

Alyson Tapp

University of Cambridge

## **Embarrassment in *The Idiot***

### **Introduction**

Embarrassment dominates the affective tenor of Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* (1868-69). It is a work studded with the blushes, outbursts, verbal and physical breakdowns that acute embarrassment brings on. Readers, too, may be viscerally engaged in the novel's circuits of embarrassment: we cringe as we read, both compelled and repelled by the dreadful expectation of a scandal's impending breaking point. And once completed, the novel is preserved in memory most readily as a series of emotionally charged, densely populated scenes that each culminate in high drama and shattered decorum—the notorious Dostoevskian scandal scene. A slanderous newspaper article is read aloud, damning in its public insinuations, and followed by the exposure of its mendacious authors. A parlour game is played in which guests are incited to recount compromising acts of their past. A young consumptive declaims a lengthy speech before attempting, and failing, to commit suicide in the presence of guests at a Prince's birthday party. Embarrassment suffuses the novel's atmosphere and relations, palpable most acutely in climactic scenes such as these.

Embarrassment may seem rather too mild a designation for Dostoevskian moments of revelation and transgression; the embarrassments of *The Idiot* stem from actions far more dissonant and transgressive than the social slips and errors of judgment typical of the novel of

manners, exemplified by the works of Jane Austen and their blushing heroines.<sup>1</sup> Of all Dostoevsky's novels, *The Idiot*, with its marriage plots and drawing room conversation, is the closest, as Robin Feuer Miller has noted, to a novel of manners (Robin Miller, *Idiot* 98, 266).<sup>2</sup> *The Idiot* may even be more aptly dubbed a “novel of bad manners.” Already, then, the novel appears as a kind of embarrassment of genre, violating both generic and behavioral norms. Dostoevsky may not have read an English novel of manners, but the novel form that he works with contains the memory of its most prominent generic exemplars.

It is, in part, for the link to the generic prototype of the novel of manners that the focus of this article is embarrassment—and not shame, a close relation of embarrassment that has received recent attention from scholars of Dostoevsky.<sup>3</sup> Both embarrassment and shame depend on intersubjective and—in the familiar, axiomatic, terms of Dostoevsky criticism—dialogic relations. Psychologists and sociologists have been undecided about how or whether embarrassment and shame differ. Some suggest it is simply through intensity—that shame is more acute and lasting than embarrassment. Of greater salience to my study is the insistence on a more qualitative difference: unlike shame, which is fundamentally a moral emotion, embarrassment is a fundamentally social emotion. Whereas shame may be an abiding state or trait, embarrassment is concentrated in an event (Rowland Miller 20-21): an uncomfortably exposed, public breach of social norms ruffles the composure of the individual—and potentially other members of the social interaction—in ways that are visibly manifest (blushing, confusion,

---

<sup>1</sup> In his recent study of the social gaffe in the nineteenth-century novel, Kent Puckett explicitly excludes Dostoevsky from his attention. Dostoevskian transgression is of an altogether different order from eating peas off your knife (Puckett's emblematic example); Dostoevsky would belong in a book “about passions strong enough to shatter the self, the social, and the very structure of the literary” (Puckett 5).

<sup>2</sup> Associated with the narrative voice of the “novel of manners”, the importance of the drawing room or salon chronotope to *The Idiot* is noted by Malcolm Jones (Jones 117-18).

<sup>3</sup> Foremost among these is Deborah Martinsen's compelling book-length study of shame, *Surprised by Shame: Dostoevsky's Liars and Narrative Exposure* (2003).

agitation). Shame and the moral emotions are powerful forces in Dostoevsky's novels, *The Idiot* included, but, I propose, the presence of the novel of manners in the generic make-up of *The Idiot* is a distinction which accords embarrassment particular place in this work.

Embarrassment is a mechanism of social cohesion that performs a regulatory function; it checks the behavior of the individual against an actual or perceived consensus on decorum or convention.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Austen's Regency England or the Victorian England contemporaneous with *The Idiot*, Russian society of the 1860s, fraught by social and political unrest in the wake of the great reforms, lacked the stability of a codified class structure and social order that makes any such consensus readily intuitable. The novel's sociologically attuned gaze reveals living arrangements in flux and an ensuing concentration of incongruous types in domestic space (in the rented rooms of the Ivolgins' apartment, for example). The collapse of social hierarchy sees rooms filled with people whose position and fortune have oscillated wildly and who previously would never have been drawn together in Petersburg society. Witness among these crowds the drunkard general Ivolgin, the upstart Epanchin and his noble-woman wife, the idiot-prince (now a pauper, now a rich heir), the disinherited heir Rogozhin and the disheveled rabble that accompanies him, the bland Ptitsyn, "who had risen from destitution and become a moneylender," and the corrupted innocent turned femme fatale—Nastasya Filippovna (Dostoevsky 46 [*PSS* 8:39]).<sup>5</sup>

Dostoevsky's proposed salve to the social disintegration he perceived in his times is the re-establishment of a christological vision, which he introduces into the novel embodied in Prince

---

<sup>4</sup> For a study of the blush in the English novel, which begins with Austen, see O'Farrell (especially 8).

<sup>5</sup> Citations from the novel are given in the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation, followed by the reference to the appropriate volume and page of F.M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh*.

Myshkin.<sup>6</sup> An agent of universal compassion, Dostoevsky's "positively beautiful man" embodies the aspiration to heal society's broken moral and social bonds.<sup>7</sup> The insistence on the redemptive, transfiguring power of God-made-man—introduced into *The Idiot* through Myshkin—is what in this article I term the novel's theological imperative. With the arrival of Myshkin at the Epanchin household a theological imperative-collides with the society novel and the marriage plot. Taking the cue from Miller's identification of the generic presence of the novel of manners in Part One of *The Idiot*, we might recast one of the novel's early scenes as an episode from *Pride and Prejudice*: three sisters of marriageable age sit with their mother in the reception room—not the Bennet sisters but the Epanchins—and in walks an eligible bachelor: not Darcy, but Christ—or rather, the Christ-like Prince Myshkin, who engages not in witty conversation, but delivers enigmatic parables. The presence of Myshkin in Petersburg society proves to be an embarrassment, felt both in the represented world of its characters and, on the metaliterary plane, by its readers, for what has occurred is a collision of two genres. This is awkward: the presence of Christ in the drawing room of the marriage plot appears as a kind of embarrassment of genre.

Before continuing, a note on language: the detection of embarrassment in the example above, and in many of those that follow, does not rely on direct verbal indications in Dostoevsky's text.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes verbal cues are present; other times, I invoke an embarrassment

---

<sup>6</sup> Among treatments of Myshkin, his Christlike qualities, and the problem of the novel's hero in the light of its religious thematics, see Ermilova, Frank 316-41, Holquist 102-23; Knapp 191-215, Peace.

<sup>7</sup> From Dostoevsky's letter to his niece Sofia Ivanova, 1(13) January 1868: "the main idea of the novel is to portray a positively beautiful person (*polozhite'no prekrasnogo cheloveka*) [...] 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." (PSS 28:251; translation from Knapp 242-43). Also, letter to Maikov, 31 Dec 1867 (12 Jan 1868).

<sup>8</sup> A number of overlapping terms are used in the novel to designate embarrassment; my task is not to distinguish between their nuances. Among these are the following, and their related forms: сконфузиться, смутиться, стыдиться. The following might also, at times, also be best understood as embarrassment: затрудительность, неловкость. Compare: "The words 'embarrassment', 'discomfiture', 'uneasiness' are used here in a continuum of meanings" (Goffman 100).

that is palpable to the reader. Embarrassment is frequently discernible in the physical behaviors of the characters, in those “objective signs of emotional disturbance” catalogued by sociologist Erving Goffman in his seminal study “Embarrassment and Social Organization: “blushing, fumbling, stuttering, an unusually low- or high-pitched voice, quavering speech or breaking of the voice, sweating, blanching, blinking, tremor of the hand, hesitating or vacillating movement, absent-mindedness, and malapropisms” (Goffman 97).

