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Prince Myshkin as a Tragic Interpretation of Don Quixote

SLAV N. GRATCHEV

SURPRISINGLY, WHILE VIRTUALLY NO one doubts Fyodor Dostoevsky's profound and direct indebtedness to Miguel de Cervantes in *The Idiot*, manifested in the obvious connection between Don Quixote and Prince Myshkin, no one yet has fully analyzed both how and why Myshkin—a character more dialogically elaborate and versatile than Don Quixote—turned out to be more limited in literary expressivity than his more “monological” counterpart. The essay seeks to remedy this analytical absence but focusing on just how the realness of Dostoevsky's hero became a weakened version of Cervantes's monologic character, and thus how this weakened realness negatively affects Myshkin's literary answerability.

When the 26-year-old Prince Myshkin returns to Russia after spending several years at a Swiss sanatorium, he finds himself at the center of attention, an attention that he never intended to have. The society of St. Petersburg, the Russian capital, obsessed with money, power, and sexual conquest, immediately abuses his trusting nature and naiveté. The Prince's ardent struggle to save the life of a beautiful and abused woman, and his struggle to save the soul of another virtuous young girl, become the motor of the plot. Unfortunately, Myshkin's goodness precipitates disaster: in this world where money and power dictate everything, a sanatorium may be the only place for a saint.

To explain the “discrepancy” in the Quixote–Myshkin identity, we will take Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of “answerability” as a point of reference. Bakhtin defines this notion as a natural unity of art and life that is brought together in the literary text by the will of the author:

The three domains of human culture —science, art, and life— gain unity only in the individual person who integrates them into his own unity. [...] But what guarantees the inner connection of the constituent elements of a person? Only the unity of answerability” (*Art and Answerability* 1).

I would like to expand Bakhtin’s definition here by arguing that answerability can also be defined as the fine ability of principal character to cope with reality while this character attempts to establish a personal relationship with this reality. If this ability is hampered or destroyed, the results are usually quite tragic for the literary character.

The figure who most often hampers this ability of the character to cope with reality is the author. This happens because the author tries constantly to be in two places at once: flying loose with wild imagination and staying grounded so as not to break ties with the reality that is being reconstructed in the literary work. Thus, according to Bakhtin, what the author can do to preserve the answerability of the character is to unite life and art together in the character; in other words, to create a so-called communicative ring that will achieve the desired answerability in the constant dialogue among the three main components—life, art, and the character.

Most of the time, the problem arises when the character, even a thoroughly dialogical character like Prince Myshkin, tries to achieve the desired answerability and cannot do it. The character cannot do this due to excessive “processing” by the author, a heavy processing almost that invariably harms the “natural goodness” of any literary character. In other words, the character’s answerability can be harmed when its literary personality is carefully calculated or carefully programmed by the author. To explain the phenomenon of how the thoroughly dialogical character, Prince Myshkin, fails in answerability (as defined above as his fine ability to cope with reality) compared to his “monological” counterpart, Don Quixote, we need to revisit both characters and look at them through a different optic—the optic of dialogism.

Writing *The Idiot* came hard for Dostoevsky. He passed six months in deep contemplation about the character before finally putting his

first lines to paper. This long delay was quite unusual for Dostoevsky, who often worked under severe financial pressure, but this time he could not be rushed.¹ Again and again he changed the plan of the novel, but none of these numerous modifications seemed to satisfy him.² As Edward Wasiolek notes, the reason, perhaps, for such a laborious quest was that “*The Idiot* for Dostoevsky lay at the end of arduous and exasperating technical experimentation” (Wasiolek 9). Such experimentation, in fact, was one of the factors that brought *The Idiot* into such proximity with *Don Quixote*, one of the most experimental novels of all time. In contrast to Cervantes, however, Dostoevsky was experimenting not only with the technical aspects of the novelistic form, but he was also experimenting with the spiritual wholeness and answerability of Prince Myshkin.

