

Dostoevsky's Mortal Christ

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For my Dad

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1. Introduction

After Dostoevsky had sent Part I of *The Idiot* to his publisher, he penned two letters that revealed his specific plan for his character, Prince Myshkin. In a letter to A. N. Maikov, dated December 31, 1867 (January 12, 1868), Dostoevsky writes: “Now about the novel, so as to finish with that subject [...] I’ve been tormented by one idea for a long time [...]. This idea is *to depict an absolutely beautiful person* [изобразить вполне прекрасного человека].”¹ Dostoevsky elaborates on his idea of the *прекрасный человек* in a letter to his niece, Sofya Ivanova, dated January 1 (13), 1868:

The main idea of the novel is to portray a positively beautiful person [положительно прекрасного человека]. There’s nothing more difficult than that in the whole world, and especially now. All the writers, and not just ours, but even all the European ones, who ever undertook the depiction of a positively beautiful person, always had to pass. Because it’s a measureless task. The beautiful is an ideal, and the ideal—both ours and 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. (The whole Gospel of John is in this sense; he finds the whole miracle in the Incarnation alone, in the appearance of the beautiful alone).²

¹ F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ v 30 tomakh* (henceforth, *PSS*), vol. 28., bk. 2 (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo “nauka,” 1972-90), 241; Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, vol. 2, 1860-1867, trans. David A. Lowe (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1989), 297.

² *PSS* vol. 28., bk. 2., 251; Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, vol. 3, 1868-1871, trans. David A. Lowe (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1990), 17.

Here, Dostoevsky reaffirms his plan to depict his idea of an absolutely beautiful person through Prince Myshkin. He also states that his idea of beauty is religious, based on the person and nature of Christ. In the second letter to his niece, Dostoevsky singles out Christ's incarnation. Dostoevsky's focus on the Incarnation reveals his nuanced intention for the Christ-like aspects of the prince. The Incarnation becomes the theological concept which informs Dostoevsky's plan for the prince and his idea of Christ-like beauty.

When Christ became incarnate, he became a *mortal*. He became a subjective individual with his own identity and self-consciousness. Christ's incarnation captivates Dostoevsky because God, in Christ, expresses a human personality to other individuals. In her work on Bakhtin, Ruth Coates notes that "the indispensability of the Incarnation [...] consists in the fact that in Christ, God, the ultimate Other, is materialised and historicised [...]."³ God became man, and thus everything commanded in the New Testament was first lived out by an actual man. The ideal of Christ's beauty is manifest in his actions, behavior, and personality. Christ-like beauty is not found in theoretical precepts or idealistic systems but actualized in the mortal Christ. The writers of the Gospels provide a narrative record of Christ's ministry on earth and how he behaved as an individual. Because Christ is man, all his behavior exists in an actual personality and is therefore recognizable and can be imitated by other people.

I want to reconfigure the way in which we discuss Dostoevsky's prince and to conceive of Myshkin as being Christ-like in his experience and embodiment of the incarnate Christ's life on earth. Given that Christ is a mortal, what does that human persona look like,

³ Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49.

as exemplified by the prince, and how (and why) do others receive and evaluate his persona? Rather than limiting myself to the conversation of whether or not Dostoevsky achieved his purpose in making the prince a genuine Christ-like character,⁴ I will approach the prince's Christ-likeness and beauty in a manner that deals with the implications of Dostoevsky's view of Christ's Incarnation and his expression of Christ-like beauty. In this essay I will first focus on how Prince Myshkin's persona embodies Christ-like beauty, through the paradigm of the mortal Christ and Christ-likeness in the New Testament. This is a paradoxical beauty that strays completely away from traditional forms of aesthetics and entails a display of societal weakness and failure. Second, I will discuss how Prince Myshkin reflects the mortal Christ's personality in his relation to the infinite from his position on earth, as a finite being. Third, I will demonstrate how Prince Myshkin's behavior exemplifies Christ-like beauty, reflected in the mortal Christ, which becomes actualized in a specific kind of Christ-like love.

⁴ Scholars who consider that Prince Myshkin is not a "positively beautiful man" argue that he never transforms the world and characters in *The Idiot* through successfully articulating his ideas; that he is too fantastical and removes himself from society through his descent back into idiocy at the novel's conclusion; and that he is complicit in the tragic fates of the characters in the novel, especially in Nastasya Filippovna's death, for he never stops Rogozhin from murdering her. The lack of Prince Myshkin's *measurable results* in the novel, in their eyes, indicates his failure. See Leonid Grossman, *Dostoevsky*, trans. Mary Mackler (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1975), 442-3; Malcolm Jones, *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 16; Murray Krieger, "Dostoevsky's 'Idiot': The Curse of Saintliness," in *The Tragic Vision* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 209-27; Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 229-30; Sarah J. Young, "Holbein's Christ in the Tomb in the Structure of *The Idiot*," *Russian Studies in Literature* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2007-8): 97, <https://doi.org/10.2753/RSL1061-1983440104>.

2. The Prince's "Beautiful" Persona

Scholars have made interesting attempts to find explicit external Christ-like features of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot's* opening chapter. Geir Kjetsaa compares Prince Myshkin to Christ, suggesting that "like the Christ of the Gospel according to St. John, he [the prince] comes 'from above,' from the mountains of Switzerland to the flat Russia."⁵ Multiple critics point out that the description of Prince Myshkin's face resembles the depictions of Christ's face in Russian icons.⁶ These critics make the important observation that from the outset of the novel, Dostoevsky is focused on the prince as representing the physical and human features of Christ. This is Christ as a literal image.

Although Prince Myshkin bears physical similarities to iconographic portrayals of Christ, Dostoevsky operates at another level with his construction of Prince Myshkin's appearance and persona as embodying the Christ-like image. The Christ-like "beauty" the prince displays superficially is, always, that of weakness and inferiority. In this way, the prince functions like a human icon of Christ, and an icon, as Timothy Ware explains, is not a means of salvation but a physical symbol of Christ, the one who saves.⁷

When Dostoevsky introduces Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot's* first chapter, he disarms the prince of all qualities that would appeal to St. Petersburg's society, grant him social

⁵ Geir Kjetsaa, *Fyodor Dostoevsky, A Writer's Life*, trans. Siri Hustvedt and David McDuff (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985), 224.

⁶ See Kjetsaa, *Fyodor Dostoevsky, A Writer's Life*, 224; Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 48; Marina Woronzoff-Dashkoff, "The Sympathetic Vision: Ethical and Aesthetic Patterns in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1995), 53, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/304255765?accountid=10226>; Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *Dostoevsky, Works and Days* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1971), 261.

⁷ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 34.

advantage, or make him attractive. These components all contribute to the prince's Christ-like beauty, which contradicts worldly ideas of beauty. The prince rides in a third-class carriage and "from his hands dangled a meager bundle made of old, faded foulard, containing, apparently, all his traveling possessions."⁸ The prince is dressed like a foreigner and unprepared for Russia's harsh winter. The prince "had been forced to bear on his chilled back all the sweetness of a damp Russian November night, for which he was obviously not prepared. He was wearing a rather ample and thick sleeveless cloak with an enormous hood, the sort often worn by winter travelers somewhere far abroad [...]."⁹ Dostoevsky also writes that "on his feet he had thick-soled shoes with gaiters—all not the Russian way."¹⁰ Rogozhin specifically comments on the prince's "foreign shoes."¹¹ The prince, although he is Russian, is an outsider to Russia because he has lived abroad his entire life. He is only Russian by blood and language, and is a complete stranger to Russia's land, people, and customs. He appears foolish and confused, over authoritative and royal. He is a strange impostor, not Russia's compelling savior. When Lebedev and Rogozhin meet the prince on the train, they mock his poverty and both agree that his paltry "bundle contains [...] [...] his whole essence [суть]."¹² Dostoevsky removes from the prince all attributes that would make him a viable contender in the world or impressive to anyone in Russian society's eyes. He is a figure of fun for his train companions and finalized through his impoverished persona.

⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 6.

⁹ Dostoevsky, 6.

¹⁰ Dostoevsky, 6.

¹¹ Dostoevsky, 7

¹² PSS, vol. 8., 7; Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 7.

Nothing is physically attractive or impressive about the prince. He bears his illness on his face: his eyes' color and expression reveal that he has epilepsy.¹³ He admits to Rogozhin that he has never been cured from his illness and adds that his caretakers in Switzerland “found it impossible to educate [him] systematically because of [his] illness.”¹⁴ The prince's lack of virility becomes more apparent when he discloses: “[...] [B]ecause of my inborn illness, I don't know women at all.”¹⁵ The prince's virginity and absence of romantic experience also separate him from the other men of the world and enhance his Christ-likeness, setting him apart as pure and innocent. Rogozhin remarks that the prince “come[s] out as a holy fool [юродивый] ..., and God loves [his] kind!”¹⁶ Dostoevsky also made note of a passage in Revelation concerning virgins¹⁷: “It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.”¹⁸ The description of the virgins and their behavior on earth matches the prince's trajectory in the novel, especially the prince's insistence on speaking the truth. It also connects the prince's person to Christ's, in that his love is void of *eros*.

The prince's sickly appearance and manner make a sorry first impression on everyone he encounters. When the prince arrives at the Epanchin's apartment, he astonishes the valet with his ragged appearance. Because of his thread-bare clothes, the valet believes that the

¹³ PSS, vol. 8., 6.

