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Keywords

Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alyosha Karamazov, Prince Myshkin, The Brothers Karamazov, The Idiot

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Callaghan McDonough

In his major novels, Fyodor Dostoevsky sought to manifest the consequences of certain ideologies—mainly Christianity and atheism—in narrative form. In 1868, Dostoevsky published *The Idiot*, with the intent of “[depicting] the positively good man,” a sort of perfect imitation of Christ incarnated in modern Russian society (qtd. in Knapp 154). As his writing progressed, Dostoevsky soon discovered—in Myshkin’s ultimate moral failure—that “there is nothing more difficult than [this pursuit] in the world, especially nowadays” (154). Dostoevsky felt that he had not expressed “even a tenth” of what he had intended (qtd. in Miller 22). Twelve years later, Dostoevsky published his magnum opus, *The Brothers Karamazov*, partly as a second attempt at creating a “positively good man” in the character of Alyosha. This time he succeeded; Alyosha became what Myshkin failed to be.

But it can be difficult to see why. How is it that of these two men, each with the loftiest of intentions and each confronting the same world of suffering, Alyosha’s story ends in a spiritual victory, while Myshkin’s ends in spiritual squalor? A close analysis reveals that Alyosha embraces reality and becomes a triumphant Christ figure, rising figuratively above death. In contrast, Myshkin pursues an artistic reflection of reality and never exits the tomb.

I. The First Crossroads: The Inner Person

In Dostoevsky's imaginative world, the narrative Christ figure must confront evil. When any author constructs a Christ figure, equally powerful forces of antagonism must also be introduced. For just as the biblical Christ goes to war against evil and death, so must imitations of Christ battle imitations of these same enemies. In both *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*, Alyosha and Myshkin wrestle with grim manifestations of evil; first, however, they struggle in the abstract. Having just emerged from relative isolation, Alyosha and Myshkin enter society and are forced to engage the philosophical problem of evil. This intellectual challenge foreshadows what is to come in embodied form. For each character's response to *abstract* suffering reveals the manner in which each will later engage *actual* suffering.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha's brother Ivan provides the most explicit atheistic perspective in the novel, and his argument for atheism—in the form of the problem of evil—acts as an abstract antagonist to Alyosha's faith. In its basic form, the problem of evil posits that an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being cannot coexist with evil. Evil clearly exists; therefore, God does not exist. Ivan Karamazov's formulation of this argument is addressed in the following question:

Imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the goal of making people happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but for that it was necessary and unavoidable to torture just one tiny little creation, [a] little child who [is] beating herself on the chest with her little fist, and found this edifice on

her unavenged tears, would you agree to be the architect under such conditions...? (213)

In other words, a loving God would not create a world in which even one child is tortured and killed, regardless of any further ends to be accomplished. If God does exist, Ivan argues, he has created a world of suffering that can never be truly “redeemed,” for no amount of vengeance, hell, forgiveness, or even future happiness can blot out the earthly suffering of children, who endure agony for the sake of their irresponsible Creator’s plan (212). This irresponsible Creator—whether or not he exists—is a being unworthy of worship. Ivan’s visceral and intellectually thorough “rebellion” (204)—of which this episode is only a segment—was, in Dostoevsky’s own words, a more “powerful...expression of...ideas from the atheistic point of view” than any ever seen in Europe (*Notebooks*, qtd. in *The Brothers Karamazov* 667). Much of its power comes from the fact that Dostoevsky constructed his case for atheism using actual historical accounts of child abuse from trials he had read about and attended, producing an effect that has struck many as being potent enough to topple any defense of the divine (209).

Alyosha’s response, however—delivered immediately—suggests that there is a theodicy that can withstand Ivan’s intellectual arsenal: “You said just now, is there a being in the whole world who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? But there is a Being and He can forgive everything, all *and for all*, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything” (*Brothers* 213). Whether or not this is a *sufficient* response to Ivan is beyond the scope of this essay, but Alyosha’s *offering* of this response reveals something fundamental about his character. As he is intimately acquainted

