclude his discussion of the Holbein painting with an account of Rogozhin's mysterious visit, and it remains unclear whether it actually took place or was merely a hallucination. This ambivalence of the plot-line heightens the mysterious aura of the scene, which is centred on the borderline state of Holbein's Christ.

When he turns in his "Essential explanation" to the painting, Ippolit does not hesitate to pose a direct and unambiguous question: "But, strange to say, as one looks at this corpse of a tortured man a peculiar and curious question arises: if just such a corpse (and it must have been just like that) was seen by all His disciples, by those who were to become His chief apostles, by the women that followed Him and stood by the cross, by all who believed in Him and worshipped Him, how could they believe that that martyr would rise again?" (8: 339).[25] For Ippolit, nature takes over the figure of Christ and annuls his resurrection. However, his scepticism is predominantly intellectual and expressed in a form of almost impersonal exposé—unlike Myshkin and Rogozhin, Ippolit does not seem to be profoundly shaken by the image of Christ's decomposing body. Ippolit is more concerned with his own person and compares his own destiny (his illness has left him with barely two weeks to live) with the

[23] Разговору много […] Не так этот предмет надо обделывать, парень, не так... (8:320).

[24] [...] он так задрожал, что князь протянул было руку, чтобы поддержать его, и он наверно бы вскрикнул, если бы видимо не оборвался вдруг его голос. Целую минуту он не мог выговорить слова и, тяжело дыша, все смотрел на Рогожина. (8:320).

[25] Но странно, когда смотришь на этот труп измученного человека, то рождается один особенный и любопытный вопрос: если такой точно труп (а он непременно должен был быть точно такой) видели все ученики его, его главные будущие апостолы, видели женщины, ходившие за ним и стоявшие у креста, все веровавшие в него и обожавшие его, то каким образом могли они поверить, смотря на такой труп, что этот мученик воскреснет? (8:339).

body of Christ, both of which are mere objects subordinated to nature, which itself is "full of mockery" (8: 247).[26] Ippolit's flow of words is rationally argued and delivered primarily with narcissistic intent. As Rogozhin comments, when Ippolit is being restrained from his would-be suicide: "That's what he's been after, that people should hold his hands; that's what he read his confession for" (8: 346).[27]

Ippolit appears to indulge himself with talking, and his "Confession," one might argue, gradually degenerates into "idle talk." Its idle nature is emphasized when nearly everyone leaves Myshkin's rooms unmoved by the pathos of the "Confession" they have heard. While silence usually is a personal intimate experience, idle talk is always public; moreover, it is not charged with an intense emotion. Heidegger explores the phenomenon in his *Being and Time*: "The groundlessness of idle talk is no obstacle to its becoming public; instead it encourages this. Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one's own. […] Idle talk is something which anyone can rake up; it not only releases one from the task of genuinely understanding, but develops an undifferentiated kind of intelligibility, for which nothing is closed off any longer."[28] Ippolit does indeed arrive at clarity; however, this clarity is of a detached nature and hence it leaves everyone feeling indifferent and provokes purely banal responses which pretend to ignore Ippolit's desperate speech. Straight after the "Confession" Ganya takes up the tritest of topics—the weather: "'It will be baking hot again, all day,' muttered Ganya, with careless annoyance, stretching and yawning, with his hat in his hands" (8: 345).[29] Moreover, Ippolit's futile use of language is accompanied by a feigned suicide—an action which also fails to reach its ultimate goal.[30]

However, in spite of the idle nature of his enquiry and the seemingly logical argument aimed against Christ's divinity, Ippolit arrives after his

[26] [Природа] очень насмешлива. (8: 247).

[27] К тому и вел, что за руки будут держать; на то и тетрадку прочел. (8:346).

[28] Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*. Translated by J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962, 213.

[29] Опять жарища на целый день, – с небрежною досадой бормотал Ганя, держа в руках шляпу, потягиваясь и зевая. (8:345).