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 9.

¹⁵ Dostoevsky, 15.

¹⁶ PSS, vol 8., 14; Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 15.

¹⁷ Geir Kjetsaa, *Dostoevsky and His New Testament* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, Inc., 1984), 75.

¹⁸ Revelation 14:4-5

prince intends to beg General Epanchin for money.¹⁹ Interestingly, in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus refers to John the Baptist, he makes a special note on nice attire: "As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: [...] 'What then did you go out [into the wilderness] to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."²⁰ In the context of this passage, Christ considers John the Baptist "more than a prophet" because John prepares a way for Christ Himself, the messiah and savior. And John's status as prophet precludes "soft clothes" and forces him to dwell in the wilderness, wearing camel fur and subsiding on a diet of locusts and honey. Nowhere in the New Testament are earthly glory and riches associated with Christ and the Christ-like. The prince enters the world looking like a servant and a beggar. In society's eyes, he has no true value, for he has no money or possessions. The prince embodies the opposite of regality and splendor. However, in this "opposite" lies Christ-like beauty.

After General Epanchin meets the prince, he describes the prince to his wife as "destitute" and "a pathetic idiot" who "took beggar's alms."²¹ In light of her husband's warning, Mrs. Epanchin fears that the prince will need monitoring at the dining table like a child. She also notes that the prince "doesn't know where to lay his head."²² Mrs. Epanchin's insult toward the prince echoes Christ's own words about himself. In Matthew's Gospel, "a scribe came up [to Jesus] and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has

¹⁹ PSS, vol. 8., 23. The prince says: "Davecha vash sluga, kogda iâ u vas tam dozhidalsiâ, podozreval, chto iâ na bednost' prishel k vam prosit' [...]."

²⁰ Matthew 11:7-9.

²¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 51.

²² Dostoevsky, 52.

no place to rest his head.”²³ The commentator on *Evangelie Dostoevskogo* suggests that Mrs. Epanchin quotes this passage verbatim in her ridicule of the prince.²⁴ Homelessness and displacement are qualities of Christ on earth. Throughout the novel, the prince never has a residence of his own. He either stays as a patient in a sanatorium or as a guest in someone’s home. His “place” is among the waterfalls and mountains, where he glimpses the eternal order and creation’s total harmony.

In the opening chapters of First Corinthians, Paul explains that the manifestation of Christ-likeness appears as human weakness, which he gleans from Christ’s ministry and death. Paul writes to the church at Corinth that “not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world [...]”²⁵ In this duality, intrinsic in Christ, power and weakness are not only concomitant, but the heavenly image is contingent upon an earthly display of weakness. In his copy of the New Testament, Dostoevsky made markings in First Corinthians on verses where Paul insists that outward displays of Christ-likeness appear foolish and pathetic in the world’s eyes. Dostoevsky’s notes in First Corinthians suggest that Paul’s ideas on human weakness and behaving Christ-like struck Dostoevsky with particular poignance. Dostoevsky marked First Corinthians 4:11-14,²⁶ in which Paul writes: “To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we

²³ Matthew 8:19-20.

²⁴ F.M. Dostoevskii et al., *Evangelie Dostoevskogo*, vol. 2, *Issledovaniia. Materialy k kommentariiu* (Moskva: Russkii mir, 2010), 214. (henceforth, *Evangelie Dostoevskogo*, vol. 2)

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:26-28.

²⁶ Kjetsaa, *Dostoevsky and His New Testament*, 52.

bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”²⁷ Dostoevsky marked another verse in First Corinthians, which comes in the context of Paul writing, “For though I’m free from all, I have made myself a servant to all.”²⁸ Dostoevsky has a pencil mark in the margin of verse 22,²⁹ which reads, “To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”³⁰ Dostoevsky was well aware of this New Testament precedent and insistence on the Christ-like appearing and becoming weak and pitiful. The incarnate Christ’s paradoxical beauty is crucial in approaching Dostoevsky’s text and evaluating his “positively beautiful” Prince Myshkin. If worldly weakness and inferiority are marks of what is truly Christ-like, then we must view the prince’s infirmities and defects as a necessary part of his Christ-like construction—not as indications of his failure.

Although the prince becomes familiar with the world of St. Petersburg as the novel progresses, he never acclimates to world. And despite his moving anecdotes on human suffering, his disarming humility, and his uncanny insight into the human heart, the characters always finalize³¹ and objectify the prince as an idiot. His illness and all the symptoms and repercussions are never separated from his person. Despite the fact that many

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 4:11-14.

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 9:19.

²⁹ Kjetsaa, *Dostoevsky and His New Testament*, 54.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 9:22.

³¹ According to Bakhtin, because Dostoevsky imbues his characters with self-consciousness, they are not capable of being finalized by others. Bakhtin writes that Dostoevsky’s characters “all acutely sense their own unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow [...] any externalizing and finalizing definition of them. As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word.” From Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 59.

of the characters admit the prince has deep insights into human character and a virtuous nature, they still never regard him as a normal member of society, due to his disease, his ideals, and his behavior. This view of the prince is especially apparent in part four of the novel. Both Mr. and Mrs. Epanchin, although they respect the prince and value his friendship, find him unfit to marry Aglaya. Before he is introduced to “society” and gives his manic polemic against Catholicism, Aglaya asks the prince if he will “be able to take a cup of tea and drink it decently.”³² She warns him not to bring up such Prince Myshkinesque topics as “capital punishment or the economic situation in Russia, or that ‘beauty will save the world.’”³³ We also learn that the Epanchins were embarrassed of the prince and apprehensive about introducing him to their social circle in St. Petersburg.³⁴ The prince never transcends his image of inadequacy.

Olga Meerson analyses St. Petersburg society’s view of the prince as an idiot, which prevails throughout the entire novel, despite his undeniable acts of goodness. Through the anthropological lens of taboo, Olga Meerson uncovers that the prince’s idiocy is necessary to his Christ-like beauty, arguing that in *The Idiot* there are no societal taboos in pointing out the prince’s idiocy.³⁵ This explains, in her opinion, why everyone from the author, in “naming his novel *The Idiot*,” to all the characters (including the prince himself), makes overt and derogatory references to the prince’s idiocy.³⁶ However, according to Meerson, because the negative aspects of the prince’s idiocy are subject to “zero-tabooing,” and are referenced and identified inconspicuously, the unnamed taboo that permeates the novel is the positive

³² Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 526.

³³ Dostoevsky, 526.

³⁴ *PSS*, vol. 8., 445.

³⁵ Olga Meerson, *Dostoevsky’s Taboos* (Dresden: Dresden University Press, 1998), 86.

³⁶ Meerson, 87.

aspect of the prince's idiocy. The positive elements, which define the prince's goodness and Christ-likeness, are imbedded in "Myshkin's positive idiocy."³⁷ This unspoken and unsuperficial positive idiocy of the prince is his Christ-like behavior.³⁸ Meerson clarifies the significance of this dichotomy between the unspeakable positive essence of the prince's idiocy vs the spoken negative qualities of the prince's idiocy: "Nothing happens when Aglaia calls Myshkin an ugly mutant and an idiot. But when she openly declares his positive "idiocy" or *iurodstvo*, his ability to forgive the unforgivable, she generates a whole sequence of events which, among other catastrophic consequences, eventually reduce Myshkin to conventional idiocy."³⁹

Through her examination of Dostoevsky's values strictly under what is "taboo," Meerson draws similar to my own, especially in how Dostoevsky conveys his ideas on beauty: that the superficial and conspicuous features of Christ-like beauty are presented negatively, but that a negative mode of presentation discloses the positive. In order for the prince to reflect values absent from the world, he must express himself and be represented in a manner that first and foremost violates societal norms and conventional forms of beauty.

Dostoevsky's beautiful man looks like an ill beggar. However, the absence of worldly glamour in the prince makes him more Christ-like and, therefore, more "beautiful." Although the prince was not born in a manger surrounded by stinking animals, growing up "an idiot" in a mental hospital is by no means a noble origin. Everything about the prince's persona that suggests weakness and inferiority is linked to the mortal Christ and Christ-likeness.

³⁷ Meerson, 89.

³⁸ Meerson, 89-90.

³⁹ Meerson, 90.

Dostoevsky strips the prince of all physical and personal qualities that would make him appeal to the world.

3. The Prince's Orientation to the Temporal and the Eternal Order

The prince's relationship to the extratemporal world establishes a dynamic inherent in the mortal Christ in the New Testament of having an insight into the eternal order from the temporal order, and using the insight into the eternal order as an epistemological basis for how to live in the world/his community. The prince's basis for behavior and action in the temporal world, like the incarnate Christ's, is informed by his extratemporal knowledge and understanding. In other words, Christ's and the prince's respective connections to the eternal realm determine their relationship to and perspective of the actual world, in literal present time and space.

