

**“Thoughts on *The Idiot*  
by Dostoevsky”<sup>1</sup>**

Hermann Hesse

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DOSTOEVSKY'S "Idiot", Prince Leo Myshkin, is often compared to Jesus. This is easy enough to do. You can compare to Jesus anyone who has been touched by one of the magical truths, who no longer separates thinking from living and thereby isolates himself in the midst of his surroundings and becomes the opponent of all. Beyond that, the comparison between Myshkin and Jesus seems to me not exactly apt. Only one characteristic in Myshkin, an important one to be sure, strikes me as Jesus-like - his timid chastity. The concealed fear of sex and procreation is a characteristic that could not be wanting in the "historical" Jesus, the Jesus of the Gospels, a trait that is clearly part of his world and is not neglected in even so superficial a portrait of Jesus as Renan's.

But it is strange - little though I sympathize with the constant comparison between Myshkin and Christ - that I too see the two images unconsciously related to each other. It only occurred to me belatedly and in connection with a tiny matter. One day when I was thinking about the "idiot" I realized that my first thought of him always seems to be an apparently insignificant one. In the first flash of my imagination I always see him in one particular secondary scene of no importance in itself. I have exactly the same experience with the Savior. Whenever an association calls up the image of Jesus or I hear or see the word "Jesus," what leaps into my mind first is not Jesus on the cross, or Jesus in the wilderness, or Jesus the miracle worker, or Jesus risen from the dead, but Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, tasting the last cup of loneliness, his soul torn by the woes of impending death and a higher rebirth. And as he looks about him for his disciples, in a last touching, childlike need of comfort, seeking a little warmth and human closeness, a fleeting comforting illusion in the midst of his hopeless loneliness - there are the disciples asleep! All of them together, the worthy Peter, the handsome John - all these good people about whom Jesus has again and again, intentionally and lovingly, deceived himself, with whom he has shared his thoughts, at least a part of his thoughts - as though they could understand him, as though it were possible in actual fact to communicate his ideas to these people, to awaken some related vibration in them, something like comprehension, something like a close relationship. And now in the moment of unbearable agony he turns toward these companions, the only ones he has; and he is now so openly and wholly human, so much the sufferer that he might come closer to them than ever before, find comfort and support in any silly word or halfway friendly gesture on their part - but no, they are not there, they are sleeping, they are snoring. This dreadful moment, I know not how, was impressed upon my mind in very early youth, and as I have said, if I think of Jesus, always and unfailingly the memory of this moment arises in my mind.

There is a parallel to this in Myshkin's case. If I think of him, the "idiot," likewise it is a moment of apparently lesser importance that first occurs to me and similarly it is a moment of incredible, total isolation, tragic loneliness. The scene is that evening in Pavlovsk, in Lebedev's house, when the

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<sup>1</sup> In Hermann Hesse, "My Belief: Essays in the Life and Art", edited and with an introduction by Theodore Ziolkowski, translated by Denver Lindley, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974 (ISBN 0-374-21666-6; the book is out of print)

Prince, a few days after his epileptic seizure and still recuperating from it, is being visited by the whole Yepanchin family, when suddenly into this cheerful and elegant though inwardly tense circle burst the fashionable young revolutionaries and nihilists. When the talkative Ippolit with the ostensible "son of Pavlishchev", when the "boxer" and the others rush in, this disagreeable, always repulsive and disquieting scene where these limited and misguided young people are so harshly and nakedly revealed in their helpless evil as though standing on an overlighted stage, where their every word inflicts a double pain upon the reader, first because of its impact upon the good Myshkin and then because of the cruelty with which it unmasks and lays bare the speaker - this is the strange, unforgettable, though in the novel not especially important or emphasized passage that I mean. On the one side society, the elegant worldly people, the rich, mighty, and conservative, on the other ferocious youth, inexorable, knowing nothing but rebellion and hatred for tradition, ruthless, dissolute, wild, incredibly stupid for all their theoretical intellectualism; and standing between these two groups the Prince, alone, exposed, observed by both sides critically and with the closest attention. And how does the situation end? It ends with Myshkin, despite the small mistakes he makes during the excitement, behaving exactly according to his kind, gentle, childlike nature, accepting smilingly the unbearable, answering selflessly the most shameless speeches, willing to assume every fault and to search for every fault in himself - and his complete failure in this with the result that he is despised, not by one side or the other, not by the young against the old or the reverse, but by both, by both! All turn against him, he has stepped on everyone's toes; for an instant the most extreme social opposites in age and point of view are completely wiped out, all are united and at one in turning their backs with indignation and rage on the single one among them who is pure!

What is it that makes this "idiot" so impossible in the world of other people? Why does no one understand him, even though almost all love him in some fashion, almost everyone finds his gentleness sympathetic, indeed often exemplary? What distinguishes him, the man of magic, from the others, the ordinary people? Why are they right in rejecting him? Why must they do it, inevitably? Why must things go with him as they did with Jesus, who in the end was abandoned not only by the world but by all his disciples as well?

It is because the "idiot's" way of thinking is different from that of the others. Not that he thinks less logically or in a more childlike and associative way than they - that is not it. His way of thought is what I call "magical." This gentle "idiot" completely denies the life, the way of thought and feeling, the world and the reality of other people. His reality is something quite different from theirs. Their reality in his eyes is no more than a shadow, and it is by seeing and demanding a completely new reality that he becomes their enemy.

The difference is not that they prize power, money, family, state, and similar values and that he does not. It is not that he represents the spiritual and they the material, or however one wants to formulate it. This is not the point. For the "idiot" too the material world exists, he readily acknowledges the significance of these things even if he takes them less seriously. Nor is his demand, his ideal, a Hindu ascetic one, a dying to this world of apparent realities in favor of a spirit content in itself and confident that it alone is reality.