Dostoevsky’s letters, as well as his preparatory material, reveal his careful reading of Cervantes, and through this reading Dostoevsky certainly came to see some of the literary weaknesses of Myshkin. But at the same time he never came to understand what hampered the answerability of the “positively good man” that he endeavored to portray, which thus reduced the level of his own literary expressivity. We find the following note in Dostoevsky’s letters: “Of the beautiful people in Christian literature Don Quixote stands as the most complete. But he is only beautiful because he is ridiculous at the same time [...] and effective in fact of that. [...] I have nothing like that, absolutely nothing” (*Letters* 3: 17).

This issue would be easy to resolve if art were not, as Bakhtin argues, so “self-confident, audaciously self-confident, and too high-flown, for it is in no way bound to answer for life” (*Art and Answerability* 1), or if Myshkin—who, ironically, Dostoevsky conceived as one of most perfected literary characters—had not turned out to be one of the least ex-

1 In 1867, for example, Dostoevsky signed a new contract with a publisher who demanded a new novel be written by the end of the month. There were only twenty-six days left. Dostoevsky hired a young secretary (who later became his wife) to help him to write the novel. In those twenty-six days he completed *The Gambler*, which was immediately recognized as one of the most significant achievements of the Russian realist novel.

2 On this, see Bagno (“*El Quijote*” and *Dorogami DON KIKHOTA*).

pressive and least answerable of all Dostoevsky's characters.³ Myshkin in and of himself needed to reconcile all the "irreconcilable differences" that exist between art and life. Instead, what Dostoevsky created was an artificial literary conglomerate consisting of man and God, who, naturally, never would be able to become either of these. Thus, the divorce between art and life became inevitable regardless of how much effort the "judge" was ready to make to reconcile the parties.

The issue, in fact, was irresolvable from the very start: Dostoevsky, while being what Bakhtin called the "creator of a polyphonic novel" (*Problems* 4), has always been and always remained an unquestionable dictator within his own literary universe, never able to get beyond the realms of his own philosophical world where his "positively good man" must be portrayed only and exclusively as a Christ-like person resembling Don Quixote: "About three weeks ago I tackled another novel. [...] The idea of the novel is to portray a *positively beautiful person*. There is nothing more difficult than that in the whole world, and especially now. [...] I will just mention that *of the beautiful people in Christian literature Don Quixote stands as the most complete*" (*Letters* 3: 17; my emphasis).

Dostoevsky's preoccupation with Prince Myshkin's not being ridiculous—"I have nothing like that, absolutely nothing" (*Letters* 3: 17)—also meant for him, perhaps, that Myshkin never could be either "positively beautiful" or "the most complete." Certainly, in Dostoevsky's view, this important element—ridiculousness—was perfectly elaborated by Cervantes, and he attributes this element to the superior literary quality of Cervantes's title character, whose answerability was able to endure the harsh reality of life as well as the demanding aesthetic of art. But if Dostoevsky attributed so much importance to the ability of this character to be ridiculous while still maintaining his literarily answerability and ability to cope with reality, why did he not do anything to remedy the situation in *The Idiot*? Did Dostoevsky ever want Myshkin to be ridiculous? Was this character predestined, perhaps, to

3 The list of Dostoevsky's novels is too extensive to be cited here in full, but the so-called "major" novels include: *The Double* (1846), *The House of the Dead* (1862), *Notes from the Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Gambler* (1867), *The Idiot* (1869), *Demons* (1872), *The Adolescent* (1875), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

become the tragic interpretation of Cervantes's Don Quixote? Perhaps Dostoevsky did want such an outcome: "he is only beautiful because he is ridiculous at the same time [...] and effective in fact of that" (*Letters* 3: 17). Dostoevsky wanted Myshkin to be ridiculous, at least at times, but he was afraid to fashion him this way, given that Myshkin was conceived, from the very beginning, as a Christ-like figure. And Christ for Dostoevsky could never have been ridiculous. So personal and so intimate was Dostoevsky's attitude toward Christ that it would have never occurred to him to represent Myshkin in this way, and we should thus look for the roots of Myshkin's keen Christ-like spirituality in Dostoevsky's attitude toward Christ.