From Dostoevsky's Orthodox Christian perspective, God's plan to sacrifice his Son as a means to save mankind was determined in the eternal order, according to God's will, and enacted in the temporal world in a specific moment in history. This is why Dostoevsky distinguishes the Incarnation with such importance. Not only did God become manifest in a human personality (Christ), but all of Christ's earthly actions, and interactions, and decisions *on earth* originate in and are informed by the mortal Christ's understanding of God's eternal plan and arrangement. In the Gospels we see, as it were, a dramatization of Christ's conjunction between the eternal and temporal order, which is crucial to his personality. A clear example of this dynamic occurs in John 17, when Christ prays to God the Father in front of his disciples. Christ says, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work you gave me to do."⁴⁰ Also, when Pontius Pilate puts Christ on trial, Christ expresses his profound connection to the eternal and how it influences his interactions with others on earth.

⁴⁰ John 17:4.

Christ tells Pilate that “my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”⁴¹ Christ’s unique perspective and participation in sacred space impacts his behavior in the profane world.

The prince’s foundation for living in the temporal world, like Christ, results from his peering into and experience of the eternal order, of sacred space. In his writing on sacred space, Mircea Eliade provides an important contradistinction between sacred and profane space. “Revelation of a sacred space,” writes Eliade, “makes it possible to obtain a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity, to ‘found the world’ and to live in a real sense.”⁴² Eliade then defines profane space, that is space in an utterly profane world. Eliade writes that “for profane experience, on the contrary, space is homogenous and neutral; no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass. Geometrical space can be cut and delimited in any direction; but no qualitative differentiation and, hence, no orientation are given by virtue of its inherent structure.”⁴³ This is the secularist materialist view of geometrical space, which Eliade writes “is the experience of space known to nonreligious man—that is, to a man who rejects the sacrality of the world, who accepts only profane existence, divested of all religious presuppositions.”⁴⁴ In *The Idiot*, it is only after the prince encounters the sacred space of the eternal order that he understands how to live. Eliade’s explanation of the profane world and the presuppositions of its inhabitants is an apt

⁴¹ John 18:36.

⁴² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 23.

⁴³ Eliade, 23.

⁴⁴ Eliade, 23.

description of the communities in which the prince hopes to enter and test himself and his ideas, through interacting with other people.⁴⁵

In Switzerland, before arriving in Russia, the prince's condition is that of sickness and despair. However, the prince undergoes ecstatic experiences and impressions that allow him to straddle both the temporal world and God's eternal order. Dostoevsky achieves this through the prince's epilepsy. After Rogozhin and the prince exchange crosses in Part II of *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky describes in detail how the prince's illness connects him to the heavenly order. Dostoevsky writes that the prince's "mind, [and] his heart, were lit up with an extraordinary light; all his agitation, all his doubts, all his worries were as if placated at once, resolved in a sort of sublime tranquility, filled with serene, harmonious joy, and hope, filled with reason and ultimate cause."⁴⁶ The prince also tells Rogozhin that "at that moment I was somehow able to understand the extraordinary phrase that time shall be no more."⁴⁷ "Also afflicted with the epilepsy from which Dostoevsky suffered," writes Joseph Frank, "the prince is overcome, at the onset of this disease, with the same ecstatic intuition of supernatural plenitude that his creator both cherished as a divine visitation and feared as the harbinger of madness."⁴⁸

The prince's relationship to the extratemporal world establishes a dynamic inherent in Christ's personality in the New Testament: the dynamic of having an insight into the eternal order from the temporal order, and using the insight into the eternal order as an absolute basis for how to live in the world. Dennis Patrick Slattery establishes how examining temporality

⁴⁵ *PSS*, vol. 8., 50.

⁴⁶ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 225-6.

⁴⁷ Dostoevsky, 226-7. Also, as one sees in Dostoevsky's subsequent novel, *Demons*, Kirillov's epileptic fits allow him also to peer into eternity, when "time will be no more."

⁴⁸ Joseph Frank, *The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 316.

and eternity is necessary in understanding Prince Myshkin and his relationship to the novel's world and characters. I agree with Slattery's aim and fundamental point that "temporality and eternity are not mutually exclusive, but neither are they identical or simultaneous."⁴⁹

However, I diverge from Slattery over the following idea that "Myshkin's growing conviction, however, is that by escaping time, by changing the structure of lived temporality in this world, he may reach a timeless order and a spaceless dimension where earth a sky meet."⁵⁰ The prince's reflection of the mortal Christ—the beautiful man—lies not in his fantasies, but in his actions. Before he leaves the Swiss hospital, he emphasizes the importance he places on *action* in the world, on how he will convey his beautiful personality to the world. After his encounter with eternal harmony, the prince says, "Always I thought how I will live; my own fate I wanted to test."⁵¹ The prince believes that "he can live more intelligently than everyone else."⁵² The prince also considers it his "duty" to be with people, even if it is "boring and painful."⁵³ In fact, the prince reaches a moment where he desires to abandon the St. Petersburg community and return to Switzerland, where, in isolation, he can bask in the impressions of eternal harmony and remove himself from profane reality.⁵⁴ However, he elects to act in the world, on behalf of the ideas impressed upon him by the extratemporal realm. The prince "decided at once that to flee [St. Petersburg] was 'impossible,' that it would be almost pusillanimous" *because* "such tasks stood before him that he now did not even have the right not to resolve them, or at least not to give all his

⁴⁹ Dennis Patrick Slattery, *The Idiot: Dostoevsky's Fantastic Prince: A Phenomenological Approach* (New York: Peter Lang, 1983), 45-6.

⁵⁰ Slattery, 46.

⁵¹ PSS, vol. 8., 50. (Translation my own, from, "Vsë dumal, kak iâ budu zhit';svoïu sud'bu khotel ispytat'.")

⁵² Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 61.

⁵³ Dostoevsky, 75.

⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, 307.

strength to their resolution.”⁵⁵ Sequestering himself from others and existing in a fantasy world where he singularly enjoys eternal harmony is no longer a possibility for the prince. He elects to display his beautiful image and demonstrate his active love, in St. Petersburg, which results in a broken mental state and return to idiocy.

Following the example of the mortal Christ’s advent into the world, as described in the first chapter of John’s Gospel, Prince Myshkin enters the world of darkness as a shining light. Mochulsky writes that the prince’s “light [his beautiful nature] arises in their [the other characters’] darkness, and it is seen only because around it is darkness. The image of the prince is not sketched and not sculptured—it is *chiaroscuro*.”⁵⁶ Through his living image and behavior, the prince wants to illuminate the darkness enveloping the temporal world. The prince’s impetus in the novel is *to act in the world on behalf of the infinite*. His interaction with the infinite defines how he behaves on earth—it is the means by which he navigates and acts in the temporal realm. Dostoevsky’s notebooks for *The Idiot* also indicate that he planned for Prince Myshkin to behave and function as a character opposed to the ways of the Russian world. Dostoevsky penned: “N. B. At every moment (inwardly) he asks himself the question: ‘Am I right or are they right?’”⁵⁷ If the prince refused to act on behalf of his idea and existed in lonely contemplation in front of a breathtaking Swiss waterfall, then one could accuse the prince of living in mere fantasy.

However, just as the prince’s Christ-like beauty, as I have suggested in the previous section, indicated weakness and inferiority, and posed a challenge to standard conceptions of

⁵⁵ Dostoevsky, 307.

⁵⁶ Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky, His Life and Work*, trans. Michael A. Minihan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 353.

⁵⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Notebooks for The Idiot*, trans. Katharine Strelsky (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 186.

beauty, Dostoevsky repeats this paradigm in regard to the prince's understanding of the eternal realm. Epilepsy is the sole cause of the prince's revelation. Although the prince accesses a glimpse of divine revelation, the validity of the revelation is not absolute. The source of the prince's knowledge of the eternal order comes as a symptom of his disease. "Myshkin's teachings on beauty, harmony, reconciliation," writes Richard Peace, "are vitiated from the very outset; they are the product of an abnormal state of mind induced by illness."⁵⁸ Dostoevsky, therefore, removes all true credibility from the prince's insights into the eternal order. The prince's insights come from his illness, which should give rise to rational and empirical doubt. This forces the prince's fellow characters (and readers of the novel) to question whether or not the prince has real insight into God's eternal order or if his perception is merely the manifestations of his illness. Does the prince have as much authority into the eternal world as a schizophrenic claiming the voices in his head come from God or someone with a fever who, in his delirium, swore to have received divine truth from a conversation with angels?

Once again, the ambiguity Dostoevsky maintains in *The Idiot* as to whether or not the characters (and readers) should trust the epileptic prince's insights into the eternal order, have a New Testament precedent. In *The Brothers Karamazov* the Grand Inquisitor's charge against Christ is that he did not *prove* to man that he was God. The inquisitor reminds Christ that "there are three powers [...] capable of conquering and holding captive forever the conscience of these feeble rebels, for their own happiness—these powers are miracle, mystery, and authority. You rejected the first, the second, and the third, and gave yourself as

⁵⁸ Richard Peace, *Dostoevsky, An Examination of the Major Novels* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992), 73-4.

an example for that.”⁵⁹ There are numerous examples in the Gospels, in which Christ refuses to *prove* his eternal authority to the crowd.