This essay will approach the relationship between embarrassment and narrative in *The Idiot* from two perspectives, one grounded in the vision of disintegration, the other in the vision of cohesion. Firstly, I will explore further the embarrassment that the entry of Myshkin poses to the novel—an embarrassment that stems from the insistence of a theological imperative in the secular realm of the novel. I will show how the embarrassment of this generic quandary is allied to formal difficulties in the configuration of the novel’s character system and its handling of temporality.

In the second part of this essay I discuss how embarrassment itself intimates the possibility of unity that that the novel so yearns for. Embarrassment projects its alternative potentiality of social cohesion onto the social world of its characters and extends to the participation and ethical constitution of the reader. Empathy and tact emerge as two possibilities for communion that are enabled by the same existential, dialogic condition that begets embarrassment.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm Jones also joins the planes of character and reader emotional experience in his discussion of how the novel frustrates and irritates and the reader, also even including embarrassment among the means contributing to this (Jones, 118, 125). Jones concludes his discussion of how the novel “drives the reader crazy” with a nod to a catharsis that may be available to the reader as an alternative experience to discomposure (145). As my essay moves towards its conclusion, it elaborates on this “not entirely whimsical note” of Jones’, suggesting that though the novel

The two halves of the essay might be titled according to the twin formal impulses that Kate Holland has recently elucidated in Dostoevsky's post-reform fiction: an impulse to fragmentation and an impulse to unity. In its openness to the experience of modernity, Dostoevsky's novelistic form is shaped by the sense of disintegration and atomization that the author perceived in his age. Simultaneously, the novel advances its conservative, redemptive, religious vision, an impulse to unity that seeks to "reintegrate the fragments of the shattered world" (Holland 5-7).

The social and psychological structures of embarrassment depend upon analogous twin impulses that strain to unity on the one hand and to fragmentation on the other. Embarrassment articulates a fault-line between social cohesion and social disintegration, as is evident in Goffman's analysis, (even in its title: "Embarrassment and Social Organization"). Goffman describes the event where extreme embarrassment takes over in terms that might apply to *The Idiot's* theatrical scandal scenes:

The moment of crisis is of course socially determined: the individual's breaking point is that of the group to whose affective standards he adheres. On rare occasions all the participants in an encounter may pass this point and together fail to maintain even a semblance of ordinary interaction. The little social system they created in interaction collapses; they draw apart or hurriedly try to assume a new set of roles (Goffman 103).

We see from these lines how embarrassment asserts the existence of collectively held normative standards (values which bind the group), and yet at the same time, embarrassment causes social interaction to stall. In both its plot development and narrative structure, *The Idiot* constantly struggles to reconcile two competing forces of social cohesion and social collapse.

---

may not *represent* this catharsis or sentimental education, it gestures towards it as a *potential* that might be available in the experience of the reader.

Dostoevsky is a religious writer advancing a theological vision and attempting to blend this with the generic forms of the society novel. Although his socially reparative bid involves grafting onto the secular, social world of the novel an alternative religious world that is introduced through a central, Christ-like character, ethical consummation does not come in the form of salvation effected by the ideal, messianic, hero.<sup>10</sup> However, as my conclusion will suggest, the secular form of the novel holds its own ethical potential, and the embarrassment that blots its world shows the reader the way to participation in the novelistic program of sentimental education: the surrender to the narrative dynamics and affective qualities of particular emotional experiences available through the practice of novel-reading.

## **Part One: Disintegration**

### **(i) The Embarrassing Insistence of the Theological Imperative in the Society Novel**

Writing in the same age as Dostoevsky, Charles Darwin, in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), points to the differing moral tenors of shame and embarrassment: he observes that man does not blush before God, but only before his fellow men.<sup>11</sup> Darwin's observation—and the anti-creationist thrust of the *Expression*—serves as a commentary on Dostoevsky's world too: these are men who no longer live in the presence of God. Georg Lukács famously translated this condition into one of generic rupture and categorization, proclaiming that "[t]he novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (88). Into this world walks the Christ-like Prince Myshkin.

---

<sup>10</sup> This, arguably, would be achieved later, in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

<sup>11</sup> Though the point is Darwin's, it is cited and highlighted in what is the first sustained literary treatment of embarrassment, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Ricks 56).

In a comment made by Prince Shch., the novel at one point gives voice to the embarrassment occasioned in the drawing rooms of this social milieu by Myshkin and the redemptive theology he stands for:

‘My dear Prince, [...] paradise on earth is not easily achieved; but all the same you are counting on paradise in a way; paradise is a difficult thing, Prince, much more difficult that it seems to your wonderful heart. We’d better stop, otherwise we may all get embarrassed (*skonfuzimsia*) again, and then...’ (Dostoevsky 341 [PSS 8: 282]).

Here Dostoevsky’s own cue to consider Myshkin the salvific “positively beautiful man” is placed into the mouth of a character, but the thought breaks off: it is embarrassing to entertain, for the speaker and assembled company, and for the novel as a whole.

At the beginning of the novel Myshkin is, for the most part, strikingly and disarmingly unembarrassable. He is an outsider not only to the social world of Petersburg, but to the social world as a determinant of behavior in general, and, consequently, to the novel as genre. Dostoevsky’s “positively beautiful man” arrives in Petersburg from Switzerland in a state of perfect goodness, Christ-like in his capacity for universal compassion. He is initially unembarrassable because this goodness is an absolute, not produced in the course of dialogic “interaction ritual”, to borrow Goffman’s phrase. When he enters the novel, Myshkin’s words and actions issue out of full accordance with his inner life and its guiding principle of universal compassion. The awkwardness of Myshkin’s entry into the novelistic world might be usefully illuminated by the opposition between novel and epic described by Lukács – which I invoke not to imply that Myshkin *is* an epic hero (which he clearly is not), but for the force of what, on Lukács’ view, is *not* the novel, but the object of its longing—namely, that world of the epic, where men still live in the presence of god(s), and where the hero’s actions issue from a world-



view that is based on the perfect accord of inner impulse and outward display.<sup>12</sup> Myshkin embodies the attempt—ultimately destructive—to reintroduce an absolute into a fallen world, the lost absolute for which Dostoevsky’s novel longs: its theological imperative, or the binding idea of universal Christian compassion.<sup>13</sup>

When Myshkin first visits the Epanchin household, we, as reader, participate in a momentary embarrassment—less acute than those of the scandal scenes that will follow—as the theological imperative and the hero who bears it enter the novelistic world.

### ***Embarrassment in the Anteroom***

Arriving at the Epanchins, Myshkin is unaware of the protocol for visitors and their interactions with servants. He elects to remain in the anteroom with the servant, rather than proceed to wait alone in the reception room until he is officially announced (20-2 [PSS 8: 16]). We might read this early scene in the novel as a vignette in which a constellation of concerns emerge: the embarrassment of Myshkin’s entry into the novel and into Petersburg society, the threat of disruption to narrative and social order, and the positioning of the reader in this unstable social and narrative environment.

The scene reveals, in miniature, the reception of Myshkin’s redemptive mission in the social world. The servant is a barometer of responses to the prince: he is at first confused by and suspicious of the prince’s curious behavior, then ultimately engaged as an attentive listener to his story of the execution in Lyon. The narrator reports the servant’s initial evaluation of the prince

---

<sup>12</sup> See the chapters “Integrated Civilizations” and “Epic and Novel” (Lukács, especially 29-30, 62-66).