with sickness and poverty by this point, Alyosha possesses a raw understanding of the problem of evil. For him, the problem of evil is not simply an idea, a conflict confined to the mind; it is far more holistic. For this reason, Alyosha points to Christ, understanding him as a being—a living, incarnate person. Furthermore, rather than focusing upon Christ’s teaching, Alyosha focuses upon Christ’s life and death upon the cross. While on earth, Christ was one who cradled lepers, wept with the mourning, and ultimately underwent crucifixion; he knew suffering and resurrection. Following his redemptive sacrifice for humankind, Christ promised to be as spiritually present in humankind’s pain as he was while on earth. As Ivan draws his theoretical argument from historical accounts of suffering, Alyosha responds with what he believes to be a historical account of healing, one that continues to be present. Unlike an abstract theodicy, Alyosha’s “Being” is a living person, active amidst suffering and responsive to the needs of the weeping child. For Alyosha, suffering is not something that can be explained away with a theodicy; it must be tangibly alleviated through human action. This incarnate response stands in contrast to an abstract reflection of existence. As such, whether or not Alyosha provides an adequate response to the problem of evil, his human response reveals the direction he himself has chosen.

In *The Idiot*, the problem of evil arrives through a different medium, that of Hans Holbein’s painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. Ippolit Terentyev, who fills Ivan Karamazov’s role as an advocate of atheism, describes the painting’s emaciated, scarred Christ, his pallor grey, his empty eyes rolling back into his head, saying that “one has the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable, dumb beast,” a “vast modern

machine which has pointlessly seized, dismembered, and devoured, in its blind and insensible fashion, a great and priceless being, a being worth all of nature and all her laws” (430). In his art criticism, Ippolit voices the atheist response to evil; this argument acts an abstract antagonist to Myshkin’s faith. Unlike Ivan’s rebellion, Ippolit rejects God not because of the absurd foundation of humankind’s ultimate harmony, but because of the absurd reality of its ultimate destruction. A nail entering the wrist of an innocent man is definitive and purely physical; no space exists in the painting’s frame for an omni-benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent Artist. In Ippolit’s interpretation, Holbein depicts Christ’s death as senseless, thoughtless, and impersonal. When a person’s life ends—particularly in a horrific manner—this defies any possibility of an all-good, all-powerful God and any possibility of resurrection for humankind. In the overwhelming presence of death, it seems impossible that God is able—or even desires—to continue humankind’s existence beyond this earth. Therefore, the Artist of this life must be indifferent Nature alone. Death, not God, splashes the final black hue of paint. Christ remains in the tomb.

While Alyosha presents a response to Ivan, Myshkin mutely faces Ippolit’s challenge. Indeed, in his own examination of Holbein’s painting, his only comment is, “A man could lose his faith looking at that picture!” (*Idiot* 229). In Platonic terms, while Ivan’s formulation of the problem of evil—being based on historical accounts—is once-removed from reality, Ippolit’s formulation results from a painting and is thus twice-removed from reality. Thus, when Myshkin engages suffering here, he is—epistemologically—a lengthy distance away from real suffering. Alyosha is much closer,

yet he evinces no fear of “[losing] his faith.” How can a mere image dispel a man’s core beliefs? This question becomes more pressing as one observes Myshkin’s frequent and exuberant assertions of commitment to Orthodox Christianity (231, 574-5). In these moments, Myshkin appears to staunchly hold his beliefs to the point of dogmatism. However, when asked directly about his personal faith, Myshkin is evasive (229, 402). Why can Myshkin pontificate about Christianity one moment, but cannot provide a defense when his beliefs are challenged? How can his dogmatic faith be undermined by paint on a canvas?

When one more closely analyzes Myshkin’s orations, the answer becomes evident. Myshkin speaks of the “concept of God,” the “idea of Christ,” “Our Christ” (*Idiot* 231, 575). He presents Christ as an idea (a specifically “Russian” idea), an image, a word that can be spoken, or a banner that one waves above one’s troops. While Alyosha portrays Christ as a three-dimensional, living “Being” who can be personally known, Myshkin provides no evidence of belief in an actual God; he sees a two-dimensional image of Christ (213). For this reason, Holbein’s painting is enough to topple his faith; an image displaces an image. Why is this the case? Just as Myshkin’s cherished beliefs are two-dimensional, so is his inner existence; he lacks the kind of experiential self-knowledge required for spiritual depth. Thus, when confronted by questions of his own being, he possesses no response. These questions concern his reality, and Myshkin’s mind—freshly removed from a Swiss asylum—is still dwelling in the abstract. Unlike Alyosha, who—in response to Ivan—moves from abstract ideas to the gritty reality of the world, specifically in his complex family relations, Myshkin’s

mind remains fixated upon an imagined, artistic reflection of the world. These internal changes—or lack thereof—provide the first inklings of each man’s approaching fate.