In Matthew’s Gospel, the crowd, priests, and teachers of the law all demand that Christ provide divine evidence to prove that he is the Son of God—to prove that he has knowledge and direction from the extratemporal realm. Matthew writes, “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”⁶⁰ However, Christ not only refuses to perform a sign, Christ explains that only those without faith seek divine miracles. Further undermining his divinity and a rational connection to his place in the eternal order, Christ also explains that his incarnate self will perish: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”⁶¹ Although Christ compares his death to Jonah’s time in the whale’s belly, Christ never directly affirms his resurrection—that which confirms that he is fully-God. Not only does Christ refuse to show the scribes and Pharisees a sign that he is the messiah, he alludes to his own destruction, his own earthly failure, which suggests that he is not fully-God. Holbein’s painting captures this haunting image.

The most appalling challenge to Christ’s divinity happens as he hangs perishing on the cross, in Mark’s Gospel. The commentator on *Evangelie Dostoievskogo* finds references to this passage and to Christ’s death in the following verses in both his notebooks for *The Idiot* and *The Idiot* itself, suggesting that this scene was of particular significance for

⁵⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 255.

⁶⁰ Matthew 12:38.

⁶¹ Matthew 12:39-40.

Dostoevsky while he composed his novel.⁶² According to Mark's Gospel, "[T]hose who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!'"⁶³

Likewise, the religious figures participate in challenging Christ, in an attempt to expose his lack of divinity: "So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.'"⁶⁴ Yet, Christ will not succumb to their nor the crowd's insistence that he must *prove* his divinity in order to establish his orientation with the eternal realm. Christ insists on maintaining a level of ambiguity as to his eternal origins and knowledge of God's eternal will. Therefore, at any moment, one can call Christ's extratemporal connection into doubt because there is neither empirical evidence in support of this claim, nor does Christ attempt to rationally prove that his acts on earth are on behalf of God's infinite realm. Instead, Christ insists that "a tree is known by its fruit,"⁶⁵ a passage which Dostoevsky marked in his New Testament.⁶⁶

The prince is an image of Christ in his humanity, and Christ's behavior as a human is rooted in the eternal. Dostoevsky preserves, with care, in the prince, this understanding of eternity, while occupying a temporal space. However, beyond Christ's and the prince's link to temporality and infinity, Dostoevsky maintains Prince Myshkin's worldly flaws and weaknesses as a manner of his Christ-likeness. For Dostoevsky ensures at all times that the

⁶² *Evangelie Dostoevskogo*, vol. 2, 234-5.

⁶³ Mark 15:29-30.

⁶⁴ Mark 15:31-32.

⁶⁵ Matthew 12:33

⁶⁶ F.M. Dostoevskii et al., *Evangelie Dostoevskogo*, vol. 1, *Lichnyĭ ekzempliār Novogo Zaveta 1823 goda izdaniia, podarenniy F.M. Dostoevskomu v Tobol'ske v ianvare 1850 goda* (Moskva: Russkii mir, 2010), 49. (henceforth, *Evangelie Dostoevskogo*, vol. 1)

prince has only the testimony of his experience of the eternal, in the finite world, which he experiences from his “idiocy,” without the ability to prove his connection to it.

4. The Prince and Marie in the Swiss Village

To this point the focus has been on Prince Myshkin himself and how he embodies the incarnate Christ and displays the paradoxical beauty of Christ, which consists of weakness and worldly failure. Maintaining the theme of weakness and worldly failure, I have connected Prince Myshkin's immediate outward presentation and personality to the depiction of Christ in the New Testament. There has also been a recurring emphasis on the necessity of the beautiful person to display that beauty through action, as the mortal Christ did. When Dostoevsky mentions in his notebooks for *The Idiot* that the prince will embody "Christian love,"⁶⁷ what does that love look like and mean, following the mortal Christ's example?

In a notebook entry (dated April 16, 1864) Dostoevsky's expresses at length his understanding of Christ's love, in a way that the prince will later emulate in *The Idiot*, written half a decade later. Dostoevsky's thoughts come at the impetus of his wife Masha's death, after seeing her corpse lying on the bier.⁶⁸ Dostoevsky writes that "to love a person *as one's own self* according to the commandment of Christ is impossible. [...] The law of [...] 'I' [the self] is the stumbling block."⁶⁹ Dostoevsky continues: "[But] Christ alone was able to do this [...]. Meanwhile, after the appearance of Christ, as [...] *man incarnate*, it became as clear as day."⁷⁰ For this reason Prince Myshkin tells Rogozhin that "the essence of religious feeling doesn't fit in with any reasoning."⁷¹ Once again, the beautiful image the prince displays defies explanation. One cannot measure it according to established aesthetic forms or

⁶⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Notebooks for The Idiot*, 170.

⁶⁸ She bore a similar countenance, no doubt, to Christ's in Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ*.

⁶⁹ Carl R. Proffer, ed., *The Unpublished Dostoevsky: Diaries and Notebooks (1860-81)*, Vol. 1, trans. T.S. Berczynski et al. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973), 39.

⁷⁰ Carl R. Proffer, ed., *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 39.

⁷¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 221.

standards of success. The Christ-like image, externally, displays weakness. But it becomes discernible in action.

We first see the prince act out this love when he recalls his time in the Swiss village with Marie. The prince's account of Marie also serves as a template for beautiful behavior, explores the nuances of his Christ-like love, and establishes the community's role and responsibility upon encountering the human image of Christ-like beauty. After a French merchant seduces and abandons Marie, the prince describes to the Epanchin women Marie's tragic return to village, focusing on her physical features, which evoke sympathy: "She came home, begging on the way, all dirty, ragged, her shoes torn; she had walked for a week, slept in the fields, and caught a bad cold; her feet were covered with sores, her hands swollen and chapped."⁷² Although she returns to the village sexually assaulted, homeless, and tubercular—bearing the visible image of suffering—neither the villagers, nor Marie's mother, nor the pastor show any kindness or aid to her. They fail to acknowledge her suffering and take part in it with her. On the contrary, they condemn her. They will not love her as Christ commanded. Instead of restoring the image of goodness and innocence in Marie, the villagers define Marie as socially outcast for her sin (themselves failing to acknowledge their own guilt): "Everybody around looked on her as if she were vermin; the old men denounced and abused her, the young ones even laughed, the women abused her, denounced her, looked at her with contempt, as at some sort of spider."⁷³

⁷² Dostoevsky, 68.

⁷³ Dostoevsky, 69.

The trauma of her sexual violation and the village's treatment of her shift Marie's view of herself into someone both exceptionally guilty and irredeemable. Marie approved of the villagers' wicked treatment, for she "considered herself the lowest sort of creature."⁷⁴

The prince is the only one who, having witnessed her suffering, responds to it with sympathy. Due to Prince Myshkin's beautiful nature, he shows Marie Christian love, displaying kindness and co-suffering amidst the village's cruelty. Not only does the prince sympathize with Marie's wretched life, he understands that her suffering has destroyed her sense of self. The prince actively loves Marie in order to restore the purified image of herself and remove her unwarranted guilt. And he loves her without regard to his *I*. Despite his own poverty, the prince sells his only possession of value (a diamond pin) and gives the money to Marie. The prince's physical display of love arises from compassion, not an erotic impulse. He kisses Marie "not because [he] is in love with her,"⁷⁵ but because "[he] really felt pity for her."⁷⁶ He also tells her that he "had never regarded her as guilty [...] and to assure her that she shouldn't regard herself as so low before everyone."⁷⁷

Marina Woronzoff-Dashkoff offers a more specific definition of Dostoevsky's view of Christ-like love, beyond pity (*жалость*), that she has observed throughout Dostoevsky's *oeuvre*. Emotional identification and sympathetic love become the focal point of her understanding of Christian love in Dostoevsky's writing. "In the Christian poetics that characterize Dostoevsky's post-exile writings," writes Woronzoff-Dashkoff, "sympathetic love or compassion becomes the sign of a Christian nature, or it expresses beliefs which

⁷⁴ Dostoevsky, 69.

⁷⁵ Dostoevsky, 70.

⁷⁶ PSS, vol. 8., 60. (My own translation from, "[emu] ee ochen' zhal")

⁷⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 70.

embody Christian tenets.”⁷⁸ Woronzoff-Dashkoff presents the nature of sympathetic love found in *The Idiot*:

Sympathy has a Russian equivalent in the words “*сочувствие*” and “*симпатия*.”

Because sympathy is a response that, in *The Idiot* depends at times on the imaginative projection of self into the other, it is also related to the modern word “empathy.” The Russian word “co-suffering” (*сострадание*) is usually translated as compassion and is roughly synonymous with “pity” (*жалость*). However, “сострадание” retains the original Greek meaning of sympathy as the capacity not just for feeling the sentiments of another person, but for participating in the suffering of another.⁷⁹

The prince reflects beauty through his pursuit of delivering Marie from her suffering condition through both compassion and “co-suffering.” Elizabeth Dalton notes, similarly, that the prince “tries to redeem a world of cruelty and darkness [...] as Christ did, through loving participation in its suffering.”⁸⁰ Her point highlights again the actual display and kind of love that Christ expressed to his fellow human beings. Like the mortal Christ, the prince shows his love through suffering with those who suffer.

It is necessary to examine the details and process of Prince Myshkin’s active Christ-like love, beyond his co-suffering. Despite the deep connection Prince Myshkin will develop with the children at the Swiss village, the children even dislike the prince when they first encounter him. And they are the first ones to bear witness to the prince’s outward display of beauty. Dostoevsky ensures that nothing about his prince is coercive or charming to the children. His prince exudes weakness and inferiority to match his perspective of the mortal

⁷⁸ Woronzoff-Dashkoff, “The Sympathetic Vision,” 11.