[30] Incontinence of the tongue is an inherent characteristic of General Ivolgin, whose uncontrolled speeches are usually transformed into mere lies. Lebedev's curious and distracted pronouncements on various spiritual and mundane topics are also given a substantial and dramatic role. Idle, secular talk dominates the Epanchin's sitting room which is occupied by members of the Russian aristocracy unable to *engage* themselves in a *meaningful* dialogue (when Myshkin attempts to introduce more meaningful themes to the conversation he immediately alienates himself).

four "Christian" stories at a similar conclusion to that of Myshkin: one cannot exhaust an idea verbally—there is always something that remains hidden. The seeds of uncertainty and inexpressibility can be found even in Ippolit's speech, which appears to be based primarily on reason:

> But I'll add though that there is something at the bottom of every new human thought, every thought of genius, or even every earnest thought that springs up in any brain, which can never be communicated to others, even if one were to write volumes about it and were explaining one's idea for thirty-five years; there's something left which cannot be induced to emerge from your brain, and remains with you for ever; and with it you will die, without communicating to anyone perhaps, the most important of your ideas. (8: 328)[31]

This statement might be taken as an excuse for the numerous incoherencies, the illogical narrative jumps and the general stammering mode of delivery of Ippolit's "Confession." These disruptive elements also manifest different types of silence, since they upset the linearity of the exceedingly logical argument which deals with "mocking" nature. The discursive muddle is directed against the petrifaction of the spiritual debate, which has to remain open since the dead body of Christ manifests a threshold between complete decomposition and ultimate resurrection. Holbein's painting captures the moment which is neither glory nor defeat. It might be suggested that this very fact explains why every time the painting appears on the scene it raises confusions which are always accompanied by various types of silence: evasions, stammering, abrupt interruptions, open-ended affirmations and undefined negations.

There is another dead body in the novel—that of the slaughtered Nastasya Filippovna. Although it does not appear until the end of the novel, the spectre of its possibility and even inevitability haunts *The Idiot*. The woman's corpse appears in the guise of a carnivalesque double of Christ: the fallen woman is opposed to the saintly man but both are subject to inescapable decomposition. Her body worries Rogozhin: "Another thing I am afraid of is that it's so hot and there may be a smell" (8: 504)[32] and in the same manner as the image of Christ's decomposing corpse, it influences the general spiritual discourse with various "silent"

[31] Но, однако ж, прибавлю, что во всякой гениальной или новой человеческой мысли, или просто даже во всякой серьезной человеческой мысли, зарождающейся в чьей-нибудь голове, всегда остается нечто такое, чего никак нельзя передать другим людям, хотя бы вы исписали целые томы и растолковывали вашу мысль тридцать пять лет; всегда останется нечто, что ни за что не захочет выйти из-под вашего черепа и останется при вас навеки; с тем вы и умрете, не передав никому, может быть, самого-то главного из вашей идеи. (8:328).

[32] Боюсь вот тоже еще что душно, и дух пойдет. (8:504).

consequences.

In the scene preceding the actual revelation of the woman's death, the reader is presented with a certain mysterious silence: "Myshkin took a step nearer, then a second, and stood still. He stood still and looked for a minute or two. *Neither of them uttered a word all the while they stood by the bedside*. Myshkin's heart beat so violently that it seemed as though it were audible in *the death-like silence of the room*" (8: 503, italics added).[33] The grammatical construction of the last phrase ("*in the death-like silence of the room*") is very awkward in Russian and it mysteriously presupposes that the room itself "maintained silence." Since it is inanimate and obviously cannot speak,[34] Dostoevsky hints that the room encloses within itself someone who has lost his or her ability to speak—i.e. the deceased Nastasya Filippovna. Myshkin is not fully aware of the woman's death, but Dostoevsky indicates that she is dead by describing her bed in the following way: "Someone lay asleep on it, in a perfectly motionless sleep; not the faintest stir, not the faintest breath could be heard" (8:503).[35] Furthermore, the silence of the room is emphasized by a contrasting phenomenon—the sudden sound of a buzzing fly: "The Prince looked and felt that as he looked, the room became more and more still and death-like. Suddenly there was the buzz of a fly which flew over the bed and settled on the pillow" (8:503).[36]

The impact the dead body has on Rogozhin and Myshkin is devastating – it brings the characters to the summit of *unreason*. After recalling various unrelated or mundane details of Nastasya Filippovna's last day, both of them appear on the verge of dementia; their ludicrous actions are accompanied by nonsensical utterances and deformed speech patterns. Moreover, their vigil over the woman's dead body marks the beginning of their respective journeys to establishments where silence, in

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[33] Князь шагнул еще ближе, шаг, другой, и остановился. Он стоял и всматривался минуту или две; *оба*, во все время, у кровати *ничего не выговорили*; у князя билось сердце, так что, казалось, слышно было в комнате, *при мертвом молчании комнаты*". (8:503, italics added).