No, about the reciprocity of nature and spirit, about their necessary interaction, Myshkin would be quite able to reach an understanding with the others. But for them the coexistence, the equal validity of both worlds is a principle and an idea, for him they are life and reality! To make this clearer, let us try to put it somewhat differently. Myshkin is different from others because as idiot and epileptic, and at the same time a very clever person, he has much closer and more direct relations with the unconscious than they do. For him the highest experience is that half second of supreme receptivity and insight that he has experienced a few times, that magical ability for a moment, for the flash of a moment, to be able to be everything, to empathize with everything, to sympathize with everything, to understand and accept everything in the world. There lies the essence of his being. He has not studied and accepted magic and mystical wisdom, not read and admired them, but (if only at very rare instants) actually experienced them. He has not only had strange and magnificent thoughts and inspirations but more than once he has stood on the magic threshold where everything is affirmed, where not only the most farfetched idea is true but also the opposite of every such idea.

This is the dread thing about this man, properly feared by the others. He does not stand entirely alone, not the whole world is against him. There are still a few people, very dubious, very threatened and threatening people, who at times understand him emotionally: Rogozhin, Nastasya. He is understood by criminals and by hysterics, he, the innocent, the gentle child! But this child, by God, is not as gentle as he seems. His innocence is by no means harmless, and people quite properly fear him.

The "idiot," I have said, is at times close to that boundary line where every idea and its opposite are recognized as true. That is, he has an intuition that no idea, no law, no character or order exists that is true and right except as seen from one pole – and for every pole there is an opposite pole. Settling upon a pole, adopting a position from which the world is viewed and arranged, this is the first principle of every order, every culture, every society and morality. Whoever feels, if only for an instant, that spirit and nature, good and evil are interchangeable is the most dangerous enemy of all forms of order. For that is where the opposite order is, and there chaos begins.

A way of thought that leads back to the unconscious, to chaos, destroys all forms of human organization. In conversation someone says to the "idiot" that he only speaks the truth, nothing more, and that this is deplorable. So it is. Everything is true, "Yes" can be said to anything. To bring order into the world, to attain goals, to make possible law, society, organization, culture, morality, "No" must be added to the "Yes," the world must be separated into opposites, into good and evil. However arbitrary the first establishment of each "No," each prohibition, may be, it becomes sacrosanct the instant it becomes law, produces results, becomes the foundation for a point of view and system of order.

The highest reality in the eyes of human culture lies in this dividing up of the world into bright and dark, good and evil, permissible and forbidden. For Myshkin the highest reality, however, is the magical experience of the reversibility of all fixed rules, of the equal justification for the existence of both poles. *The Idiot*, thought to its logical conclusion, leads to a matriarchy of the unconscious and annihilates culture. It does not break the tables of the law, it reverses them and shows their opposites written on the back.

The fact that this foe of order, this frightful destroyer, appears not as a criminal but as a shy, endearing person full of childlikeness and charm, a good-hearted, selfless, benevolent man, this is the secret of this terrifying book. Out of a profound perception, Dostoevsky has made this character a sick man, an epileptic. All representatives of the new, of the dreadful, of the uncertain future, all harbingers of an intuited chaos, are in Dostoevsky sick, dubious, overburdened. Rogozhin, Nastasya, later all four Karamazovs. All are represented as derailed, as exceptionally strange figures, but all in such a way that we feel for this derailment and mental illness something of that holy awe which Asiatics believe they owe to madmen.

What is remarkable and strange, important and fateful, is not that somewhere in Russia in the 1850's and 60's an epileptic of genius had these fantasies and created these figures. The important thing is that these books for three decades have become increasingly important and prophetic works to the young people of Europe. The strange thing is that we look at the faces of these criminals, hysterics, and idiots of Dostoevsky quite differently than we do at the faces of other criminals or fools in other famous novels, that we understand and love them so uncannily that we must feel in ourselves something related and akin to these people.

This is not due to accident and even less to the external and literary elements in Dostoevsky's work. However disconcerting any of his traits may be – you have only to think how he anticipates a highly developed psychology of the unconscious – we do not admire his work as the expression of profound insight and skill or as the artistic representation of a world essentially known and familiar to us; rather we experience it as prophecy, as the mirroring in advance of the dissolution and chaos that we have seen openly going on in Europe for the last several years. Not that this world of fictional characters represents a picture of an ideal future – no one would consider it that. No, we do not see in Myshkin and all the other characters examples to be copied; instead we perceive an inevitability that says, "Through this we must pass, this is our destiny!"

The future is uncertain, but the road that is shown here is unambiguous. It means spiritual reevaluation. It leads through Myshkin and calls for "magical" thinking, the acceptance of chaos. Return to the incoherent, to the unconscious, to the formless, to the animal and far beyond the animal to the beginning of all things. Not in order to remain there, not to become animal or primeval slime but rather so that we can reorient ourselves, hunt out, at the roots of our being, forgotten instincts and possibilities of development, to be able to undertake a new creation, valuation, and distribution of the world. No program can teach us to find this road, no revolution can thrust open the gates to it. Each one walks this way alone, each by himself. Each of us for an hour in his life will have to stand on the Myshkin boundary where truths can cease and begin anew. Each of us must once for an instant in his life experience within himself the same sort of thing that Myshkin experienced in his moments of clairvoyance, such as Dostoevsky himself experienced in those moments when he stood face to face with execution and from which he emerged with the prophet's gaze.