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Griffiths and Stanley Rabinowitz argue against what they perceive as Lukács’s and Bakhtin’s oversimplified oppositions of epic and novel (Griffiths and Rabinowitz, 18-38). However, it is ‘Lukács’ epic’—his structural and conceptual ideas about the genre (not the nature of the epic as such) that are of primary importance to me, especially since the young Lukács intended *The Theory of the Novel* as the preface to an unwritten study of Dostoevsky.

through an ambiguous and at first unmarked instance of free indirect discourse, momentarily according his judgment special weight as an endorsed statement of fact:

Though the prince was a little fool—the lackey had already decided that—all the same the general’s valet finally found it unsuitable to continue his conversation with the visitor, despite the fact that for some reason he liked the prince, in his own way, of course. But from another point of view, he provoked in him a decided and crude indignation (21 [*PSS* 8:19]).

Between the servant’s ambivalent feeling and the ambiguity on the part of the narrator as to whether he is endorsing the servant’s views, the reader is provided with no stable or reliable evaluation of the prince to readily adopt. This scene models the dilemmas of interpretation and reader-response that will persist throughout the novel and reveals them to be set amid conditions where embarrassment is close to the surface: a face-to-face encounter where one party (Myshkin) projects an inappropriate definition of himself, that at the same time threatens to loosen the other (the servant) from his own defined self-projection in the given context. Possible responses to the scene may move between vague amusement at the breach of etiquette and a more powerful sympathy for Myshkin’s heeding of the servant’s full humanity. While Myshkin may be unembarrassable, the experience of embarrassment on behalf of or in the presence of the prince is available among possible reader-responses to this scene in the ante-room.

As well as defying social convention, Myshkin’s encounter with the servant challenges narrative convention on a second, formal level. Myshkin disregards the servant’s lowly status and treats him as if an equal. While his social misstep is clear, in narrative terms, the encounter swells the novelistic world’s containment of character by desiring to accord to an incidental, minor character more space than is usual. The servant requires the faintest outlines of an

interiority as his responses to Myshkin's behavior are registered in the narrative. As the prince begins his story about the execution, the servant listens: "The valet watched him with sympathetic interest and seemed unwilling to tear himself away; perhaps he too was a man with imagination and an inclination to thinking" (22-23 [PSS 8:20]).

At this moment we might find again in the servant an unlikely double for the reader: the extent and autonomy of the reader's response is, in the same way, present in the text only as potential. As I will suggest in my conclusion, it is through the dynamics of *potential* reader response harbored by the novel that its ethically redemptive work is done (not its expressly represented character, action or word). But above all, the allusion to the unknown depths of the servant's mind remind us of the extent to which both his social and narrative position circumscribe the representation of his character; there is a fullness of person which far exceeds the minorness of his character status. Allowing a minor character to exceed the bounds of his minorness would distort and disrupt the allocation of attention to major characters upon which the novel's plot and structure depend.<sup>14</sup> In other words, if we carried on like this, the novel might never leave the anteroom.

This scene gestures towards the novel's ongoing problems with holding its constellation of characters in balanced harmony, in social and narrative order. In the novel as a whole, such problems reflect the disintegrating social fabric and collapse of decorum. But here, in the anteroom, we see how these problems spring also from the imperatives of portraying of

---

<sup>14</sup> See "Characterization and Distribution" (Woloch 12-42). Establishing the literary problem that is the focus of his study (namely the apportioning of attention between major and minor characters), Woloch cites Dostoevsky who explicitly acknowledges this issue in a metaliterary aside towards the end of *The Idiot*: "in spite of all our efforts, we find ourselves in the decided necessity of giving a bit more attention and space to this secondary character of our story than we had hitherto intended" (Dostoevsky 484; cited Woloch 12). For recent readings of minor characters in Dostoevsky that engage with Woloch, see Naiman, Matzner-Gore. For a discussion of minor characters that pre-dates Woloch, see Young.

Myshkin, the “positively beautiful man.”<sup>15</sup> Here, at the beginning of the novel, Myshkin is in an as yet uncompromised state of wholeness, singularly set on his intention of transforming the world views of all those with whom he interacts through his example of compassionate goodness and his parable-like stories. Whole and undivided in his intention and orientation to the other, Myshkin has no need or understanding (in himself or others) of the ways in which the modified and multiplied facets of self are constantly being concealed and revealed in the social world. However, both social convention and novelistic narrative form require that one be adept in managing and decoding self-presentation according to each given scenario (be it the drawing room in the company of marriageable young ladies or in the presence of the household servant) with the use of strategies of selectivity and framing.

We might compare this moment to the opening of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, where, in violation of the reader’s expectations of a novel’s introductory moves, a disproportionate amount of narrative attention is lavished upon the description of a man who merely witnesses the arrival of Chichikov’s carriage but is entirely inconsequential to the story and subsequently abandoned.<sup>16</sup> In this case, though, there is no embarrassment—because there is no sociality and no psychology. This is a matter of representation wholly confined to the plane of narration, which in no way engages the participation of the characters. The carefully introduced man with the pistol-shaped tie-pin, like the famous Homeric similes that follow, bespeaks the problematic relationship between general and particular, background and foreground in Gogol’s novel. These representational quandaries spring from an aspiration towards wholeness that belongs to the epic,

---

<sup>15</sup> T.A. Kasatkina discusses the consequences of Myshkin’s character for the nature of character relations in the novel in broadly comparable terms: among the main characters, Myshkin’s indiscriminate apportioning of Christian love and his failure to heed individuals in the uniqueness (*iskliuchitel'nost'*) that they desire produces the destructive forces of jealousy that bind them all (Kasatkina 203-204). I consider these dynamics in relation to the minor character of the servant, who is situated outside the stuff of the plot—which proves illuminating on the level of form and narrative structure, too.

<sup>16</sup> Iurii Tynianov discusses parodic transformations of Gogol in Dostoevsky’s works, including *The Idiot*.

or from a fundamentally romantic longing for that aesthetic ideal. In *Dead Souls* the undifferentiated vision that blurs background and foreground belongs to the author/narrator. Meanwhile, in *The Idiot*, the inclusiveness that does not know such hierarchical distinctions as those between background and foreground, between major or minor characters, springs from Myshkin's vision.<sup>17</sup>

Myshkin does not comprise the fragmented, multiple selves which serve mutable social contexts and therefore he is, in his original state, unembarrassable. Such a model of selfhood may be adequate to an epic or biblical narrative but is an ideal incommensurable with the conventions of social and novelistic narrative form.

## **(ii) The Rhythms of Embarrassment: Narrative, Composure, Temporality**

As the novel proceeds, Myshkin's trajectory towards breakdown is marked by an increasing susceptibility to embarrassment. An early instance of his embarrassment comes when he tells his stories to the Epanchin daughters of the mock execution and the prisoner on the scaffold. Aglaya addresses the Prince: "When you finish a story, you immediately feel ashamed (*zastydites'*) of having told it [...] Why is that?" (66 [*PSS* 8:57]). The novel's fundamental generic dissonance underlies this embarrassment: Myshkin can deliver his stories uninhibitedly from within one generic position — as a parable or Christ-like teaching.<sup>18</sup> But the tone and narratorial stance of Myshkin's lengthy "parables" are a generic aberration when the scene in the drawing room is set for an incipient marriage plot. They are also a rhythmic aberration: the self-

---

<sup>17</sup> Anna Berman, in her reading of Myshkin's character in relation to romantic aesthetics, suggests that *The Idiot's* innovation in psychological prose lies in shifting the locus of the romantic struggle between the real and the ideal from the authorial plane to inside the main hero..