II. The Second Crossroads: The Other

The next major crossroads for each protagonist concerns the Other. Each has begun to choose how he will conceptually view the world; now, each must decide how he will view other people—specifically, certain beautiful women in his life. Alyosha’s and Myshkin’s interactions with particular women provide the clearest glimpse into their moral characters, revealing their incarnate solidity or “excarnate” vacuity (cf. Taylor 556).

Alyosha’s father and brothers, in describing the woman Grushenka—for whom they romantically compete—fashion a glamorized caricature. She becomes a kind of sexualized goddess in the imagination of young Alyosha. Continuing the destructive family pattern, Alyosha willfully resolves to wield her as a weapon in his own rebellion against God, following the death of Father Zosima, Alyosha’s mentor. With Grushenka—in a black silk dress—“nestling” like a “kitten” on his lap, Alyosha’s glossy imaginings have come to life (300). The Karamazov (“black smear”) has awoken within Alyosha, and he plans to indulge it, succumbing to the image. In other words, Alyosha plans to engage in a sexual act with Grushenka, but one that defies recognition of the act’s self-giving, other-honoring element; it is intended to be angry, egocentric, and degrading.

But in this “critical moment,” Alyosha allows his expectations to be upended by reality and, as a result, he comes to a deeper understanding

of the Other (*Brothers* 291, cf. Weil 65). Faced with the actual embodied person of Grushenka, Alyosha discerns her kindness and cannot commit the act that his father would; the surname's dominion is limited, and the "Alyosha" ("defender of man") has risen in defense. For the woman before him is exactly that—a woman!—a three-dimensional human person with her own hopes, fears, insecurities, and imperfections. She is not a possession or a conquest or a painting, but a "treasure" (302). The curtain of lust and prejudice is thus torn in two, and Alyosha perceives a "sister" sitting on his knee (305).

In perceiving the reality of another—a selfless pursuit of understanding—Alyosha draws Grushenka into his manner of seeing. In her designs, he, too, had been a conquest—a projection of judgmental purity to be defiled (*Brothers* 301). Alyosha was to be her rebellion, not against God, but against the other Karamazov men, who seek to control her, and Alyosha, who she believes has judged her (304).

But Alyosha's attention prompts reciprocation. Her remorse upon learning of Zosima's death, followed by her leaping from his knee in shame, displays authenticity, not manipulation. Something remarkable has occurred, and it is a turning point for both characters, but especially for Alyosha. With the subsequent forming of a relationship—the two becoming siblings in suffering—each is drawn from their shadowy projections into a very earthbound intimacy. In becoming proximate to each other—and truly attending to each other—object becomes person, and person becomes family. Alyosha has learned to move from abstraction to reality, appearance to being. In his previous fear of evil, Alyosha had hidden behind monastery

walls; now he emerges from within the monastery of his own mind. He expected to find “treasure” only in those like Zosima: the “saints” (*Brothers* 302). In his interaction with Grushenka, however, he learns that beauty and goodness can be found even in one who shoulders the societal yoke of “sinner.” Alyosha discovers that when he embraces others’ embodied realities—in this case, quite literally—he may find the joy of a mutually-redeeming relationship.

But where Alyosha succeeds, Myshkin fails. As Myshkin becomes further entrenched in Russian society, the face of Christ is not the only image vying for his devotion. He is also confronted by the portrait of the breathtaking Nastasya. Myshkin’s strange, impulsive response to his first viewing of this image—the kiss—cannot be over-emphasized (*Idiot* 85). In Myshkin’s kiss on the canvas, he pledges himself to the fictional image. Why does Myshkin kiss the portrait but gaze in stupefaction at the actual woman? The answer is simple: for Myshkin, the portrait *is*—in almost every sense—the woman. Myshkin’s enraptured gaze rests on a two-dimensional projection.

Indeed, Myshkin—“afraid to look at [women]”—never truly does (*Idiot* 82). Throughout the novel, Nastasya’s actual behavior conflicts with the beauty of her portrait, and Myshkin is unable to reconcile the difference (124). Seeing a created image, he imposes this created image on the actual person. As a result, Myshkin is voluntarily blind to Nastasya’s reality. “In you everything is perfection...no one would wish to see you different,” he tells her, a statement that—while flattering—is far from the truth (148). Nastasya is not the only victim of Myshkin’s blindness. Aglaya, too, is one

wondrous “portrait” that he sees “as an object a mile away from where he is” (364). Existing at a permanent distance from the knowledge of Aglaya’s and Nastasya’s actual natures—their intricacies, flaws, and desires—Myshkin objectifies and idealizes them. Unlike Alyosha, who develops a proximate and physical connection to a fully-realized, flesh-and-blood woman, Myshkin sees women as installations in an art gallery.