The personal, almost intimate, relationship between Dostoevsky and Myshkin practically mirrored the particular relationship between Dostoevsky and Christ. For Dostoevsky, Christ was always a big mystery and an unachievable ideal that could exist only as an idea. Christ could be anything except comical. Christ could be ridiculed, and so was Myshkin. Christ could be beaten with stones, and so was the prince. Christ could be betrayed by his most trusted people, and so was Myshkin. But Christ could never be comical, and this is the core problem for Dostoevsky: Myshkin—conceived and elaborated as a double of Christ—could not be comical either. Realizing this impossibility in advance, Dostoevsky deliberately sacrificed Myshkin's answerability and thus significantly weakened his complex dialogical character. As a result, Myshkin fell short in "realness" in comparison with the monologic but irresistibly "wholesome" Don Quixote. But since Myshkin was also a double of Don Quixote (who was all-too comical and, consequently, extremely real), he did not turn out real at all. Myshkin's intentional doubleness, of which Dostoevsky was fully cognizant, created numerous deficiencies for the character and, eventually, undermined his literary answerability.

Dostoevsky did not find a solution to this problem: he thus portrayed Myshkin according to his understanding of Christ as well as his admiration of Don Quixote as the most beautiful person in Christian literature. Had Dostoevsky chosen to make the literary duo Quixote–Myshkin his principal model, Myshkin, perhaps, might have turned

out much more real as an individual and much more answerable as a literary personage. But, by choosing the duo Christ–Myshkin as his model, Dostoevsky preserved his own understanding of Christ and hampered Myshkin’s literary answerability in the process. By endowing Myshkin with a double orientation toward both the human (Don Quixote) and the divine (Christ), Dostoevsky ultimately gave his character too much burden to carry; he assigned Myshkin an impossible task, and the fragile consciousness of the character tragically failed.

Yevgeny Pavlovich took the warmest interest in the fate of the unfortunate ‘idiot,’ and in consequence of his efforts and care the prince ended up back abroad, in Schneider’s clinic in Switzerland. [...] [Q]uite often, at least once every few months, he visits his sick friend but Schneider frowns and shakes his head; he hints at a complete derangement of the mental organs; he does not yet speak in the affirmative of incurability, but permits himself the most melancholy allusions. (*The Idiot* 716)

Vsevolod Bagno, one of the prominent Russian scholars of Cervantes, also perceived in Prince Myshkin “una de las más profundas y más trágicas interpretaciones del *Quijote*” (“El *Quijote*” 265). Regretfully, Bagno did not explain this interesting notion, nor did he consider the double orientation of Myshkin as a main cause for his reduced literary answerability. In fact, Bagno’s interpretation leaves us wondering whether Dostoevsky really conceived Myshkin as a tragic interpretation of Don Quixote, or whether he conceived Myshkin as a human representation of Christ. Perhaps he conceived Myshkin as the Hegelian “antithesis” of Don Quixote, as a “Christ-enriched” literary substitute for the immortal Alonso Quijano el Bueno, who long ago, Cervantes tells us, “dio su espíritu, quiero decir que se murió” (2.74:607)?⁴

4 We refer here to the famous triad that is often used to describe the thought of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, where thesis is an intellectual proposition, the antithesis is simply a negation of the thesis, and the synthesis resolves the conflict between them by reconciling their common truths. However, here I want to stress that the Greek prefix “anti” does not merely designate opposition, but it can also mean “in place of.”

As is seen from his letters, Dostoevsky knew in advance that this comic element would never become a part of Myshkin's literary image, and he was afraid that, because of the lack of this important element, the book might be "an absolute failure" (*Letters* 3: 17). To avoid this "failure" Dostoevsky re-accentuates the literary character he most admires, Don Quixote, by replacing Don Quixote with a thoroughly dialogical literary character who is nevertheless burdened at the same time by a strong orientation toward Christ. This new Christ-like character, charged by a double orientation, would become an extremely tragic figure—indeed "one of the most profound and most tragic interpretations" of Cervantes's character (*Letters* 3: 17).