<sup>18</sup> On Dostoevsky's use of parable as narrative form, see Robin Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey* (68-85).

contained monologues disturb the rhythm of speech and conversational exchange expected from social discourse in this setting.

Rhythmic disorder is a hallmark of embarrassment. Embarrassment disrupts the rhythms of language, social interaction and the body; it brakes and fragments speech and renders the body awkward. Embarrassment both ruffles composure and disrupts narrative composition; it has the power to imprint itself onto the experience of temporality, to stamp a scene with, as it were, its “time signature.”<sup>19</sup> In this section, I look at other instances of rhythmic aberration and find these moments indicative of the novel’s greater problems of temporal form.<sup>20</sup> The examples come from two scandal scenes related to the novel’s marriage plot that are lent contour by the narrative arc of embarrassment and dreadful expectation: Nastasya Filippovna’s name-day party, where it is expected that her marriage to Ganya will be announced, and the party hosted by the Epanchins to involve Myshkin in their society circle as fiancé to Aglaya, and where the Prince smashes the Chinese vase.

The nature of time and its transformation is a question that presses urgently in the novel: the singular temporality of the condemned man who faces execution is a special emblem pinned on the novel at its start, receiving threefold emphasis in the three variations on the story of the condemned man that Myshkin tells upon his arrival at the Epanchins. According to Myshkin’s stories, the moments before a seemingly certain execution assume infinite dimensions and become exceptionally charged, maximally filled with perception and sensation. In turn, Myshkin’s epileptic fits and Ippolit’s certain death from consumption evoke a paler version of this existential state.

---

<sup>19</sup> I borrow the idea of applying the musical term “time signature” to a novel from Nicholas Dames (10).

<sup>20</sup> On rhythm and pattern in *The Idiot*, see Elizabeth Dalton, who connects the rhythm of the scandal scenes to Myshkin’s epilepsy and to the altered temporality of the execution tales (Dalton 123-25; 133-34).

The transformed experience of time under the sign of certain death represents what Michael Holquist calls “the mysterious stasis of a transcendent world,” divine time as opposed to the “linear, merely human, cause-and-effect-time” (102-103). If Myshkin’s stories of the condemned man introduce, but hold at a distance, the example of transcendent, altered temporality into the novel, then his epileptic fits—in which sensation and self-awareness increase and intensify in moments that “flashed by like lightning”—provide an embodiment of this temporal experience in the world of the novel’s own action (225 [*PSS* 8:188]). To these symbolic examples of altered temporality, we might add the embarrassment of the scandal scenes—where altered temporality is now produced by the inevitability (and its peculiar variety of suspense) that the scene will eventually reach a breaking point. Time is both drawn out into extended suspense and concentrated into a single charged instant. Goffman describes the effect: “An encounter which seems likely to occasion abrupt embarrassment may, because of this, cast a shadow of sustained uneasiness upon the participants, transforming the entire encounter into an incident itself” (100). Time under the sign of anticipated embarrassment replicates (on the social stage) the model of temporality that lies at the metaphysical and spiritual core of the novel, charged and altered by its movement towards a kind of event horizon.

In the account of Nastasya Filippovna’s name-day party there is a frequent insistence on disrupted and distorted rhythm, betraying, in the scene’s temporal textures, the emotional strains that are felt. In the account of the name-day there is a frequent insistence on disrupted and distorted rhythm, betraying, in the scene’s temporal textures, the emotional strains that are felt. Temporality is pushed to the fore in this scene at the outset by Nastasya Filippovna’s inquiry as to what time it is and frequent checks of her watch. The rhythm that punctuates the scene is one of convulsive, broken movement. It issues from Nastasya Filippovna and infects the others

around her. The following extract of the narrator's commentary on the scene not only describes Nastasya Filippovna's state, but also, through its own rhythms and style, gives an impression of the physical and emotional composition of the scene:

Totsky also took his glass, hoping to harmonize the new tone that was setting in, possibly giving it the character of a charming joke. Ganya alone drank nothing. In the strange, sometimes very abrupt and quick outbursts of Nastasya Filippovna, who also took wine and announced that she would drink three glasses that evening, in her hysterical and pointed laughter, which alternated suddenly with a silent and even sullen pensiveness, it was hard to make anything out. Some suspected she was in a fever; they finally began to notice that she seemed to be waiting for something, glanced frequently at her watch, was growing impatient, distracted (141 [PSS 8:119]).

The smooth flow of the first sentence conveys the oily Totsky's efforts to smooth over the awkwardness; his hopes for producing a "charming joke" and for "harmonizing" the tone sound somewhat ironically from the violator of Nastasya Filippovna and convey his predilection for amoral decency and good taste. Described in a short sentence of his own, Ganya stands frozen in fearful horror at what might unfold. As well as conveying the abrupt alternations in her speech and behavior, the long, confused sentence about Nastasya Filippovna gives an indication, with its own rhythms, of her agitated condition.

The sharp, rapid rhythms of agitation continue to be felt—both by bodies and in the pacing of the unfolding scene: Nastasya Filippovna repeatedly (*po vremenam*) suppresses a shiver; looks are exchanged rapidly back and forth, and Ganya, as if in response, stirs convulsively. As Nastasya Filippovna's hysteria mounts, she "fusses about, laughing convulsively and fitfully" (143 [PSS 8:121]). The use of the word "fitfully" (*pripadochno*)



evokes Myshkin epileptic condition, and produces a kind of rhyme between this scene of Nastasya Filippovna's hysterical agitation and Myshkin's fits, particularly the one in public, at the Epanchin's one when he smashes the Chinese vase.

As social interaction threatens to stall and collapse, Ferdyshchenko instigates the *petit jeu*, in which guests offer up confessions of their worst deeds. The available material comprises an “*embarras de richesses*,” Ferdyshchenko exclaims (144 [PSS 8:122]). As confessions, the guests' stories reprise a favorite Dostoevskian theme: the corrupt, double-edged nature of confessional narrative as truth-telling. Moreover, we might also read the *petit jeu* as a model for the relationship between embarrassment and narration, for the guest-narrators' corrupt confessions turn this game into one of fiction-making, where the command of style and tone is paramount.<sup>21</sup> A blatant incitement to embarrassment, the *petit jeu* demonstrates the workings of embarrassment through the attempts to control it: the main thrust of the ‘confessions’ shifts from the moral import of their contents, to the social success of the stories' ‘performance’ and the speakers' claims on the identities that they advance. Maintained composure and averted embarrassment express a powerful effort to control the identity the speaker wishes to project and the meaning of each story for its listeners.

The *petit jeu* bares the theatrical premise that lies behind the “dramaturgical” model of embarrassment (and indeed all social discourse) advanced by sociologists such as Goffman, whereby the individual comprises multiple selves, different configurations of which are “performed” on different occasions.<sup>22</sup> As Goffman notes, “[m]any of our games and sports, commemorate the themes of composure and embarrassment: in poker, a dubious claim may win

---

<sup>21</sup> On the meta-literary qualities of the *petit jeu*, including its relation to the narrative instability of the novel itself, see Volodin.

<sup>22</sup> On “dramaturgical” theories of embarrassment, see Parrott and Harré, 43-56.

money for the player who can present it calmly” (104). In this game of narration, the speakers’ intended effect—the manipulation of their listeners to see them in a particular light—depends on their maintaining composure—undisrupted narrative rhythm—throughout.

We might even go as far as saying that in this sense, these individual acts of narration and self-composure struggle with the same forces as the narration of the novel as a whole, in which the narrator now and then signals his own discomposure in the face of his task. The confessional narrators muster self-composure, possessing a strong imperative to close down and limit the assumptions made on the basis of their stories. The narrator of the novel itself, in contrast, struggles with the conflicting imperatives to be a disinterested observer or to advance particular attitudes about and judgments on the novel’s characters. The confessional narrators participating in the *petit jeu* essentially ‘bare the device’ of the narrative unreliability—of which the novel’s narrator is one more exemplar.