Myshkin’s inability to see women as persons is ultimately the result of fear. As Myshkin says, he is afraid to look at Aglaya’s face (*Idiot* 82), and he says, “I cannot bear Nastasya Filippovna’s face...I’m afraid of her face!” (616-7). He much prefers to gaze upon the women’s portraits than to meet their eyes, as he fears the intimacy of an actual relationship. For this reason, he objectifies Nastasya and Aglaya, seeing them as portraits even when he is with them. He would prefer not to discover their imperfections through a relationship; rather, if they can remain “stopping points,” colorful idols with a manufactured façade of perfection, he can continue to worship them—from a safe distance (Marion 10-11). Just as he replaced Christ with an image, so he does with women.

For this is Myshkin’s desire: to worship his idea of each woman, or more specifically, each woman’s beauty. Myshkin is profoundly moved by beauty; it has the power of salvation over him (*Idiot* 402). Rowan Williams calls Myshkin a “man with no history” (51). Myshkin does possess a history, however; it is simply a history of alienation. In Russian society, he remains as much an “outcast” from the “chorus” of life as he was in the Swiss asylum; thus, he is seeking an entry point into the world (*Idiot* 446). “Beauty” becomes this entry point. But when Myshkin sees Nastasya or Aglaya, he

experiences a feeling, and he calls this “beauty.” When he pursues beauty, he is—in actuality—pursuing the feeling that results from seeing the woman; he is not pursuing the woman herself. As a result, he loves like a “disembodied spirit,” a ghost worshipping a mirage (617). He can kiss Nastasya’s two-dimensional portrait—and later, Aglaya’s love letter—but never the three-dimensional woman (85, 380). Each kiss is an attempt to be swallowed up by beauty, to achieve a “profound experience of infinite happiness” (238). But what he truly needs and desires is an intimate relationship. While Alyosha is willing to be “spiritually completed by others” through a relationship (Wyman 177), Myshkin is indecisive, unable to commit to either Aglaya or Nastasya; he tells Yevgeni Pavlovich that he wants to love them both (*Idiot* 617). Both women are tortured by this lack of commitment. Myshkin, however, does not recognize his fault, for how does one commit to a picture?

As before, Myshkin is longing to escape his dreamlike reality, but he continues to doggedly chase dreams. He longs to be “saved by beauty,” but his beauty is not salvific or an antidote to alienation (*Idiot* 402). Perceiving human beings as pictures imprisons him in a kind of solipsism, surrounded by moving images crossing the retina. At this point in our analysis, this is Myshkin’s fate. Coming into St. Petersburg, he says, “I have no experience of women at all” (14). After months in Russia, he still has none.

III. The Final Crossroads: Engaging the World

Thus far, we have analyzed two crossroads on Myshkin’s and Alyosha’s respective paths—paths leading toward their contrasting fates. We have seen how each man views his world and how each views other specific

individuals in his life. In reality, these have been paths to potential incarnation. As Christ was to become actually incarnate in the world, so each Christ figure is to become incarnate in Dostoevsky's narrative world. At each crossroads, the underlying question has been: will each Christ figure move toward becoming incarnate in his narrative world? Will each see the reality of suffering not only abstractly but also in embodied persons?

Now, we arrive at the final crossroads on this path to incarnation. Will Alyosha and Myshkin fully *enter* the world? Possessing a view of reality, will they now *engage* in that reality? The previous crossroads focused upon each man's perceptions; here we focus on their actions. We have seen the beginnings of each man's interactions with others, Alyosha's being more positive than Myshkin's. However, at this third crossroads, each man ultimately decides who he will become—a man of action, or a man of dreams.