⁷⁹ Woronzoff-Dashkoff, “The Sympathetic Vision,” 4.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Dalton, *Unconscious Structure in The Idiot: A Study in Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 145.

Christ, as depicted in the New Testament. The children make the same mocking observations of the prince as the narrator and the other characters. “The children disliked me at first,” Prince Myshkin tells the Epanchin women. “I was so big, I’m always so clumsy; I know I’m also bad-looking ... finally, there was the fact that I was a foreigner. The children laughed at me at first, and then even began throwing stones at me when they spied me kissing Marie.”⁸¹ The prince’s external appearance and status, as discussed in the previous section, undermine him and detract from how the children perceive him. The children respond with mockery and violence when they spectate the prince’s beautiful behavior (which is his Christ-like love).

However, the prince endures the mistreatment. Once the children continue to *witness* the prince’s active love for Marie and identify Marie’s unfortunate condition, the children discontinue abusing Marie and “soon start[] to feel sorry for Marie.”⁸² They become co-sufferers with her. Through imitating the prince’s personality and actions, the children radiate the image of Christ-like beauty: they speak to her politely; they feed her; they clothe her; they embrace and kiss her and tell her that they love her. They visit her as she dies from tuberculosis. Marie undergoes a literal transformation from the love shown to her: “Marie almost lost her mind from this sudden happiness; she had never dreamed of anything like it; she was [...] joyful [...].”⁸³ The prince tells more of how the children’s love regenerated Marie: “Because of them, I assure you, she died almost happy. Because of them, she forgot her black woe.”⁸⁴

After Marie dies the children *continue* to emulate the prince’s example, *on their own accord*. As individuals they take on the responsibility to love personally those in their midst.

⁸¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 68.

⁸² Dostoevsky, 71.

⁸³ Dostoevsky, 71.

⁸⁴ Dostoevsky, 73.

This tender passage (narrated by the prince) captures the extent of the children's transformed personalities:

Then suddenly in the morning they come and tell me that Marie is dead. Here there was no holding the children back: they decorated the whole coffin with flowers and put a wreath on her head. [...] But when it was time to carry the coffin, the children all rushed to do it themselves. As they couldn't really carry it, they helped, they ran after the coffin, all of them crying. Since then Marie's little grave has been constantly venerated by the children; every year they decorate it with flowers, and they've planted roses all around it.⁸⁵

Because the children bear the prince's beautiful image, the children's love for Marie is not some sort of evanescent affection that existed only during the short time they pitied her. Their love for Marie persists even after her death. They actively express their love by maintaining her grave and keeping it with flowers and preserving her in their memory. In fact, the children in the Swiss village treat Marie's coffin and grave as Alyosha instructs the boys at Ilyushechka's funeral at the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Scholars point out the similarities between Prince Myshkin and the Christian hero of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha. "The 'positively beautiful individual'—Prince Myshkin," writes Mochulsky, "is Alyosha's spiritual brother."⁸⁶ Predrag Cicovacki also points out that "Prince Myshkin is Dostoevsky's first major attempt to portray a beautiful man. Alyosha Karamazov is the second."⁸⁷ Much of the prince's behavior in the Swiss village and his

⁸⁵ Dostoevsky, 73.

⁸⁶ Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky, His Life and Work*, 596.

⁸⁷ Predrag Cicovacki, *Dostoevsky and the Affirmation of Life* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 207.

interaction with children, in fact, foreshadows Zosima's Weltanschauung and *The Brothers Karamazov's* conclusion.

Zosima, Alyosha's spiritual teacher, also devotes special attention to children in his exhortations. Zosima emphasizes the responsibility adults have to children. Zosima instructs adults to, "Keep company with yourself and look to yourself every day and hour, every minute, that your image be ever gracious."⁸⁸ Zosima is concerned with how the adult's image influences children and their sense of good and evil. Zosima explains that an "unsightly and impious image" can "remain[] in [...] [the child's] defenseless heart."⁸⁹ "You did not know it," warns Zosima, "but you may thereby have planted a bad seed in him, and it may grow, and all because you did not restrain yourself before the child, because you did not nurture in yourself a heedful, active love."⁹⁰

Zosima's words, in a sense, clarify the beauty behind Prince Myshkin's behavior, as well as the absence of goodness in the Swiss village. The prince, unlike the adults in the village, sows good seeds in the children's hearts, and their personalities transform. They cease to emulate the bad images of the unloving adults, for the plants from the bad seeds have withered.

The prince's story also reveals how the world responds when the law of the self is violated by one who "loves a person *as oneself* according the commandment of Christ."⁹¹ Once the prince demonstrates Christ-like love through his compassion for Marie, the adults of the village witness his love and detest it. They relish abusing Marie: the sadistic adults

⁸⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 319.

⁸⁹ Dostoevsky, 319.

⁹⁰ Dostoevsky, 319.

⁹¹ See page 20 of this paper.

even “wanted to condemn her and punish her.”⁹² The grown-ups’ rejection of Christ-like love becomes even more apparent when they witness the children’s imitation of the prince. They believe the prince has corrupted the children, they forbid the children to see the prince, and they persecute the prince. This story shows that those confronted with the reflection of Christ either embrace the image and are moved by it or reject it. It is always a matter of the individual’s will and responsibility.

In her analysis of Prince Myshkin’s sojourn in the Swiss village, Liza Knapp points out that “the tale of Marie—where Myshkin shows his Christ-like love in action—is part dreamy Swiss miracle and part a warning of a socially subversive force that can create chaos.”⁹³ Knapp argues that “especially disconcerting for the adults was that Myshkin did not judge Marie. Here Myshkin imitates Jesus in his refusal to judge a fallen woman. He loves in a seditious way that threatens authority and divides families.”⁹⁴ Because Christ-like love, by its nature, violates the laws of man, the community rejects and condemns the bearer of Christ-like love and those loved in a Christ-like manner.

Christ speaks directly to this conflict in the Gospel of Matthew⁹⁵ in a passage Dostoevsky marked in his New Testament.⁹⁶ Christ tells his followers “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”⁹⁷ Christ prepares his followers for ineluctable rejection and suffering they will receive, bearing his image. He also addresses the subversion and chaos that bearing his image will cause in

⁹² Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 70.

⁹³ Liza Knapp, “Myshkin Through a Murky Glass, Guessingly,” in *Dostoevsky’s The Idiot, A Critical Companion*, ed. Liza Knapp (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 194.

⁹⁴ Knapp, 194.

⁹⁵ See Matthew 10:16-22.

⁹⁶ Kjetsaa, *Dostoevsky and His New Testament*, 18-9.

⁹⁷ Matthew 10:16.

their communities—and even in their families: “Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”⁹⁸

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Christ’s message and Christ-like love not only create schisms within families and communities, but those who behave like Christ are to expect persecution and rejection. However, it is not the one who transforms society who bears Christ’s image. On the contrary, Christ maintained his personality despite the suffering and opposition he faced. Dostoevsky follows this Christian paradigm. Triumph results from enduring pain and ridicule and not from a measurable result. For the world received Christ in exactly this same way: the world mocked him, rejected him, and executed him. Persevering against hate and maintaining love, despite the suffering, is a direct form of *imitatio Christi*. The prince does not verbally preach Christ’s message; he enacts Christ message in the form of his behavior. The children respond not to the magic of his words but to the goodness and beauty of his deeds toward another individual.

The children’s Christ-like love does not stop with Marie. They themselves continue to emulate beautiful behavior. On their own initiative, they take responsibility for the suffering of a mentally ill man and also restore his happiness. “And if you knew what our children became for him in the end...But I’d better tell you about the patient later,”⁹⁹ the prince tells the Epanchin women. The prince neither returns to this sick man’s story nor explains the children’s role in his life, but that is inessential. What is essential is that the children continued to voluntarily love those who suffer. With the prince’s time in

⁹⁸ Matthew 10:21-22.

⁹⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 68.

Switzerland, Dostoevsky reveals, once again, that society's response to the Christ-like image is rejection and hatred. For Christ-like love opposes man's nature. However, as a part of "co-suffering" there is a charge to the community to love the sufferer in their midst—to take responsibility for the suffering individual and restore that person's happiness and sense of self. Marie's transformation begins when she encounters Prince Myshkin's love and responds to it with positivity (not repudiation). But her renewal does not stop with Prince Myshkin. Marie's transformation is complete only once the children—who are part of her community—involve themselves with actively loving her and "co-suffering" with her.

5. The Prince and Nastasya Filippovna in St. Petersburg

When the prince's train pulls into St. Petersburg, he enters a modern world enveloped in spiritual turpitude. As Joseph Frank notes: "The world into which the prince is plunged upon his unexpected arrival in St. Petersburg is locked in the grip of conflicting egoisms, a world in which the desire for wealth and social advantage, for sexual satisfaction, for power over others, dominates and sweeps away all other humane feelings."¹⁰⁰ The members of the St. Petersburg community, as in the Swiss village, have no compassion toward the victimized and suffering. The world's darkness is highlighted in St. Petersburg through society's pitiless treatment of Nastasya Filippovna. Between the ages of seven and eight, Nastasya experiences the horrific deaths of her three family members: her mother from an estate fire, her father in a fit of madness, and her younger sister from sickness. Through Nastasya's character, we witness the personal tragedy of how the modern world regards its most helpless being: an orphaned child. In his epistle, James unequivocally instructs one how to *treat* orphans: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."¹⁰¹

The prince first hears about Nastasya on the train ride to St. Petersburg, but he is not aware of her condition until he *sees* her portrait. Although he notices her physical beauty, his focus is on her internal struggle, which her countenance displays. By beholding her face, the prince discerns that "her fate is no ordinary one" and that "she has suffered terribly."¹⁰² When the prince discusses the portrait with Mrs. Epanchin and her daughters, he appears

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*, 580.