The novel’s climactic scandal scene occurs at the party hosted by the Epanchins in Part Four. Myshkin's socially exposed epileptic fit at the Epanchins' party is itself is a source of embarrassment and is implicated in the dynamics of the scandal scene. (The same is not true, of course, of the fit provoked by Rogozhin's attempted murder). Moving through several tonalities, the scene at the Epanchins’ culminates with Myshkin’s smashing the hostess’s expensive Chinese vase in front of the assembled guests, an act that Aglaya had part-warned him about, part capriciously incited him to commit. This whole scene is strongly marked by distorted rhythms in speech and bodily movement, and, lent contour by the narrative arc of embarrassment and dreadful expectation, it provides the final collision of the theological imperative with the novel’s marriage plot. The problem of narrativity comes to the fore as the novel experiences its

most acute problems in the handling of time—a sign of its corrupted “time signature” and the confusion between secular and sacred structural principles.

In his initial impressions of the gathering, Myshkin mistakes the social for the spiritual: he fails to see the guests’ conformity to the conventions of a night in “society” (their barely masked spite, tolerance or indifference) and instead perceives the group as bound in harmony and fraternity. Myshkin’s perception of the gathering places it out of time—not an event on the social calendar but a manifestation of transcendent and organic unity.

It appeared to him somehow at once and suddenly that all these people had, as it were, been born to be together; there was no “evening” at the Epanchins’ that evening and no invited guests, that these were all “our people,” and it was as if he himself had long been their devoted and like-minded friend, who had now returned to them after a recent separation (534 [PSS 8:442]).

Note too the doubling of temporal adverbs describing Myshkin’s thought process, an early signal of the dilemma of registering moment, process and event in the linear linguistic medium.

Unnaturally enraptured by the company he finds himself amid, the prince becomes excited at the mention of his benefactor, Pavlishchev, and the presence that evening of another of his purported relatives. Then embarrassment takes him over as he fears he has made insinuations about the man’s magnanimity. The pace of his speech changes and he begins to stutter: “Ah, my God!” cried the prince, embarrassed (*konfuzias*’), hurrying, [...] “I’ve...I’ve said something stupid again, but...it had to be so, because I...I...I...though again it’s not what I mean!” (541 [PSS 8:448]). His agitation grows and he begins to tremble; his emotions mismatch the general theme of the conversation and are out of reach of narratorial explanation: “Why he suddenly became so agitated, why he became so emotionally ecstatic, for absolutely no reason, and, it

seemed out of all proportion (*ne v meru*) with the subject of the conversation—it would be hard to tell” (ibid.). The phrase “*ne v meru*” is repeated when Myshkin launches into the main part of his speech “in extreme agitation and much too sharply (*ne v meru rezko*)” (543 [PSS 8:450]). Like Goffman’s model embarrassed individual, Myshkin “answers to a new set of rhythms, characteristic of deep emotional experience” (103). Following on from and co-mingled with his excitement and rapture, Myshkin’s embarrassment—here indicated by the verb *konfuzit'sia*—eventually slides into a pre-epileptic state. Interestingly, Darwin’s account of blushing and the “confusion of mind” would also link the state of embarrassment to that of epilepsy; both, too, are linked by rhythmic disorder (Darwin 321-22, 344).<sup>23</sup>

As he continues to speak at high speed (“*uzhasno skoro*”), Myshkin’s thoughts eventually seem to outstrip time altogether, insisting on a kind of maximally filled simultaneity—the transcendent time akin to the pre-execution condition of the condemned man: “This whole feverish tirade, this whole flow of passionate and agitated words and ecstatic thoughts, as if thronging in some sort of turmoil and leaping over each other, all this foreboded something dangerous, something peculiar in the mood of the young man” (546 [PSS 8:453]).

In this scene of concentrated rhythmic aberrations, the narrative itself faces the problem of temporal ordering, finding that it has exceeded the limits of linear narration. Myshkin’s speech breaks off with ellipsis as “an incident suddenly occurred,” and the narrator keeps this moment suspended as he describes first Myshkin’s state and that of the embarrassed onlookers. Then, with a second paragraph and another temporal shift, we backtrack and are given an overview of the action from the moment Myshkin had first entered the room. The narration then resumes

---

<sup>23</sup> Darwin does not distinguish embarrassment from shame, but as commentators note, many of those who now study embarrassment have adopted Darwin’s views on blushing.

from where Myshkin's last words left off, and the vase tumbles and breaks. We experience an instance of simultaneity and protracted, drawn-out time.

The smashing of the vase and the epileptic fit come after Myshkin's passionate speech about atheism and faith—his final attempt to “express an idea directly, to state, in Dostoevsky's words, a ‘sacred conviction’” (Robin Miller, *Idiot*, 150). Myshkin's monologue represents once more the embarrassing insistence of the theological imperative in the world of the society novel and contemporary society itself and the smashing of the vase the final collision between these two positions.

In the moment that the vase smashes, any notion of scandal or embarrassment is explicitly displaced by the sense of prophecy: “But we cannot omit mention of one strange sensation that struck him precisely at that very moment and suddenly made itself distinct in the crowd of all the other vague and strange sensations: it was not the shame, not the scandal, not the fear, not the unexpectedness that struck him most of all, but the fulfilled prophecy!” (548 [*PSS* 8:454]). All the novel's scandal scenes point towards this final one and the smashing of the vase, where the inevitability of scandal is re-dubbed prophecy. Two temporalities collide: sequence is transformed into transcendence when the narrative unfolding of events that belong to the marriage plot is condensed into prophecy, the voice of the theological imperative.

## **Part Two: Unity**

### **(i) Embarrassment and “Need”**

The opening scenes of the novel invest their hope in Myshkin as the source of reparative social and spiritual harmony - but as I have shown, both social and narrative order flounder in his

presence. As his meeting with General Epanchin revealed, Myshkin cannot give voice to this purpose that he is charged with. Neither can the assembled company tolerate open discussion of earthly salvation. When Prince Shch. raises the redemptive prospect of “paradise on earth”, he hurriedly advises: “We’d better stop...otherwise we’ll all get embarrassed again.” The Prince silences the train of thought; to give voice to sacred vision is embarrassing.

The problem of voicing the need for spiritual connection and social harmony is felt throughout the novel. The novel strives, on the metaphysical plane, for the “binding idea” (*sviazuiushchaia mysl'*) that would counter the atomizing forces of modern society and the ascendancy of materialism.<sup>24</sup> Dostoevsky places the statement of this need in the mouth of the buffoon Lebedev, who compares the present day to medieval times, lamenting the loss of a “binding idea” in the age of the railroad (379 [*PSS* 8: 315]). What was too embarrassing to be entertained in the polite speech of Prince Shch is permissible in the aberrant tirades of a Lebedev.

Embarrassment itself, to the extent that it seeks to regulate behavior, represents a straining towards stability and cohesiveness. It is one alternative, indirect means through which the novel manifests an aspiration to unity.<sup>25</sup> Alongside embarrassment, we find another recurring condition of the novel’s social collective—the expression of individuals’ “need” for one another set against the backdrop of social disintegration.

The statement of characters “needing” one another recurs a number of times throughout the novel. It is striking for its curious bareness, suggesting something urgent and fundamental; it expresses a straining towards cohesion, the exact nature of which is left unspecified. The

---

<sup>24</sup> Miller titles the final chapter of her study “The Search for a Binding Idea” (Robin Miller, *Idiot*, 200-222).