Despite all this, the thoroughly dialogical nature of Myshkin against all odds allowed the necessary coexistence of a comic element within a tragedy of his whole existence. Aglaya Epanchina, the only distant relative that Myshkin has in Saint Petersburg, laughs at him at first but then becomes one who celebrates his human beauty: "At first I laughed, but now I love the 'poor knight,' and admire his exploits" (*The Idiot* 291).⁵ Her intricate and highly complex relationship with Myshkin intensifies the plot tremendously: this "new Dulcinea" loves her "Russian Don Quixote" to death and would be ready to follow him to Calvary Hill, if he ever asked her to. Myshkin, however, feels obligated to defend the honor of another woman, Nastacia Filippovna. And to save her he would sacrifice his life, if need be, and all this he would do just out of pity for her—for love, exactly like Christ. On behalf of that lost woman who, he thinks, is in need of help, Myshkin rejects Aglaya's love:

I must also say to you that I have never in my life met a man resembling him in noble simplicity and unlimited trustfulness. I guessed after his words that anyone who wanted to could deceive him, and that whoever deceived him he would later forgive, and that was why I fell in love with him. (*The Idiot* 662)

⁵ Aglaya is the youngest of three daughters of General Yepanchin. She is the most beautiful and the most rebellious of all, and she is the one who falls in love with Myshkin.

As Myshkin soon discovers, there is tragedy here around every corner. And wherever he turns there is pain and suffering, and he does not know whose pain he has to attend to first. Myshkin's quixotic quest—to save Nastacia Filippovna by marrying her—ends up tragically for all three of them: Aglaya cannot eradicate her human jealousy, while Nastacia Filippovna never could measure up to Myshkin's ideal. In a final attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, Myshkin scolds Aglaya for not understanding his Christ-like behavior.

“He has already told me that he hates you...” Aglaya barely managed to mouth.

“Perhaps; perhaps I am not worthy of him, but...but I think you are lying! It is not possible that he hates me, and he could not have said that.”

“Aglaya, stop it! I mean, it is not fair!” exclaimed the prince, like a man who was lost. (*The Idiot* 665)

Dostoevsky's fascination with Christ, whose unachievable ideal cannot be attained even by a literary character, obliterated Dostoevsky's perception of the realness of Myshkin's character and eventually brought him to “failure.”

The idea of the novel is an old and favorite one of mine, but such a hard one that for a long time I did not dare to take it up, and if I have taken it up now, then absolutely because I was in a nearly desperate situation. The main idea of the novel is to portray a positively beautiful person. There is nothing more difficult than that in the world, and especially now. All the writers, and not just ours, but even all the European writers, whoever undertook this depiction of the positively beautiful person, always had to pass. Because it's a measureless task. The beautiful is an ideal, and the ideal—both ours or that of civilized Europe—is far from having been achieved. There's only one positively beautiful person in the world—Christ, so that the appearance of this measurelessly, infinitely beautiful person is in fact of course an infinite miracle. (*Letters* 3: 17)

It is clear that the idea of redemption permeates the personality of Myshkin—something that is entirely absent in Don Quixote—while the image of Christ looms over his shoulder. This is what creates the problem of Myshkin’s literary answerability: Christ is and always will be the ideal, Dostoevsky insists, “both ours or that of civilized Europe,” adding that the ideal “is far from having been achieved” (*Letters* 3: 17). Consequently, Dostoevsky could not finalize a proportionate image of Myshkin that would be real and answerable, and Myshkin will thus always be just a mere double of Christ and, consequently, unreal for life and artificial for art.

This is what conditioned Myshkin’s shift from Dostoevsky’s intended realness toward the programmability that, like a centrifugal force, immediately unbalanced the image’s answerability. To counterbalance this instability, Dostoevsky needed to find a centripetal force that, by working against the first one, would help to balance the image and bring it to its intended stability: the character that “in Christian literature stands as the most complete”—Don Quixote. This provincial hidalgo—who, Cervantes tells us, “vino a dar en el más extraño pensamiento que jamás dio loco en el mundo, y fue que le pareció conveniente y necesario, así para el aumento de su honra como para el servicio de su república, hacerse caballero andante” (1.1:79)—served as a model that helped Dostoevsky preserve both Myshkin’s answerability and, to a certain degree, his realness.