¹⁰¹ James 1:27.

¹⁰² Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 36.

stunned and remarks, again, that “there’s so much suffering . . . in that face.”¹⁰³ This is the Epanchin women’s cue to acknowledge Nastasya’s suffering. In seeing her suffering, they would sympathize with Nastasya, and, therefore, begin to treat her with compassion. This would begin a Christ-like behavioral shift in the practice of their society. The women, too, would reflect Christ-like beauty, along with the prince. However, they neglect to see the pain that Nastasya’s face expresses and co-suffer with her. Mrs. Epanchin considers this “raving” on the prince’s part, and expresses her contempt through a metaphorical slap of Nastasya’s face: “With an arrogant gesture she flung the portrait down on the table.”¹⁰⁴ The conversation moves further away from the prince’s observation when the Epanchin women limit their discussion to Nastasya’s external appearance. They concentrate on the *power* of Nastasya’s physical beauty, and its potential to disrupt the world. They still buy into her objectified image and consider her guilty. Although the men in their community, because of their attraction to Nastasya’s physical beauty, have violated and dehumanized Nastasya Filippovna, the Epanchin women deflect the responsibility of the men and place it on Nastasya’s appearance. Her beauty is responsible—the culprit—for the male character’s sexual appetites. Contrarily, the prince focuses on her emotional suffering and the possibility that her suffering has to destroy her interior life and erase her proper sense of self.

From seeing her picture, the prince detects that Nastasya suffers in a way that is similar to Marie. The prince even kisses the cheek of Nastasya’s portrait, as he kissed Marie’s cheek, a gesture stemming from sympathy and compassion, not lust. As in the Swiss village, where the prince was the only person to *recognize* the sufferer in the community

¹⁰³ Dostoevsky, 80.

¹⁰⁴ Dostoevsky, 80.

(before the children follow his example), the prince is the only member of St. Petersburg society who acknowledges Nastasya's suffering.

As with Marie in Switzerland, Nastasya Filippovna's suffering comes directly from the cruelty and lack of responsibility of her community. They are both innocent women who have been sexually assaulted, and then considered guilty and "fallen" by their respective communities. Nevertheless, a major distinction separates Marie's and Nastasya's situations. In Switzerland, a foreigner seduces Marie, takes her away from her village, sexually violates her, and abandons her. Marie then returns to her community, who judges her. However, with Nastasya, the individual who sexually assaults her is not only a member of her community, he takes on the role of her adoptive father after Nastasya's parents die. He assumes responsibility for the control of innocent Nastasya's life, yet sexually objectifies and uses her. Not incidental to the cultural context of the novel, Nastasya's father comes from a more noble family than Totsky.¹⁰⁵

Robin Feuer Miller examines how, not only the novel's characters, but the implied narrator, too, participates in condemning and objectifying Nastasya. Concerning the narrator's presentation of Nastasya's tragic past and her relationship with Totsky, Miller writes that "the narrator suddenly takes the reader back eighteen years to the painful details of her childhood. But his tone does not change; he relates Nastasya's history from the distorted, uncompassionate point of view of the seducer Totsky; he appropriates Totsky's self-justifications."¹⁰⁶ Miller's point accentuates, at a metafictional level, Nastasya's powerlessness and the excess of cruelty she experiences. Nastasya faces oppression even

¹⁰⁵ Dostoevsky, 40.

¹⁰⁶ Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky and The Idiot*, 101.

from an outside force—her external author—who finalizes her as a seductress and crazy woman.¹⁰⁷ Nastasya is a traumatized orphan in need of compassion and serious help.

Totsky's reprehensible treatment of Nastasya Filippovna is antithetical to Christ-like treatment of children. In the Gospels Christ speaks definitively about how to behave toward children. Christ tells his disciples that "whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."¹⁰⁸ Beyond Totsky's sexual crimes against Nastasya, for which he never atones, as the novel unfolds, the male characters continue to treat Nastasya as a commodity. Totsky wishes to marry General Epanchin's oldest daughter, to which General Epanchin consents, but Totsky also wants Nastasya to get married, for this would assure him that Nastasya would no longer harass him for his unapologetic wrongdoings. In order to make Nastasya more "profitable," Totsky attaches an enormous dowry to Nastasya. Totsky and General Epanchin, "for their own advantage" hope "to buy Ganya by selling him Nastasya Filippovna as a lawful wife."¹⁰⁹ Ganya agrees to marry "another man's mistress,"¹¹⁰ "only for money" because his soul is "greedy."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Miller's point has implications for the reader's role in recognizing Nastasya's pain and co-suffering with her. Bakhtin identifies Nastasya as one of Dostoevsky's heroes who "always seeks to destroy that framework of other people's words about [...] [her] that might finalize and deaden [...] [her]. Sometimes this struggle becomes an important tragic motif in the character's life (as, for example, with Nastasya Filippovna)." From Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 59.

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 18:5-6.

¹⁰⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 50.

¹¹⁰ Dostoevsky, 121.

¹¹¹ Dostoevsky, 50.

When Rogozhin and his gang crash Nastasya's party, he proposes to Nastasya not with a ring, but with money.¹¹² He hopes to seduce her with wealth, as their society is greedy and venal. However, money has no sway over Nastasya.¹¹³ Nastasya is fully aware that the males in her community regard her as nothing more than an auction item, as she exclaims that Rogozhin "was bargaining for me: he started at eighteen thousand, then suddenly jumped to forty, and then to this hundred here."¹¹⁴ Whether it be the wealth Ganya will receive from Nastasya's dowry in the marital scheme, or the obscene amounts of money with which Rogozhin hopes to buy Nastasya as his bride, the men commodify her humanity.

Nastasya's experience of being offered for sale and bargained for like a commodity influences her reading of Revelation (the Apocalypse) and informs her view of how to *behave* and *interact with others* in the world. When Lebedev discusses the Apocalypse with the prince, Lebedev claims that Nastasya believes "that we live in the time of the third horse, the black one, and the rider with a balance in his hand, because in our time everything is in balances and contracts, and people are only seeking their rights [...]."¹¹⁵ As a victim of the world whose entire value system consists in the pursuit of the *I*, Nastasya ascertains both the darkness that pervades her community and the subsequent need for responsibility in her community, as a means toward restoration. Sarah J. Young points out that "connecting money and mercantilism to the third horse, and to the Apocalypse in general, places responsibility for the nearness of Judgement firmly on human action, characterizing wealth and the negative emotions and actions that spring from it, as James does, as major source of

¹¹² Dostoevsky, 160.

¹¹³ Dostoevsky, 45.

¹¹⁴ Dostoevsky, 161.

¹¹⁵ Dostoevsky, 201.

strife and sin.”¹¹⁶ She argues that this “reinforces the notion of man’s responsibility for the current physical and emotional environment [...]”¹¹⁷ The prince’s Christ-like image, therefore, fulfills what Nastasya perceives as an appalling void in the community’s behavior. The prince forsakes wealth and makes himself responsible for those suffering in his presence.

Still, like every character in the novel, Nastasya Filippovna, before all else, notices the prince’s lack of standard beauty and his weakness, based on his physical appearance. When Nastasya Filippovna meets the prince for the first time in Ganya’s residence, she throws her coat at the prince, having taken “him for a lackey.”¹¹⁸ Once she discovers that Myshkin is a prince, she is perplexed at the lack of power and regality he demonstrates. She also cannot understand why the prince did not stand up for himself and admonish her.

However, it is not until she *witnesses* the prince’s unique behavior, which counters the social order, that she understands his beauty. After the prince stops Ganya from slapping his sister’s face, Ganya strikes the prince’s cheek. The prince does not retaliate in kind. His only concern is for Varya’s safety, not for the pain he felt from the blow and the public humiliation. The prince’s humble and meek response to Ganya’s insulting gesture, astonishes Nastasya. As if she had an epiphany, Nastasya’s “usually pale and pensive face [...] was now visibly animated by a new feeling.”¹¹⁹ Like the Swiss children who understand the prince’s beautiful nature after witnessing his behavior toward Marie, and Marie herself after she experiences the prince’s Christ-like love, Nastasya apprehends the prince’s beautiful personality. However, in this scene, Dostoevsky lays the foundation for a pivotal conflict in the novel, which will be further analyzed below: Nastasya’s will. Unlike the Swiss children

¹¹⁶ Sarah J. Young, “Dostoevskii's *Idiot* and the Epistle of James,” 412-3.

¹¹⁷ Young, 413.

¹¹⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 104.