<sup>25</sup> The somewhat obtuse form of community offered by embarrassment might take its place next to other such alternatives investigated by Pericles Lewis in his study of the European modernist novel and the ways it seeks “to reconstruct a sacred community in the absence of churches” (Lewis 31).

vagueness of “needing” masks the complex and conflicting motivations that inform each character’s actions. The young Kolya, for instance, is said to be “necessary” to both Myshkin and Ganya: “The prince needed (*nuzhen*) Kolya” (130 [PSS 8:110]); “One might have thought that Kolya was sometimes now even necessary (*neobkhozimym*) to Ganya” (188 [PSS 8:156-57]). At Lebedev’s dacha, Myshkin observes Lebedev’s pleasure on entering into long conversations with the General, in which they sometimes shouted and argued. This too is formulated as a relationship of “need:” “One might even have thought that [Lebedev] needed (*nuzhdal'sia*) the general” (237 [PSS 8:197]). “Needing” is not a motif, in the sense of an image whose repetition patterns the narrative at a level determined by or indicative of authorial design; this “need” speaks of an impulse issuing from the metaphysical core of the novel that strains towards articulation, towards connection and communication, and that is shared by the novel’s characters, narrator and author.

Acute embarrassment and “need” come together in the novel’s longest inserted monologue, Ippolit’s confession. It is the same “need” for connection and community that sounds in the title of Ippolit’s monologue, “My Necessary Explanation” (*Moe neobkhozimoe ob'iasnenie*), the would-be suicide note he reads aloud to an assembled company. Though the wrathful bitterness of his consumptive state leaves Ippolit spiritually and socially estranged, the “necessity” of his confession lies in making one final attempt to communicate to others before he ends his life. Though he rails against the notion of a providential order, Ippolit issues a powerful statement of the means by which men are connected to one another in ways enabling the transmission of good: “Individual goodness will always abide, because it is a personal need, a living need for the direct influence of one person on another” (403 [PSS 8: 335]).

With Ippolit's bungled suicide attempt, however, the confession reaches a climax of acute embarrassment. The spectacle of Ippolit's public failure in this most extreme of acts strains at the limits of what the script for embarrassment can account for. Whereas embarrassment usually stems from violating what Goffman called "the standards of the little social system," here its cause lies in the failure of enacting a taboo—which sends the scene lurching into a different realm of extreme discomfiture. In the immediate aftermath, where the taboo (public suicide) has obliterated the possibility of the individual's feeling secure in any tacit consensus on an accepted response, malicious laughter issues from those whose own selves are threatened and unsettled by the spreading embarrassment.

As the longest of the novel's inserted narratives, the length and rising urgency of Ippolit's statement is a violent imposition into the narrative; a previously minor character (albeit one of a very different order to Rogozhin's hangers-on) becomes the exclusive focus of attention—and bearer of the novel's core ideas—for three tensely high-pitched chapters. The prominence of Ippolit in this part of the novel and the attention he commands is one more indicator for the muddling of the metaphysical and social planes of the novel. On the metaphysical plane, Ippolit is a "main character" in the sense that he is a bearer of a "main idea."<sup>26</sup> In the world of the society novel, though, he is nothing but a painful embarrassment.

## **(ii) Embarrassment and Empathy; the Novel and the Reader**

Embarrassment, as I have emphasized, exists in the presence of both social cohesion and social collapse. Embarrassment depends upon a degree of cohesion (however fragile) that can propagate a body of collectively held norms and values, yet it is also momentarily destructive of

---

<sup>26</sup> Compare Dostoevsky's comment in his Notebooks on Ippolit as "the main axis of the entire novel" (*PSS* 9: 277).



that cohesion, thwarting the production of speech and the smooth running of the social machinery. There is another way in which embarrassment can open up channels of communication and connection of its own—through the possibility of empathetic embarrassment, of feeling embarrassed on behalf of another. The potential exists here, too, for the reader to be drawn into active involvement in the novel’s circuits of embarrassment and empathy.<sup>27</sup>

We can find several marked moments of empathetic embarrassment in *The Idiot*. After the reading aloud of the slanderous article about Myshkin’s alleged exploitation of his benefactor, for example, the young Kolya is terribly shamed and the rest of the assembled company in a state of awkward embarrassment. As for Myshkin, “he was so abashed by what others had done, he felt so ashamed for his visitors, that he was afraid at first even to look at them. Ptitsyn, Varya, Ganya, and even Lebedev—they all seemed to have a somewhat embarrassed look (*skonfuzhennyi vid*)” (266 [*PSS* 8: 221]). Later, an explicit statement of the value of a display of empathetic embarrassment is placed in the mouth of Myshkin: “I can see that you are perhaps more ashamed for me than anyone else, Evgeny Pavlovich; you’re blushing, that’s the sign of a beautiful heart” (341-42 [*PSS* 8:282]). This remark of Myshkin’s is oddly abrupt and devoid of immediate context or consequence, which has the effect, I think, of highlighting its thematic import. There is a sustained and inconclusive treatment of modes of

---

<sup>27</sup> The term “empathy” was, of course, not available to Dostoevsky. The German term *Einfühlung* was first used by Robert Vischer in 1872 (and eventually translated into Russian as *vchuvstvovanie*.) See “Empathy” (Wiener (ed.) 2:85-89) and “Vchuvstvovanie” (Shmidt (ed.) 13:660-61). In twentieth-century usage, in the field of psychology, “empathy” and “sympathy” are differentiated in meaning. To empathize is to feel the emotions of others (I feel your pain); to sympathize is to feel *for* another (I feel pity for your pain). Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century usage of “sympathy,” (for example by Adam Smith, David Hume, George Eliot) incorporates some of what we today understand as “empathy”. For definitions of empathy, sympathy and observations on the historical use of the terms by a literary scholar, see Keen (4-6, 42-55).

empathy or sympathy in *The Idiot*, and here Dostoevsky explicitly signals the pertinence of embarrassment to these questions.<sup>28</sup>

In a conversation between Myshkin and Aglaya following the acute embarrassment of Ippolit's failed suicide, different models of empathy/sympathy are set forth. The embarrassment that overtakes the assembled group, who break out into malicious laughter, is, in effect a form of thwarted empathy. To empathize with Ippolit, the dying consumptive, would require his listeners to place themselves in his position; such a fearful fantasy of occupying his place would entail a confrontation with mortality and an uncomfortable threat their own sense of selfhood.

Speaking with Aglaya after the incident, Myshkin displays a sympathetic understanding of Ippolit. Myshkin explains (in a somewhat instructive mode to Aglaya) how Ippolit's actions were motivated by the desire for communication and affirmation—from people in general, and, though he may not have been consciously aware of it, perhaps from Aglaya in particular (given that he had requested that she read his confession). Myshkin's sympathy, it turns out, is based on his idea of universal needs: "everyone is inclined to think that way," he says, justifying his explanation of Ippolit's craving an audience (426 [PSS 8:354]). Though he suggests that Ippolit's most desired interlocutor may have been Aglaya, Myshkin remains at some distance from the particularity of Ippolit's situation, dealing instead in universals. This is one model for the working of sympathy. It affords Myshkin a perspective from which he claims to see and understand more than Ippolit does himself. To Aglaya, the existence, much less the penetration of the opaque realm of another's mind, is mystifying and ultimately objectionable. Aglaya

---

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Frank locates varieties of fellow feeling at the center of *The Idiot*, identifying (with recourse to Max Scheler's 1923 work *The Nature of Sympathy*) Myshkin's movement from "experiencing an understanding and sympathy for the feelings of others without being overcome emotively [to] a total coalescence leading to the loss of identity and personality" as the principle structural movement novel (Frank 577-78). I suggest, in addition, that Dostoevsky exposes still other nuances to varieties of fellow feeling.

extends sympathy differently: as her thoughts unfold, she reveals that mechanism of sympathy which works by making analogy with one's own experience to gain insight into another's (recalling her own adolescent thoughts of suicide in order to imagine Ippolit's condition.) Aglaya considers Myshkin's assessment of Ippolit to be a judgment, not an exercise of sympathy: "...and on your side I find all this very bad, because it's very rude to look at and judge a man's soul the way you're judging Ippolit." Aglaya's words also obliquely raise the question of whether sympathy springs from reason or from feeling and imagination; she reproaches Myshkin for seemingly operating from reason alone, which, in her view, is opposed to tenderness of feeling: "You have no tenderness, only truth and that makes it unfair" (ibid.).