In *The Idiot*, the perfect-to-be novel, Christ always remained Dostoevsky’s main preoccupation. But to ensure the realness of Myshkin and to achieve a greater degree of his literary answerability, Dostoevsky tried to make him more human, like Don Quixote. Myshkin’s pure and idealistic attitude toward the world is certainly derived from Christ. He, like Christ, is gentle and submissive. But Myshkin’s submissiveness is due to his innocence and naïveté. Christ was also meek, but not through innocence: more than anyone he was cognizant of humanity, of its weak nature, its restless souls. This earthly wisdom made Christ powerful and efficient in everything he did. But while Myshkin shares with Christ similar aspects of personality that in theory should have

connected him with Christ, in reality, these aspects only weakened Myshkin's realness and hampered his literary answerability.

In trying to offset these shortcomings and humanize his character, Dostoevsky looked to Don Quixote—whose message about love to mankind was also wasted, and who, like Myshkin, was ridiculed, mocked, stoned, and loved—as the human model of Myshkin. Their common ineffectiveness in the face of reality is what made them literary twins more than anything. These two processes—the humanization and divinization of Myshkin—did not go hand in hand, as Dostoevsky probably intended. Myshkin, while losing his connection with Christ, could still not maintain his connection with Don Quixote either, and the character that was initially conceived as a happy marriage of two models eventually lost the intimate connection to both of them.

It is inexplicable why in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, when the intellectual milieu was so perfectly amenable to an amalgamation of both models in one “beautiful person,” this merger did not happen. According to Yakov Malkiel, Russian intellectuals of the nineteenth century were keenly sensitive to new ideas, and they were very interested in the vexing problem of the individual's place in the society, so this potential amalgamation of the two most significant images of the Western culture was something to expect.

To these readers Cervantes as the towering personality torn between mutually exclusive careers and conflicting artistic loyalties hardly existed; nor did the full content of his multilevel novel [...]. What mattered primarily and was regarded as Cervantes' flash of genius was the amalgamation into a single type, forcefully delineated and picturesquely named (if Quixote amused the author's compatriots, foreigners derived satisfaction from Don, suggestive of a quaint charm of nobility) [...]. Cervantes' chief claim to Russian gratitude rested upon this masterly telescoping, upon his skill in finding a label for an increasingly important, disquieting human type previously unidentified: the day-dreamer surrounded by an unromantic world. (Malkiel 310)

According to the text, Dostoevsky accepted the idea of amalgamation. While Don Quixote was just a day-dreamer who felt obligated to restore a Golden Age to a troubled world, his Russian twin Myshkin was more of a Christ figure who would never confuse windmills for giants: “‘An astonishing face!’ the prince replied. ‘And I am certain that her fate is not of extraordinary kind. Her face is cheerful, but she has suffered dreadfully [...]. Her eyes betray it [...]. It is a proud face, dreadfully proud and I simply cannot tell if she is good or not. Oh, if only she were good! It would redeem everything!’” (*The Idiot* 43).

Unlike Don Quixote, Myshkin is well aware of who he is, as well as of his own personal shortcomings.

“And would you marry that sort of woman?” Ganya continued, keeping his inflamed gaze trained on him.

“I cannot marry anyone, I am unwell,” said the prince. (*The Idiot* 43)

This is why, even when he is laughed at and openly ridiculed, he just smiles in return and, unlike his militant counterpart, quietly laughs at himself. “The prince agreed. Fiancé. Very funny. How he diverges the laughter” (Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie* 9: 242; my translation). Shortly thereafter, Dostoevsky, who continues to struggle with his attempts to balance Myshkin’s ridiculousness with his realness, also notes:

Velmonchek constantly laughs at the prince and makes fun of him. Skeptic and non-believer. For him, everything in prince is sincerely laughable, up to the very last moment. (*Polnoe sobranie* 9: 274; my translation)⁶

Prince Myshkin is likewise cognizant that he is ridiculous, and this knowledge makes him sad. He knows that this is his curse—to know and understand everything and yet not be able to change it. For Myshkin, it is really true that “in much wisdom is much grief” (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

⁶ Velmonchek is one of the secondary characters in *The Idiot*.