[34] As Bakhtin suggests: "In quietude nothing makes a sound (or something does not make a sound); in silence nobody *speaks* (or somebody does not speak). Silence is possible only in the human world (and only for a person)." In *Speech Genres and Other Late Eassys*. Trans. V.W. McGee, ed. C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. Quotation at 133-34.

[35] […] на ней кто-то спал, совершенно неподвижным сном; не слышно было ни малейшего шелеста, ни малейшего дыхания. (8:503).

[36] Князь глядел и чувствовал, что чем больше он глядит, тем еще мертвее и тише становится в комнате. Вдруг зажужжала проснувшаяся муха, пронеслась над кроватью и затихла у изголовья. (8:503).

the repressive Foucauldian manner, reigns supreme: a prison and a lunatic asylum.

> From time to time Rogozhin *began suddenly and incoherently muttering in a loud harsh voice, he began shouting and laughing*. Then Myshkin stretched out his trembling hand to him and softly touched his head, his hair, stroking them and stroking his cheeks… he could do nothing else! He began trembling again, and again his legs seemed suddenly to fail him. Quite a new sensation gnawed at his heart with infinite anguish. Meanwhile it had become quite light; at last he lay down on the pillow as though utterly helpless and despairing and put his face close to the pale and motionless face of Rogozhin; tears flowed from his eyes on to Rogozhin's cheeks, *but perhaps he did not notice then his own tears and was quite unaware of them*.
>
> Anyway, when after many hours the doors were opened and people came in they found the murderer *completely unconscious and raving*. Myshkin was sitting beside him motionless on the floor, and every time the delirious man *broke into screaming or babble*, he hastened to pass his trembling hand softly over his hair and cheeks, as though caressing and soothing him. But by now *he could understand no questions* he was asked and *did not recognise the people surrounding him*. (8: 507, italics added)[37]

Myshkin's and Rogozhin's lament over Nastasya Filippovna, like any other profound emotional experience, disrupts their faculty of speech. The two protagonists face a mental catastrophe—their loss is too great to be comprehended by means of conventional mental reasoning and it robs them of their senses. If for Rogozhin this appears to be an entirely new experience, the Prince is already familiar with it from the time he saw Holbein's painting. Thus, the powerful finale links the two corpses—the decaying corpse of the Saviour and the already decomposing corpse of Nastasya Filippovna. The first one shatters Myshkin's composure and the second returns him to his initial state of mind—insanity.

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[37] Рогожин изредка и вдруг начинал иногда *бормотать, громко, резко и бессвязно; начинал вскрикивать и смеяться*; князь протягивал к нему тогда свою дрожащую руку и тихо дотрогивался до его головы, до его волос, гладил их и гладил его щеки... больше он ничего не мог сделать! Он сам опять начал дрожать, и опять как бы вдруг отнялись его ноги. Какое-то совсем новое ощущение томило его сердце бесконечною тоской. Между тем совсем рассвело; наконец он прилег на подушку, как бы совсем уже в бессилии и в отчаянии, и прижался своим лицом к бледному и неподвижному лицу Рогожина; слезы текли из его глаз на щеки Рогожина, но, может быть, он уж и *не слыхал тогда своих собственных слез и уже не знал ничего о них*...

По крайней мере, когда, уже после многих часов, отворилась дверь и вошли люди, то они застали убийцу в *полном беспамятстве и горячке*. Князь сидел подле него неподвижно на подстилке и тихо, каждый раз при взрывах крика или бреда больного, спешил провесть дрожащею рукой по его волосам и щекам, как бы лаская и унимая его. Но он уже *ничего не понимал*, о чем его спрашивали, и *не узнавал вошедших* и окруживших его людей. (8:507, italics added).