The exchange between Myshkin and Aglaya remains somewhat obtuse and inconclusive. Recognizing in Ippolit impulses that he sees as common to all, Myshkin restores the consumptive teenager to a community from which wrathful shamelessness has excluded him. Yet Aglaya's response suggests that he has not exerted sufficient imagination and feeling to understand the particularity of Ippolit's situation. Indeed, it is Myshkin's capacity to love only according to a universal feeling of compassion that renders him unable to choose between Aglaya and Nastasya Filippovna.

On his trajectory towards breakdown Myshkin experiences the limits of his mode of fellow feeling. A perfectly beautiful man, but unfit novelistic character, to whom embarrassment is alien at the novel's start, Myshkin still believes in the accessibility of wholeness: "Now [...] that you have told me all your inmost truths," he says to Keller, "it seems to me that it's impossible to add anything more to what you've already said" (308 [PSS 8:257]). But towards the end of the novel he expresses his frustration: "Why can we never know everything about another person?" (583 [PSS 8:484]). We can never know everything about another person

because we remain essentially outside of that person, separated by the boundaries of the body. Myshkin ultimately fails in romantic love – love which is based upon the embodied particularity of another being.<sup>29</sup> When Evgeny Pavlovich says of Aglaya at the novel’s end that she “loved as a woman...as a human being...not as an abstract spirit,” we also hear this as an indictment of Myshkin—who could love only a general idea of humanity and goodness (ibid.).

Shortly after Aglaya and Myshkin’s conversation about Ippolit, another ‘instructive’ dialogue follows: this one points to the role of embarrassment in cultivating sensibility and decorum. Embarrassment signals the existence of a form of community; it joins those who share a set of social and behavioral norms. In this way, embarrassment establishes connection between individuals as an aid to what we might call ‘sentimental education’—the transmission of values and emotions within a community.

When Aglaya asks a provocative question in an otherwise dignified exchange between Lizaveta Prokofyevna and the Prince, her mother replies “didactically”: ““You know that up to now I have never had occasion to blush before you...though you might have been glad if I had.’ [...] ‘Delicacy and dignity are taught by one’s own heart, not by a dancing master”” (438 [*PSS* 8:365]). Attunement to embarrassment, Lizaveta Prokofyevna’s words imply, can advance a form of sentimental education and instill a sense of decorum: blushes of regret at Aglaya’s lack of delicacy would throw into relief the values and behavior that are approved in that social setting. In short, embarrassment schools the individual in tact.

Tact, like empathy, is a form of mutable knowledge. We might define tact as the action that proceeds from an empathetic consciousness of the other. Writing on different forms of

---

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Cascardi finds in Myshkin an implicit critique of “the beautiful soul” for whom love is possible only as an abstraction and who cannot heed the condition of embodiment and its necessity to human community and knowledge (130-32, 154-56).

knowledge in the human sciences Hans-Georg Gadamer asserted: “By ‘tact’ we understand a special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge from general principles does not suffice” (Gadamer 16). Tact binds individuals in a socially fraught world where man suffers from the rift between his inner consciousness and the outer world.<sup>30</sup> The exercise of tact, like that of empathy, is a means of healing and compensating for this rift.

When she speaks for the sentimental education that may be advanced through the legibility of embarrassment and its inculcation of tact, Lizaveta Prokofyevna is also giving voice to the author’s conviction in the power and value of fiction. Her words gesture towards the possibility of sentimental education of the reader. Just as training in tact is not given by a dancemaster, neither do Dostoevsky’s fictions sound a clear didactic voice. But just as attunement to embarrassment and its lessons in delicacy seeks to extend social cohesion and stabilize decorum, so too does the novel seek to extend empathetic participation to its readers. Participation in fiction, like religious faith, depends on the uniquely human capacity to communicate and form connection with and around things that do not exist in the material, physical world. Training in tact (to quote Gadamer on different forms of knowledge) is “not nourished on the true but on the probable, the verisimilar” (21-22). Literature, too, can provide this same form of sentimental education; the power of fictionality lies in probability or plausibility, and in its verisimilitude to life. In being implicated in the novel’s own circuits of embarrassment, the reader of *The Idiot* is herself instructed in the exercise of tact, delicacy and empathy.

---

<sup>30</sup> Lukács points to the importance of tact to the novel form: “Tact and taste [...] here [in the novel] acquire great constitutive significance: only through them is subjectivity, at the beginning of the novel’s totality and at its end, capable of maintaining itself in equilibrium.” For Lukács, tact is akin to irony as a means by which the novel compensates for the non-identity between the internal and external world (74).

Though he lacks the terms that psychology would later place at our disposal, Dostoevsky explores the nuances of modes of fellow feeling: while empathy may be grounded in the recognition of motives or needs that are universal, it also depends on a relationship to the particularity of the individual. These would-be universal tenets may be learned, stated or transmitted within a community, but empathetic understanding of another individual tempers that axiom with imagination.

What is not represented in the novel, but suggested—and required—by the failure of Myshkin’s compassion to bring good to the world he has entered, is a form of empathy that would take full heed of the other’s alterity, confronting the limits of that which cannot be known. It is an act of shared feeling which at the same time acknowledges the particularity and difference of the other.

This particular understanding of empathy is privileged by Bakhtin in his early work “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (1920-23). Here, Bakhtin contrasts sympathetic identification with a literary character with what he calls “*vzhivanie*” (translated as “live entering”) (25, 61-80).<sup>31</sup> *Vzhivanie* is Bakhtin’s coinage, and a modification of existing terms for related phenomena such as empathy (*vchuvstvovanie*) or co-experiencing (*soperezhivanie*).<sup>32</sup> The distinction of *vzhivanie* is that the empathizer retains a degree of outsidedness (and thus acknowledging their embodiment) to the individual he empathizes with; he does not simply double the feelings or experience of the other, but enriches it.<sup>33</sup> Bakhtin’s notions of *vzhivanie*

---

<sup>31</sup> Alina Wyman has discussed Bakhtin’s concept of *vzhivanie* in relation to Dostoevsky’s novels, finding in Alesha Karamazov the successful embodiment of the principle that failed in Myshkin.

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin’s treatment of these terms takes place in the context of their appearance in the discourse of psychology. See note 27.

<sup>33</sup> “In what way would it enrich the event if I merged with the other? [...] And what would I myself gain by the other’s merging with me? If he did he would see and know no more than what I see and know myself [...] Let him remain outside of me, for in that position he can see and know what I myself do not see and know [...] And in this sense his ordinary sympathizing (*sochuvstvie*) with my life is not a merging of the two of us into a single being and

and “outsidedness” (*vnenakhodimost'*) are forerunners of his later full-blown concept of dialogism, and of novel theory's subsequent privileging of the novel as a site for the experience of alterity.

In the end, *The Idiot* presents redemptive possibility not through an inserted religious ideal (Myshkin) from which moral example or instruction issues. What promises to be a salve to social and moral breakdown proves hard to assimilate to novelistic form. Yet *The Idiot* ends up promoting a novelistic source of reparation—a sentimental education available through the practice of novel reading.