The monastery garden is the site of Alyosha's successful incarnation as a Christ figure. In Grushenka, Alyosha has glimpsed reality through the forging of a deep relationship. However, in her reality he has also witnessed pain. Upon his return to the monastery, we can understand Alyosha as confronting the question that has dominated his life since his return to Skotoprigonevsk. He has chosen the monastic path partly as a desire to escape from suffering; now, he must ask himself whether his entire life will be one of comfortable isolation. Father Païssy's juxtaposed reading reveals that Christ's first miracle occurred in Cana of Galilee; there, Christ had to decide whether it was time to make himself known to society and enter public life. Alyosha, perhaps, realizes that he, too, faces this choice. Clear, pure water is life-giving, but Christ chose to transform it into the more worldly and rich-

er wine, which brought gladness to the world. Will Alyosha do the same?

Alyosha's dream represents a temporary relapse into a state of safe unconsciousness, yet even there, reality beckons in the form of a vision to which Alyosha responds. The stars offer him a future of contemplation. Casting aside that hope, however, Alyosha chooses instead to embrace the earth. He even kisses the soil—earthy actuality (not a painted portrait). Alyosha knows that with this embrace will come suffering; he weeps over the earth, and all who are in it, for he loves them. Yet in embracing the finite, he has also received the ecstasy of the infinite; the “vault of heaven” has entered his soul (*Brothers* 312). Like a Kierkegaardian knight of faith, he “makes the movement of infinity and [gets] finitude out of it;” he lowers his eyes from the skies in order to express the “sublime in the pedestrian” (Kierkegaard 70). Here, Alyosha has embraced the real and received the exaltation of dreams. Thus, when he rises up and leaves the monastery—reflecting his dream of the risen Christ—he does so as a “resolute champion” (*Brothers* 312). A champion over his previous fear and voluntary blindness, he has indeed acquired a greater resolution and become the fully incarnate Christ figure that he will remain for the rest of the narrative.

In contrast, the Yepanchin family's dinner party is the site of Myshkin's failed incarnation. Like Alyosha in the monastery, Myshkin stands on the edge, looking out upon a world that promises harm. Alyosha has made a deep connection with a person in that world—Grushenka—but Myshkin possesses no such connection; he is adrift. His situation harkens back to his condition in Switzerland; as he stands in the corner of the party, observing this “grand festival,” he continues to fear that he will remain an

outcast (*Idiot* 446). As then, he continues to “comprehend nothing” (446). Myshkin has no suspicion of concealed undercurrents of ulterior motives, corrupt histories, secret hatreds. His eyes dwell on the “superb artistic veneer” of everything (564). He does not suspect that this veneer might cover the lid of a coffin, concealing stale, rotting air. Distracted by society’s golden façade, he fails to comprehend its essence. As Myshkin treats the women in his life, so he treats the world.

Myshkin is, however, increasingly desperate to enter reality, to make a human connection. “Choked with goodness” at the beauty that surrounds him, he longs to embrace the world as Alyosha does (*Idiot* 572). He longs to experience “fusion with the supreme synthesis of life,” like the wholeness Alyosha finds (237). But when he attempts to engage the other party guests, he unleashes a boisterous diatribe against the Catholic Church and asserts the preeminence of the Russian Orthodox Church. He longs to know others and to be known, but when he opens his mouth, a torrent of nationalistic ideology emerges. Seeing society as a beautiful two-dimensional image, and approaching it in fear, he can only engage it with abstract ideas. Just as Myshkin treats God as an intangible concept or image, so he also treats the world.

When Myshkin finally lapses into unconsciousness, the physical parallels the spiritual. Myshkin inwardly withdraws from reality, and his true self remains hidden from those who might know him. His inner nature—once only revealed through his understanding of God—is now being manifested in his interactions, first with specific individuals, and now with society. In his fear, Myshkin has seen only images and contributed

only ideas; he has thus failed to engage reality. The would-be “Christ figure” never becomes incarnate.

Yet, incarnate or not, Alyosha and Myshkin must complete the Christ narrative.

IV. Gethsemane

Shortly before the crucifixion, Christ prays on his knees in the garden of Gethsemane. He beseeches, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (*Holy Bible*, Matt. 26:39). In this moment, Christ is determining whether or not he must bear the cross, suffering for the sake of love. Determining that he must, Christ then goes on to endure Calvary, dying by crucifixion; three days later, he emerges resurrected from the tomb. Toward the ends of *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Myshkin and Alyosha enter their own gardens of Gethsemane. But while Christ determined whether or not to bear his cross, each Christ figure must decide *how* to bear it; for each, the cross is inevitable. Each man’s decision in his “Gethsemane” determines the nature of his Calvary, and ultimately, his duration in the tomb.