Although Myshkin's reversion to obscure and uncomprehending idiocy appears to be final, Rogozhin apparently regains his consciousness after two months of brain fever. The reader is struck, however, by his powerful refusal to justify his crime during the subsequent court hearing. Rogozhin's silent meekness highlights the opposition between the "able" speech of his counsel and his own inner "silence": "Rogozhin *was taciturn* during his trial. He *did not contradict his adroit and eloquent counsel,* […] he was sentenced to fifteen years' penal servitude in Siberia, and heard his sentence *grimly, silently, and* '*thoughtfully*'" (8: 508, italics added).[38]

Rogozhin's refusal to speak and to dispute infinitely defers, as it were, the discursive closure of the novel. Silence in this case is an inherently non-affirmative form of speaking—it is not a mere empty space but a meaningful void which leaves the ending unfinalised. Hence, silence creates a communicative situation of a different order. Since the experience of the protagonists cannot find its full expression by means of conventional speech patterns, its transmission is achieved by means of the crisis of communication. The only discursively appropriate response to the disastrous situation Myshkin and Rogozhin find themselves in is silence.

The overall structural pattern of the novel might thus be summarized as an oscillation between intensely verbose but not always sensible speeches and a silent inability to provide a logical and coherent argument in response to the questions posed by "mocking" nature. The same structure is at work in the way Dostoevsky "half-quotes" the New Testament—he literally confines to silence those "frightful" words ("why have you forsaken me?") and refuses to participate any further in a pointless debate, at least through a verbal medium. The quotation abruptly ends after "Eloi, Eloi" and the reader is left with an emotionally charged void. Like Myshkin and Rogozhin, the protagonist of Dostoevsky's draft is ill at ease and she expresses uncertainty combined with fear: "I don't know, but it is a terrible cry" (9: 184). Words cease to be reliable carriers of meaning and are abandoned in favour of the *silent vacuum*. However, this *vacuum* is not nihilistic in nature—it does not deny, but rather postpones intellectual reasoning and submerges one in a *mute* state of mind.

[38] Рогожин был *молчалив* во время своего процесса. Он не *противоречил ловкому и красноречивому своему адвокату*.[…] Он был осужден […] в Сибирь, в каторгу, на пятнадцать лет, и выслушал свой приговор сурово, *безмолвно* и "*задумчиво*". (8:508, italics added).

One might apply the English phrase, "passing over in silence," to Dostoevsky's treatment of the incomplete reference to the Bible. The phrase strikingly reflects the essence of the writer's hesitation: he is reluctant to produce a complete utterance, although he *passes over* (i.e. makes a movement towards and over) the ultimate word of his discourse in *The Idiot* which at once discloses and obscures itself. This is not a mere repression of the as-yet-unuttered word, it is an active accomplishment which functions as a rhetorical gesture. This gesture appears to have certain affinities with Derrida's *supplement* which "is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness."[39]

In his diary for 1870, the year after *The Idiot* had been published, Dostoevsky made an interesting entry on Shakespeare which touched upon the notions of silence and poetic ineffability: "On Shakespeare: […] It is not a mere reproduction of everyday life […] The whole of reality is not exhausted by everyday life, for, to an enormous extent, it is present in life in the form of a still latent, unexpressed, future Word" (11: 237).[40] Dostoevsky makes clear that reality is not exhausted by its conspicuous present, it never "is" in its full glory, that the ultimate *exposé* is always postponed. In the same manner, the actuality or givenness of truth is generally never fully realised. Although it is heavily dependent on the perceptible language which is already in action, truth's "essence" lies beyond it and can be found in the latent, unexpressed, future Word (that is, the Second Coming of Christ in the indefinite future). Both the "silent" finale of *The Idiot* and the partially quoted words of Christ on the cross dwell in this same terrain, forever haunted by the unrealized Word.[41]

Interestingly, a further "stammering" or negative form of reasoning takes place in the very quotation from the drafts for *The Idiot* with which the present essay began. The complete entry can be reconstituted as follows:

- Death on the cross disconcerts reason. But he has overcome reason too.
- What is this—a miracle?
- Of course, a miracle, although…
- What?

[39] Derrida, 1997, 145.

[40] Вся действительность не исчерпывается насущным, ибо огромною своею частию заключается в нем в виде еще подспудного, невысказанного будущего слова. (11:237).

[41] C.f. Ippolit's similar pronouncement on the notion of continuity: "It's life that matters, nothing but life—the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process, not the discovery itself, at all!" (8:183). ["Дело в жизни, в одной жизни, – в открывании ее, беспрерывном и вечном, а совсем не в открытии!" (8:183)].