Myshkin's awareness of his own identity is amazing, but the question of existence for him is far more important than the question of identity. As Alexander Welsh rightfully notes: "In *The Idiot*, 'Am I?' is an even more basic question than 'Who am I?'" (204). His counterpart, Don Quixote, is certainly different, and the question "Who am I?" is the one that worries Don Quixote the most. For Myshkin this question is premature: first he needs to know if he exists outside of a clinic for the mentally ill. And to answer this question Myshkin makes his "primera salida." But, unlike Don Quixote, he feels very content with his past because he knows that it was a real existence filled with happy moments and memories. This is why he willingly shares these experiences with everyone: "I have never been in love," the prince replied, quietly and gravely as before. "I...was happy in a different way." "How, in what way?" "Very well, I shall tell you," the prince said softly, as if in deep reflection" (*The Idiot* 79).

Bruce French, for his part, thinks that "the narrative structure of *The Idiot* is greatly affected by a fear of storiness" (x). We would respectfully disagree, and would argue that Dostoevsky intentionally includes many beautiful, as well as scary, intercalated stories. All these stories are recited by Myshkin, and each of these stories is like another reassurance of his existence, of his connection with this world:

They were the children of that village. [...] Not that I taught them. [...] I may have also taught them in a way but I was mostly just with them. I needed nothing more. I told them everything, hid nothing from them. [...] Adults do not realize that even in the most difficult matter a child can give extremely useful advice. [...] Through children the soul is healed. [...] At first the children laughed at me, and they even began throwing stones at me, when they saw me kissing Marie. No, do not laugh, it had nothing to do with love at all. If you knew what an unhappy creature she was, you would be sorry for her, as I was. [...] Her mother was the first to receive her with spite and contempt: "You have dishonored me now." Marie endured it all, and later, when I got to know her I noticed that she herself approved of all this, and considered herself the very lowest

of creatures. [...] I wanted to do something for Marie. [...] Their dislike of her grew even worse, and they teased her worse than before. On one occasion I even rushed at them and fought with them. Then I began to talk to them, talked every day, whenever I could [...] Little by little we began to talk. They listened to me and soon began to feel sorry for Marie. [...] Soon they all began to love her, and at the same time they suddenly began to love me too. [...] but Marie was happy now. Marie almost went out of her mind with such sudden happiness; she had never even dreamed of this. [...] Because of them, I assure you, she died almost happy. Ever since then, the children have constantly honored Marie's little grave; they deck it with flowers every year, have planted it round with roses. (*The Idiot* 79–87)

Myshkin's existence in the mental asylum is one thing, while his existence in the real world—where he, like Don Quixote, lacks many of the practical skills necessary to handle the most trivial situations—is a quite different reality. Consequently Myshkin, like Don Quixote, almost immediately is repulsed by the world. The result of this revulsion is hard for both characters, but for Myshkin it turns into a real tragedy when his “sweet Dulcinea,” Nastacia Filippovna, after rejecting his hand and openly laughing at him, is soon stabbed to death by her wild and jealous lover. Myshkin, following two sleepless nights beside her dead body, is physically and mentally destroyed. Thus, the same beautiful qualities that Myshkin shared with Christ not only were able to save the world, but made him the most tragic interpretation of Don Quixote.

Christ behaved as He did, not because of preconceived ideas of man and life, but because His was the path of truth. Throughout His life He was well aware of the limitations of man. Such is not the case with Don Quixote and Myshkin, who want life to fit into their scheme of things and, when they are faced with failure, have to compensate psychologically. (Turkevich 127)

What Myshkin misses in his quest is the plan; he has a “thought to teach” but does not know how to cope with reality. He seems totally lost, outside of time and space, and he does not seem capable of connecting the temporal and spatial dimensions of reality. This literary “underdevelopment” of Myshkin entails not only his loss of connection with reality but also brings him to tragedy: the woman he loved is dead, the mission is incomplete, and there is no other place to go than to return to the mental asylum without any hope of recovery. By endowing Myshkin with an orientation toward Christ, Dostoevsky twisted reality in favor of art and hampered the literary answerability of his favorite character with regard to the aesthetics of reality (life) and the theories of idea (art). As a result, he left his favorite character totally groundless and tragically helpless—one of the most tragic interpretations of Don Quixote.

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