We can interpret Alyosha’s and Myshkin’s Gethsemanes as being the homes of Lise Khokhlakova and Nastasya Fillipovna, respectively. Here, Alyosha stands before Lise—the “little demon”—who bears fragments of their broken betrothal (*Brothers* 489). Myshkin, on the contrary, beholds not an aftermath but a potentiality, with two polar paths before his feet. He considers Aglaya, whose character promises consistent attachment, and, simultaneously, Nastasya, whose turbulent nature promises a flux between

intimacy and alienation. For Alyosha and Myshkin both, a crucial time of decision has arrived.

The decision that unites each of these scenes, such that both can be called “Gethsemane,” is the following: Christ asked for reprieve in the garden of Gethsemane. He did not want the cross; he wanted its redemptive result. Suffering was not an end; it was a means to a greater end: love. In Dostoevsky’s Christ figures’ Gethsemanes, each must determine his own ultimate purpose. Will he bear the cross for the sake of love, or for the sake of suffering as a perverse end in itself?

Alyosha, when he abandons his novice’s cassock, does so realizing that suffering accompanies love; with Lise, however, he realizes that suffering—simply for suffering’s sake—is not something to choose either. Alyosha desires to heal Lise of her anguish. As with Grushenka, he is “kenotically attentive” to her, humbly emptying himself so that he can receive her reality (Contino 69). He promises to always love and weep for her; the two actions will be inseparable, for his love of her tortured soul will cause him to suffer. He recognizes, however, that he cannot heal her tortured soul by marrying her. To do so, in effect, would be to marry her suffering—to chain himself to it. For it would be pity, not romance, that would bind Alyosha to Lise now. This urge of pity would ultimately dishonor her and destroy him. Here, unlike with Grushenka, it is distance, as opposed to proximity, which allows for love—love of both Lise and himself. In order to love both Lise and himself, he must stay whole, and commitment to her would require that he be torn asunder. For this reason, when forced out the door, he leaves. In effect, this final action begins Alyosha’s Calvary. Alyosha bears the

cross of Lise's suffering, the natural consequence of his love for her. However, he does not choose to bear this cross in a way that will destroy him. He is a Christ figure, not Christ; he can accept the cross, but in order to rise again, he cannot cling to it.

On the contrary, Myshkin plans to marry himself to the suffering Nastasya. Faced with a choice between a woman who offers simple love—Aglaya—and a woman who offers passionate suffering—Nastasya—he chooses the latter. Here, Myshkin again falls prey to a kind of aesthetic “intoxication,” whereby he continues to pursue beautiful images (*Idiot* 614). Myshkin is seduced by others' picturesque suffering. It is not only Nastasya's beauty that holds him spellbound, but also the “great deal of suffering” in her face (85). His desire to witness suffering is partly driven by a kind of visceral urge to experience pain, and, ultimately, to see death, because death appears beautiful. This morbid passion for Nastasya, akin to Myshkin's morbid interest in the Holbein, reveals a psychological pattern that will culminate in his ultimate end in Rogozhin's house, with his final attraction to both the dead Nastasya and her murderer reflecting the novel's earlier foreshadowing.

But while Myshkin is enchanted by the aesthetic nature of suffering, he is not content simply to observe it; he wants to heal it. He is drawn to Nastasya as to a “pitiful, ailing child,” not unlike his earlier interactions with Marie in Switzerland (*Idiot* 624). Myshkin himself believes that he loves Nastasya out of “pity” and “compassion” (458), “not love” (218). But in order to heal this suffering, Myshkin oversteps the bounds of pity. Instead, he attempts to heal *through* suffering. This urge seems to be a strain

of *nadryv*—a psychological phenomenon observed throughout Dostoevsky’s works. As Robert L. Belknap explains, “*Nadryv* has been rendered as ‘laceration,’ and is derived from *rvat*, to ‘rend,’ ‘tear,’ ‘burst,’ ‘split’... *nadryv* causes a person to hurt himself in order to hurt others, or, perversely, to hurt others in order to hurt himself” (37-8). Edward Wasiolek further observes, “*Nadryv* is for Dostoevsky a purposeful and pleasurable self-hurt. . . . a primal psychological fact. It is the impulse in the hearts of men that separates one man from another” (160). Unlike typical *nadryv*, Myshkin has no intention of harming others; he does, however, have every intention of harming himself. His love is a kind of lacerative, romantic love, whereby he desires to help “the suffering” so much that he will undergo unnecessary suffering; this healing-by-*nadryv* goes well beyond what is required or even possible.