- Although there was a terrible cry as well.
- What sort of cry?
- Eloi! Eloi!
- That was the eclipse.
- I don't know, but it is a terrible cry.
A story of Holbein's Christ from Basel.
How martyrs built dug-outs.
About revolution.
About the devil's tempting Christ. ~~There lies the beginning of a profound Christianity.~~
The tongue in the mirror. (9: 184)

The last four sentences, one of which is crossed out in the notebook, have the potential to prompt numerous suppositions. Firstly, the violence inflicted on the already written text signifies the open-ended character of the diary entry under discussion. The meaning is negotiated in a very explicit manner: initially Dostoevsky appears to suggest that the essence of profound Christianity depends on the process of undergoing temptation. (The concept of temptation itself signifies ultimate instability—it is an oscillation between the distressing truth and the enticing lie.)[42] However, after suggesting this, Dostoevsky strikes out the proposition which links Christianity—a relatively stable set of values and beliefs—with temptations. The outcome is by no means a clearer statement; the disappearance of the stable concept results in a more blurred, more abstract and somewhat indeterminate figure of speech.

Secondly, as one would expect, a logical thread runs through all these adjacent statements—the idea of *doubt*. Christ's cry on the cross, Holbein's decomposing corpse and the devil's temptations are all acute manifestations of doubt. The lines "About revolution" and "The tongue in the mirror" can also be interpreted in this vein since they connect the present discussion with a novel which had not yet been written—*The Devils.* It explores one of the most extreme manifestations of doubt, namely, revolutionary and spiritual nihilism. While Petr Verkhovensky clearly personifies the revolutionary type of nihilism, Alexey Kirillov stands for a deep spiritual confusion, developing into the complete rejection of God comparable with that of Ippolit. In his ante-mortem

[42] C.f. Dostoevsky's own account: "I do not profess and believe in Christ like a boy, my hosanna was forged in the vast crucible of doubts" ["не как мальчик же я верую во Христа и его исповедую, а через большое горнило сомнений моя осанна прошла"] (27: 86) or the devil's statement in his conversation with Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "But nothing but 'hosannah' is not enough for life, the 'hosannah' must be tried in the crucible of doubt and so on, in the same style" ["Но для жизни мало одной "осанны", надо, чтоб "осанна"-то эта переходила чрез горнило сомнений, ну и так далее, в этом роде"] (15: 77).

statement, for example, Kirillov wants to depict "at the top a face with the tongue out" (10: 472).[43] He arrives at this both carnivalesque and highly neurotic desire by means of a powerful speech addressing the death of Christ on the cross. The stylistic pathos and lexis used here strongly resemble the passage in which Ippolit reflects upon "mocking" nature. Moreover, it might seem that the artistic meditation on the theme, which is found in Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46 and suppressed in the drafts for *The Idiot*, emerges and almost reveals itself in Kirillov's speech—Christ's cry of doubt is transformed here into the ultimate absence of divine transfiguration:

> [Verkhovensky:] "Do you know, to my thinking, you believe perhaps more thoroughly than any priest."
> "Believe in whom? In *Him*? Listen." Kirillov stood still, gazing before him with fixed and ecstatic look. "Listen to a great idea: there was a day on earth, and in the midst of the earth there stood three crosses. One on the cross had such faith that he said to another: 'To-day thou shalt be with me in Paradise.' The day ended; both died and passed away and found neither Paradise nor resurrection. His words did not come true. Listen: that Man was the loftiest of all on earth, He was that which gave meaning to life. The whole planet, with everything on it, is mere madness without that Man. There has never been anyone like Him before or since, never, up to a miracle. For that is the miracle, that there never was or never will be another like Him. And if that is so, if the laws of nature did not spare even Him, have not spared even their miracle, but made even Him live in a lie and die for a lie, then all the planet is a lie and rests on a lie and on mockery. So then, the very laws of the planet are a lie and the vaudeville of devils. What is there to live for? Answer, if you are a man." (10: 471)[44]

Kirillov believes that it is his mission to expose this ultimate lie. He

[43] English quotations from *The Devils* are taken from Constance Garnett's translation (Kingswood, Surrey: Windmill Press, 1946), and are modified as appropriate.

> […] сверху рожу с высунутым языком. (10:472).