To think about this collision of a theological imperative and a secular literary form and practice in one final way—and in a move that is very much reading against Dostoevsky—we might invoke Feuerbach, a thinker whose materialism was grossly incompatible with Dostoevsky's own vision. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach analyzes religious mysticism, the condition of belief where God is distinct from both Nature and man, where God exists as an imaginary object, yet is not equated either with mind or consciousness. In this instance, Feuerbach claims, “the real object is pathology, the imaginary one, theology; i.e., pathology is converted into theology” (88). By making man—not God—the subject of theology, Feuerbach's project translates theological discourse into the secular disciplines of anthropology or psychology.

Likewise, in *The Idiot*, in the secular province of the novel, what results from the grafting of the Biblical onto the social and novelistic is the conversion of theology into pathology – pathology understood in its various senses: the investigation of abnormality or malfunction in the moral or social sphere; the study of disease (Myshkin's epilepsy, with its transcendent states);

---

is not a numerical duplication of my life, but constitutes an essential enrichment of the event of my life, because my life is co-experienced by him in a new form” (Bakhtin 87-88).

and in its oldest sense, the branch of knowledge that deals with emotions.<sup>34</sup> In the end, in both *The Idiot* it is not theology that grants transcendence or redemption, but pathology; not the messianic tendencies of the hero, but participation in the novelistic study of the emotions and program of sentimental education.

Embarrassment is inevitable, or even necessary, in the novel just as it is in social life. The conditions that give rise to embarrassment are the same ones that allow for empathetic contact between individuals. As I noted in my discussion of Myshkin in the anteroom, the novel (in contrast to the epic) is a world of refracted and fragmented selfhood; individuals select and adjust the roles they play in the social world, manipulating and modifying the parts of their selves that are on display. In a world where wholeness of self prevails, embarrassment would not arise, for, as Goffman showed us, it is the misalignment of these multiple, fragmented, selves that produces situations of embarrassment. This condition begets embarrassment – and it also promotes and necessitates empathy. The condition of fragmentation defines a social world – that is, the modern world—in which wholeness of self is not accessible in any encounter.

Embarrassment is a dialogic condition, arising out of the interaction between the individual and the social context. In the exploration of the dialogic condition in *Crime and Punishment* it is the porousness of Raskolnikov's consciousness that allows both the dialogic fertilization of the idea of murdering the pawnbroker (the overheard fragments of conversation that increase his resolve) and the redemptive, empathetic communion with Sonia. In *The Idiot* Dostoevsky shows us the tragic, ineluctable condition of modernity—the fragmented, modern self in the godless, atomized world, but the art of his narrative fiction also points the way to the redemptive potential that is inherent in this world: the possibility of empathetic connection that

---

<sup>34</sup> On the relation between pathology, religious experience and Myshkin's epilepsy, see Murav 73-88.



does not depend on the accessibility of a whole self (indeed requires its very non-accessibility). We find here an attempt to resolve the problem by which Lukács characterized the novel and modernity; indeed his *Theory of the Novel* concludes with an intimation that in the works of Dostoevsky we will find a new epic (152-53). Into the atomized and morally bankrupt world Dostoevsky places, as an experiment, Prince Myshkin, his “wholly beautiful man,” innocent, whole and Christ-like. Yet Myshkin’s presence in this world proves to be an embarrassment—and incompatible with novelistic form. In the end, what prevails is not the universal compassion practiced by Myshkin, but the redemptive potential that is inherent in the modern, novelistic, world and that requires the participation—and perhaps even embarrassment—of a reader.

## REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist & Vadim Liapunov. Trans. Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990.
- Berman, Anna. “The Idiot’s Romantic Struggle”, *Dostoevsky Studies*, Vol. XII (2008): 81-103
- Cascardi, Anthony J. *The Bounds of Reason: Cervantes, Dostoevsky, Flaubert*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.

- Dalton, Elizabeth. *Unconscious Structure in The Idiot*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979.
- Dames, Nicholas. *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Introduction, Afterword and Commentaries by Paul Ekman. London: Harper Collins, 1999.
- Dostoevskii, F. M. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-90.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky London: Granta, 2003.
- Ermilova, G. G. *Taina kniazia Myshkina: O romane Dostoevskogo "Idiot."* Ivanovo: Ivanovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1993.
- Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years. A Writer in His Time*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. Trans. George Eliot. New York: Harper and Row: 1957.

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. New York: Crossroad, 1989.
- Goffman, Erving. "Embarrassment and Social Organization," *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior*. Chicago: Adeline Publishing Company, 1967.
- Griffiths, Frederick T. and Stanley J. Rabinowitz. *Novel Epics: Gogol, Dostoevsky, and National Narrative*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1990.
- Holland, Kate. *The Novel in the Age of Disintegration: Dostoevsky and the Problem of Genre in the 1870s*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2013.
- Holquist, Michael "The Gaps in Christology: *The Idiot*." *Dostoevsky and the Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977.
- Jones, Malcolm. *Dostoyevsky After Bakhtin: Readings in Dostoyevsky's Fantastic Realism*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Kasatkina, T. A. *Kharakterologiya Dostoevskogo: tipologiya emotsional'no-tsennostnykh orientatsii*. Moscow: Nasledie, 1996.
- Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 2007.

Knapp, Liza. "Myshkin Through a Glass, Guessingly." *Dostoevsky's The Idiot: A Critical Companion*,. Ed. Liza Knapp. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1998: 191-215

Lewis, Pericles. *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*. Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1971.

Martinsen, Deborah. *Surprised by Shame: Dostoevsky's Liars and Narrative Exposure*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2003.

Matzner-Gore, Greta. "Kicking Maksimov out of the Carriage: Minor Characters, Exclusion, and *The Brothers Karamazov*." *Slavic & East European Journal* 58.3 (2014):

Miller, Robin Feuer. *Dostoevskii and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981.

----- . *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale UP.

Miller, Rowland S. *Embarrassment: Poise and Peril in Everyday Life*. New York: The Guildford Press, 1996.

Murav, Harriet. *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique*.  
Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992.

Naiman, Eric. "Kalaganov." *Slavic & East European Journal* 58.3 (2014):

O'Farrell, Mary Ann. *Telling Complexions: The Nineteenth-Century English Novel and the  
Blush*. Durham, NC & London: Duke UP, 1997.

Parrott, W. Gerrod and Rom Harré. "Embarrassment and the Threat to Character." *The  
Emotions: Social, Cultural and Biological Dimensions*. Eds. Rom Harré and W. Gerrod  
Parrott. London: Sage Publications, 1996.

Peace, Richard. *Dostoevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP,  
1971.

Puckett, Kent. *Bad Form: Social Mistakes and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. Oxford: Oxford  
UP, 2008.

Ricks, Christopher. *Keats and Embarrassment*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976.

Shmidt, O. Iu. (ed.) *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia*. Moskva: Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia,  
1926-47.

Tynianov, Iurii. "Dostoevskii i Gogol': K teorii parodii." Petrograd: OPOIAZ, 1921.

Volodin, E. F. "Petit-zhe v *Idiote*." *Dostoevskii: materialy i issledovaniia*, Vol. 6. Ed. G. M. Fridlender. Leningrad, Nauka: 1985. 73-80.

Wiener, Philip P. (ed.) *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. New York: Scribner, 1973.

Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. The Many. Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton, NJ & Oxford: Princeton UP, 2003.

Wyman, Alina "The Progress of Dostoevskii's Ideal Hero: From *The Idiot* to *The Brothers Karamazov*." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Teachers of Slavic and Eastern European Languages, Pasadena, California, January 6-9, 2011.

Young, Sarah. *Dostoevsky's The Idiot and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative: Reading, Narrating, Scripting*. London: Anthem Press, 2004.