Why choose to suffer? Myshkin mistakenly views suffering as his final opportunity for incarnation. On some level, he recognizes that incarnation requires love. And he believes that suffering, in itself, will be the means to love. In Myshkin’s mind, if it does not hurt, it is not love. Thus, in a final act of desperation, he decides to tortuously indulge in suffering in order to enter and save the world. He chooses crucifixion, by itself, in order to achieve liberation from his perpetual loneliness. But suffering does not end Myshkin’s alienation; he wounds himself in order to heal others, yet, being wounded, he requires healing himself. Aglaya presents this opportunity to Myshkin. Aglaya offers a peaceful and intimate relationship, one that would free him from his solipsistic prison. Instead, he chooses to marry an inconstant and tormented woman. He bears a cross that will devour him.

The love of Christ that accepts suffering is Alyosha's initial answer to Ivan's challenge. In responding to Lise's suffering, Alyosha embodies this response: he bears the cross of suffering out of love—choosing love and accepting suffering. On the contrary, Myshkin bears the cross in order to find love. As a result, he chooses suffering in itself, and denies love. Inflicting suffering on himself—partly in an attempt to battle evil and suffering—he actually compounds the problem of evil. For this self-inflicted suffering, too, may require a theodicy. In this attitude, one chooses the cross when offered a simpler and equally effective option. One chooses Christ in the tomb over Christ resurrected. This tomb is each man's ultimate fate.

V. The Entombed Christ and the Risen Christ

Alyosha and Myshkin, having now accepted their crosses, reach Calvary. Arriving there, each re-discovers the problem of evil, but now in its real, incarnate form, the form in which it was embraced by Christ.

At the funeral of Ilyusha, Ivan's argument symbolically comes to life. Where before Alyosha philosophized about child suffering, he now stands in its presence. The twelve grieving children demand a response. Can Alyosha now offer an adequate response? This is Alyosha's final test. Standing beside the stone under which Ilyusha was initially to be buried, Alyosha begins to encourage the children. "Let us remember his face, and his clothes, and his poor little boots," he exhorts (*Brothers* 646). "Don't run from reality," he seems to be saying, "Don't let grief drive you into forgetting your friend." Even as he encourages them to face their current reality, however, Alyosha also urges them to anticipate a future reality, that of the life to

come: “Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other and gladly, joyfully will tell each other all that has happened” (646). Like Christ, Alyosha, the “resolute champion,” stands next to a stone under which no corpse resides. He brings hope to the myopic in the presence of the grave. And at the end of the novel, he walks out of the graveyard. The figurative Christ has entered the tomb and emerged again, bringing life to the twelve figurative disciples who surround him.

Myshkin, too, enters a tomb: Rogozhin’s house. With the discovery of Nastasya’s corpse, the sepulchral element of Holbein’s painting has come to life, though the painting lacks its primary subject. Can Myshkin respond where he could not before? He cannot, and he remains entombed. Seeing such aesthetically beautiful suffering, he is mesmerized. Lured by the dark glow of this living portrait, he longs to be consumed by it, to become for a moment a brilliant, dancing ash. Thinking he is pursuing reality, Myshkin has always been preparing to return to the Holbein portrait. He leaves Switzerland like an image stepping from a frame. Yet he continues to see the world as an artwork, populated with beautiful images. He seeks to engage with picturesque pain through the emotional turmoil of self-inflicted suffering, but only becomes more distant. Ultimately, Myshkin’s final act is consistent with this pattern. In the novel’s final scene, Myshkin strokes the face of Rogozhin, Nastasya’s murderer, and slips into insanity (*Idiot* 648). Thus, he becomes the subject of his own painting, the dead Christ of Holbein.

In *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky sought to incarnate two Christ figures. One man—Myshkin—stands at a distance, beholding the world as a portrait that he both loves and fears. Ultimately,

this man chooses death for fear of life, and Dostoevsky returns him to his frame—a dead image. The other man—Alyosha—“falls to the ground” like a kernel of wheat (*Holy Bible*, John 12:24). Literally and figuratively, he kisses the earth, finding both seeds of faith and the ashes of suffering. It is for this realist embrace that, in the end, he rises as new wheat by the hand of Dostoevsky.

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