[44] [Верховенский:] - Знаете что, по-моему, вы веруете, пожалуй, еще больше попа.
- В кого? В *Него*? Слушай, – остановился Кириллов, неподвижным, исступленным взглядом смотря пред собой. – Слушай большую идею: был на земле один день, и в средине земли стояли три креста. Один на кресте до того веровал, что сказал другому: "Будешь сегодня со мною в раю". Кончился день, оба померли, пошли и не нашли ни рая, ни воскресения. Не оправдывалось сказанное. Слушай: этот человек был высший на всей земле, составлял то, для чего ей жить. Вся планета, со всем, что на ней, без этого человека – одно сумасшествие. Не было ни прежде, ни после *Ему* такого же, и никогда, даже до чуда. В том и чудо, что не было и не будет такого же никогда. А если так, если законы природы не пожалели и *Этого*, даже чудо свое же не пожалели, а заставили и *Его* жить среди лжи и умереть за ложь, то, стало быть, вся планета есть ложь и стоит на лжи и глупой насмешке. Стало быть, самые законы планеты ложь и диаволов водевиль. Для чего же жить, отвечай, если ты человек? (10:471).

refuses to be part of a corrupted world of this kind and exclaims: "But I will assert my will, I am bound to believe that I don't believe […] I am killing myself to prove that I won't give in, to prove my new terrible freedom" (10: 472).[45] In spite of this overtly active stance, Kirillov arrives at the same mental silence as Myshkin though of a different order: he kills himself and ceases to exist, together with his thinking (reasoning) ability. Death here functions as an extreme and final form of silence (which Myshkin, unlike Kirillov, does not experience).

Moreover, Kirillov completes what Ippolit was unable to carry through. Nevertheless, Ippolit's fake suicide and Kirillov's completed act together constitute a highly significant accomplishment, inspired by the image of the decomposing and not yet resurrected body of Christ. Both young men are unable to accept the triumph of nature over the body of Christ and arrive to strikingly similar conclusions—while for Ippolit nature is "full of mockery," Kirillov sees the whole planet resting "on a lie and on mockery." In order to resist this unbearable truth, they aspire to total and final silence—in death (though in Ippolit's case the move towards death is abortive). The same mechanism is at work in the closing scene of *The Idiot*: Myshkin's insanity and Rogozhin's imprisonment are immediate consequences of the confrontation with another decomposing corpse, that of Nastasya Filipovna. Their silence or shattered muteness stands for the fundamental crisis of communication—no appropriate words can be found to sustain dialogue.

To conclude, Dostoevsky's marginal (from the notebook) and central (from the novel) references to Christ's (im)possible resurrection and its philosophical and spiritual consequences dominate the discourse of *The Idiot*. These references constitute an ambiguous discourse which is inherently destabilized by means of silent gestures, which are necessary, since they make the monologic closure of Dostoevsky's text impossible. Moreover, they also evade the all too familiar commonness of the language. The latter point is not completely alien to Heidegger, who introduces the notion of silence as an important constituent for authentic existence. He writes in *Being and Time*:

> Keeping silent is another essential possibility of discourse, and it has the same existential foundation. In talking with one another, the person who keeps silent can 'make one understand' (that is, he can develop an understanding), and he can do so more authentically than the person who is never short of words. Speaking at length about something does not offer the slightest guarantee that thereby

[45] Но я заявлю своеволие, я обязан уверовать, что не верую […] Я убиваю себя, чтобы показать непокорность и новую страшную свободу мою. (10:472).

> understanding is advanced. On the contrary, talking extensively about something, covers it up and brings what is understood to a sham clarity—the unintelligibility of the trivial.[46]

I maintain that Dostoevsky follows Heidegger's train of thought in an attempt to avoid a "sham clarity" while addressing the issues posed by 'mocking' nature. Certain leitmotifs can be discerned in the passages under discussion: such complex issues as the nature of Christ's death can never be captured by definitive statements and they require silent gaps. This gives a certain justification to silence as a meaningful (i.e. full of meanings) mode of continuing discourse. It explains why various silences, achieved through insanity (Myshkin), imprisonment (Rogozhin), or suicide (Ippolit and Kirillov), constitute positive acts of communication. In the same manner, Dostoevsky's partial citation of Christ's last words on the cross is not a mere negation or refusal to communicate; on the contrary, it is a positive "passing over in silence" of a solution to the "horrifying riddle" that the mortal reality poses. Silence for Dostoevsky is not about leaving something unsaid—it is about saying something by means of the unsaid.

[46] Heidegger, 1962. 208.