¹¹⁹ Dostoevsky, 117.

and Marie, who respond positively once they recognize the prince's beauty, Nastasya's will affects her attitude toward and reception of the prince's Christ-like behavior. Although she recognizes not only that the prince's behavioral image challenge the practices of the world, but also the beauty inherent in that behavior, "she still seemed unwilling to show it, and the mockery remained as if forcedly on her face."¹²⁰ How Nastasya views the prince, in this scene, foreshadows the nature of the scandal at her name day party and informs the trajectory of the novel's plot.

When Nastasya throws her party, she is now acutely aware that the prince has a nature and mode of being completely opposed to everyone whom she has encountered. She has witnessed the prince's behavioral image at Ganya's. She now wishes to see how the prince will treat her. When the conversation turns toward bargaining for her marriage, and whom she should marry (with no concern for her opinion), to everyone's surprise, Nastasya suggests that the prince ought to choose her husband. Nastasya explains her decision: "The prince is this for me, that I believe in him as the first truly devoted man in my whole life. He believed in me from the first glance, and I trust him."¹²¹ In an indirect manner, she declares publicly that she has identified the prince's Christ-like beauty and realizes his way is the needed light to dispel the darkness of their community. She believes that the prince's behavior has the capacity to transform her life.

While Prince Myshkin only kept company with Marie in Switzerland, the prince offers Nastasya his hand in marriage. However, the essence of his active Christ-like love remains consistent: he does not love Nastasya romantically, "but with pity,"¹²² or, more

¹²⁰ Dostoevsky, 117.

¹²¹ Dostoevsky, 154.

¹²² Dostoevsky, 208.

accurately, with “co-suffering,” as he loved Marie. The prince articulates to Nastasya both his opinion of her and his intention to marry her, which completely contradicts the way in which society has treated and regarded her, and is consistent with his mode of love. He first expresses no regard for his own ego and explains that he has placed Nastasya above himself: “I told you just now that I will take your consent as an honor, and you are doing me an honor, and not I you.”¹²³ Once the prince hears laughter from the crowd, he realizes that his idea cannot be conveyed in speech, only in presentation and action. Although he insists that “he understands what honor is” and that what he “said was the truth,”¹²⁴ he focuses on the actual praxis of his Christ-like love: “You need much care, Nastasya Filippovna,” says the prince. “I will take care of you. [...] I will respect you all my life.”¹²⁵

The prince’s marriage proposal is urgent. Christ-like love “cares little about that problematic future but puts the whole emphasis on the now—the only decisive time for love.”¹²⁶ He proposes to counteract Ganya’s and, subsequently, Rogozhin’s proposals. He knows that Nastasya will either be miserable with the vindictive Ganya or murdered by Rogozhin because of his insatiable passion for her. The prince understands that in her current state in society, marriage is the appropriate act to begin her renewal. He wants to challenge society’s view of her as a “kept” or “fallen” woman and restore her dignity. More importantly to the prince’s relation to the mortal Christ, his marriage is void of sexual desire. As the prince expresses, he is willing to dedicate his entire life to restoring Nastasya’s happiness and self-respect. He demonstrates Christ-like love according to the context of the

¹²³ Dostoevsky, 168.

¹²⁴ Dostoevsky, 168.

¹²⁵ Dostoevsky, 168.

¹²⁶ Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 26.

one in need. He elevates the other over the self, which is a form of sacrificial love. For the sufferer's life takes precedence over the one who displays active love to the sufferer.

However, the prince also discerns the complex nature of Nastasya's psychology and unhappiness. He recognizes Nastasya's perturbed will and masochistic impulse come from her suffering. He tells Nastasya, "You were just going to ruin yourself irretrievably, because you would never forgive yourself for that: but you're not guilty of anything. It can't be that your life is already completely ruined. [...] You're proud, Nastasya Filippovna, but you may be so unhappy that you actually consider yourself guilty."¹²⁷ The prince fears that, due to society's wicked treatment of her, she has taken on as her identity her objectified image. Her community has sown an evil seed in her heart, and it has grown into a self-destructive will.

While the party members ridicule the prince's declaration of love and suspect him of having ulterior motives, Nastasya—the unhappy one in need of renewal—has a different response: "Thank you, Prince, no one has ever spoken to me like that [...]. They all bargained for me, but no decent person has ever asked me to marry him."¹²⁸ Prince Myshkin assumes the responsibility for what has happened to her and what will happen to her, at no benefit to himself. Nastasya alone *recognizes* the beauty in the unique form of active love that the prince exhibits, as she recognized it displayed at Ganya's apartment. But now this love is directed toward her. Now she must freely accept his proposal or reject it.

Sarah J. Young argues that "we cannot begin to understand the hero's [the prince's] actions without first addressing hers [Nastasya's]."¹²⁹ "If the novel is 'about' anything on the level of plot," continues Young, "it is surely the collision of the heroine's outraged suffering

¹²⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 168.

¹²⁸ Dostoevsky, 168.

¹²⁹ Sarah J. Young, *Dostoevsky's The Idiot and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative: Reading, Narrating, Scripting* (London: Anthem, 2004), 29.

and the hero's compassion, and it is therefore necessary to examine both sides of the relationship."¹³⁰ I agree with Young. Examining Nastasya's agency and individuality is a necessary component to demonstrating Dostoevsky's vision of beauty and Christ-like love in *The Idiot*.

The difference in how Marie's and Nastasya's respective communities treat them, as well as how they perceive the treatment of their communities, has major ramifications for their psychologies and how they respond to the prince's Christ-like love. Marie considers herself a lowly creature because her community condemns her, but she freely accepts the love that the prince (and the children) give her, and through this acceptance of their love is able to return to a state of happiness. Marie also welcomed, passively, not only the way in which her community treated her, but approved of her community's finalized view of her self as a "fallen woman." Although the prince, from the outset, displays the same active love toward Nastasya and Marie, Nastasya and Marie are two completely individual subjects, with their own unique personalities. The prince does not fail to see this difference. The prince is aware of the suffering in Nastasya's face, yet he also detects "boundless pride and contempt, almost hatred, in that face."¹³¹ Nastasya is a different type of "fallen woman" from Marie. She is not a passive victim, for she refuses to acknowledge that society's treatment of her is just or good. She has a clear understanding of the world's darkness, the need for a renewing love as an antidote, and that her suffering is a consequence of her greedy and egotistical community. In St. Petersburg, Dostoevsky adds a new dimension to Nastasya's pain: The community in St. Petersburg, unlike the children in Switzerland, never follows the prince and

¹³⁰ Young, 29.

¹³¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 79.

emulates his Christ-like beauty. They never take responsibility for Nastasya's suffering and become co-sufferers with Nastasya.

Psychologically, Nastasya is more complex than Marie. Recognizing that her innocence has been lost and that her community neglects and perpetuates her suffering, has hurdled her into a chasm of despair. Kristeva argues that Nastasya's type of despair has a metaphysical and religious dimension, for it constitutes a total loss of one's self. "My depression points to my not knowing how to lose—I have been unable to find a valid compensation for the loss? It follows that any loss entails the loss of my being—and of Being itself. The depressed person is a radical, sullen atheist."¹³² Indeed, Nastasya "ceased to value herself."¹³³ A crucial theme in Dostoevsky's work is "man's perpetual battle for self-respect. Without self-respect a man cannot truly be human; without it, his life goes to pieces."¹³⁴ In Dostoevsky's world, when one loses respect for himself or herself, one ceases to see the image of God in oneself and views themselves and society with abjection.

With this in mind, the prince's mission in St. Petersburg becomes clear: to restore Nastasya's happiness (as he did with Marie's). Restoring her happiness, psychologically, resurrects her Being from the abyss. Mirroring his treatment of Marie in Switzerland, Prince Myshkin's medium for reflecting beauty in Russia is his active Christ-like love for Nastasya Filippovna, which involves freely offering his love to her at all times, co-suffering with her, and taking full responsibility for her, when the rest of her community neglected and dehumanized her.

Kristeva also writes that

¹³² Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 5.

¹³³ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 44.

¹³⁴ Kjetsaa, *Fyodor Dostoevsky, A Writer's Life*, 46.

depression is the hidden face of Narcissus, the face that is to bear him away into death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in a mirage. [...] This time, however, we shall not encounter the bright and fragile amatory idealization; on the contrary, we shall see the shadow cast on the fragile self [...]. The shadow of despair.¹³⁵

This is the mirage upon which Nastasya Filippovna gazes and operates accordingly. The black mirage influences the manner in which she views herself in the past, present, and future, along with how she views others. The prince wishes to dispel this mirage, which has caused her to plummet into an illusory world where her Being is defiled, unredeemable, and, therefore, irreconcilably lost. In this mirage, her trauma and depression define her. Ironically, for Nastasya any real glimpses of hope and acts of goodness appear as themselves illusory. Imprisoned by her trauma in this false reality of incurable despair, she vocalizes a longing for death. The possibility of the world that the prince offers Nastasya seems to her, in her state, an incomprehensible reality and way of life. The prince makes it his mission, through his love, to assert that the view of everyone toward her in the novel (including the narrator himself) has created this mirage, where her self-destruction and death are oases in the desert of her life. The Prince recognizes that this mirage is not Nastasya's reality, but a symptom of her trauma and suffering, which he praises her for bearing. The prince identifies the exact essence of this shadowy mirage: total unhappiness.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 5.

¹³⁶ Freud writes that “neurotics are dominated by the opposition between reality and phantasy. If what they long for the most intensely in their phantasies is presented to them in reality, they none the less flee from it; and they abandon themselves to their phantasies the most readily where they need no longer fear to see them realized.” From Sigmund Freud, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case Study of Hysteria (“Dora”),” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 231.

Before the prince's arrival in St. Petersburg, society had confined Nastasya to the cage of their objectified image of her. With no foreseeable exit, her only act of freedom and will are to spite her wrongdoers and wallow in her loss of Being. For this reason she flaunts, through hyperbole, her objectified image,¹³⁷ sows discord in her community, and flirts with violence and death. As she admits, the trajectory of her approach to life will either lead to her drowning herself or electing death by Rogozhin's knife,¹³⁸ which is a kind of suicide. Even if it means self-destruction, Nastasya attempts "to establish herself as a conscious human subject, retain the right to utter the last word about herself, and escape objectification and finalization by others. In doing so, she frees herself from the control of others in order to direct her own existence and script her own future."¹³⁹ Nastasya's pride and contempt from being objectified have left her craving total freedom and individuality. With complete freedom she—and she alone—has the ability to define her self and determine how to act. However, while Nastasya understands that her suffering has come at the cost of man's lack of responsibility and love, this does not make her exempt from personal responsibility and the impact of her actions in the world. Nastasya's fate is still contingent upon her will, upon her choice. It is totally up to her to choose Rogozhin's knife or the prince's hand. Although she has been objectified and dehumanized, she has not lost her human agency and her freedom to live.

Nastasya bears the burden of total freedom. She knows that receiving the prince's Christ-like love is the only path toward restoring her happiness. However, to change, to forgive without being forgiven, to choose a way opposed to the laws of nature and the laws

¹³⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 169-70.

¹³⁸ Dostoevsky, 215-6, 455.

¹³⁹ Young, *Dostoevsky's The Idiot and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative*, 39.

of the self, all require an enormous act of free will. In Dostoevsky's writing, pursuing the road to a renewed self amidst the presence of unconditional love is an onerous challenge for a subject consumed by pride and despair. *Crime and Punishment* ends not with Raskolnikov's renewal, but on the starting point of an arduous journey toward restoration, through Raskolnikov's reading of the New Testament and reception of Sonya's active love. Yet unlike Raskolnikov, Nastasya cannot bear to embrace the prince's love and the path of forgiveness, despite knowing that his Christ-like love is the only means for her happiness to be resurrected. The burden of her will manifests in her vacillating between Rogozhin and the prince. She, therefore, chooses to finalize herself according to her false objectified image as one who will "destroy"¹⁴⁰ the prince and is unworthy of him and his love. Vyacheslav Ivanov points out that Nastasya convinces herself that she is "a woman of ill repute" and that it would be "far better, therefore, that she herself should perish; her destiny wills it, and it serves her right."¹⁴¹ In the end, Nastasya chooses death over the course of renewal.

According to Dostoevsky, without a totally free will, man ceases to be a human subject, but an essentialized machine. But having a free will precludes defining man as a rational being. Predrag Cicovacki notes that "despite the expectations of the Enlightenment philosophers, man's reason and his will power can stand in irreconcilable opposition to one another. Our reason can construct the Crystal Palace, but our will prefers freedom in the darkness of an underground cellar."¹⁴² In Dostoevsky's world, reason acts on behalf of one's will. For with a totally free will one may desire and choose what harms himself/herself over what is beneficial or what reason dictates is good. In the context of *The Idiot*, Nastasya

¹⁴⁰ PSS, vol. 8., 142. (My own translation from "sgubit")

¹⁴¹ Vyacheslav Ivanov, *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky*, trans. Norman Cameron (London: Harvill Press, 1952), 100.

¹⁴² Cicovacki, *Dostoevsky and the Affirmation of Life*, 60.

prefers Rogozhin's knife to the prince's love. Nastasya recognizes the prince's beauty and is free to be irrational. She turns away from the prince and elects death. Nastasya's rejection of the prince cannot be evaluated as failure on the prince's end.

Dostoevsky's insistence that humans have a free will not guided by reason is not only crucial in evaluating his characters' decisions, it adds nuance to his conception of Prince Myshkin's role as a mortal Christ-like figure. Dostoevsky's idea of irrational freedom and will is connected to his Christology and view of the mortal Christ. Berdyaev writes that

In Christ there is no forcing of conscience: the religion of Golgotha is free; when the Son of God came into the world "in the form of a servant" and was tortured by the world on the cross he appealed to the free human spirit. He used no coercion to make us believe in him as in God, he had not the might and majesty of the sovereigns of this world, the kingdom that he preached was not here. Therein lies the radical secret of Jesus Christ, the secret of freedom. It needed an extraordinary freedom of spirit, a prodigy of free faith a spontaneous recognition of "things not seen" to see God beneath the appearance of a bondsman [...].¹⁴³

Beyond appearing as a servant (as I have discussed in chapter 2), Dostoevsky's prince, in embodying Christ's human personality, must safeguard man's freedom above all else in his acts of love and how he interacts with others in the world. Any coercive features of Christ's (and by extension the prince's) love interferes with the free will of the other and contaminates the other's pure freedom to love Christ in return.

Reflecting the mortal Christ's love, Dostoevsky's positively beautiful man expresses a love that is at all times freely-given, unconditional, and uncoercive. The prince's lack of

¹⁴³ Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, trans. Donald Attwater (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1965), 78-9.

interfering with other's choices and actions is elucidated in his conversation with Rogozhin, after Nastasya flees from Rogozhin at the marriage altar. The prince explains to Rogozhin: "When your wedding was underway [...], I didn't hinder you, you know that. The first time it was *she* who came rushing to me, [...] begging me to 'save' her from you. I'm repeating her own words."¹⁴⁴ Again, Nastasya concedes that the prince's love is the means to save her, physically and psychologically, and that Rogozhin will slaughter her. Yet, at the same time, as the prince makes clear, "Then she ran away from me too."¹⁴⁵ The prince allows Nastasya to pursue her freedom and will. He does not force her to marry and love him. However, he always freely offers his love and always agrees to marry her whenever she expresses her willingness.

Incidentally, this is the charge the Grand Inquisitor brings against the incarnate Christ. He accuses Christ of the crime of giving humans total freedom:

And so, instead of a firm foundation for appeasing human conscience once and for all, you chose everything that was unusual, enigmatic, and indefinable, you chose everything that was beyond man's strength, and thereby acted as if you did not love them at all [...]! Instead of taking over men's freedom, you increased it and forever burdened the kingdom of the human soul with its torments. You desired the free love of man, that he should follow you freely [...]. Instead of the ancient law, man had henceforth to decide for himself, what is good and what is evil, having only your image before them as a guide—but did it not occur to you that he would eventually

¹⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 208.

¹⁴⁵ Dostoevsky, 208.

reject and dispute even your image and your truth if he was oppressed by so terrible a burden as freedom choice?¹⁴⁶

Dostoevsky's insistence that Christ was not coercive sheds more light on the prince's display of weakness throughout the novel. A coercive Christ-like figure would display power and charm to win followers and restructure society. However, that is a single act of seduction and subjugation of free will, not a process of active love. Therefore, as I have examined earlier, the mortal Christ will not prove that he is the Son of God. Influenced by Christ's portrayal in Ivan's "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," Berdyaev remarks that "if Christianity has not made men happy [...] it is because it has not wished to violate the freedom of the human spirit, because it appeals to human freedom [...]."¹⁴⁷ In *The Idiot* the nature of the reflection of the Christ-like image and the freedom to choose or reject the Christ-like image are concurrent.

Lastly, it is necessary to remember that, despite yielding to Nastasya's choice to reject his love, nothing about the prince's love is passive or apathetic. Both loving Nastasya and experiencing her rejection come at a dear cost to the prince's own happiness. This recalls the sentiment behind Christ's lamentation over Jerusalem's denial of him, where Christ exclaims: "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"¹⁴⁸ The mortal Christ is sad when an individual or society forsakes his love. It also devastates the prince that the rest of the St. Petersburg community will not co-suffer with Nastasya and attempt to restore her happiness. Multiple times throughout the novel he pleads with members of the community to not judge

¹⁴⁶ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 255.

¹⁴⁷ Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 194.

¹⁴⁸ Matthew 23:37

her because of her unhappiness. “Oh, don’t disgrace her, don’t cast a stone,”¹⁴⁹ the prince implores Aglaya, quoting directly John 8:7.¹⁵⁰

In between Part I and Part II of *The Idiot* the prince spends time with Nastasya. He recalls this time to Aglaya with horror as “the most painful moment of [his] life”¹⁵¹ and as “darkness.”¹⁵² The prince also explains to Radomsky that he is not marrying Nastasya for the sake of his own “happiness,” but “because she wants it.”¹⁵³ He even confesses “with extreme fear” that he “can’t bear Nastasya Filippovna’s face” and that he is “afraid of her face!”¹⁵⁴ From Dostoevsky’s Orthodox Christian standpoint, Christ’s crucifixion is the only means to conquer death and enact God’s plan of restoring his people. However, in the Gospels the mortal Christ’s fear in fulfilling his mission is a vital aspect of his personality. Christ articulates to his disciples the dread he feel about his impending sacrificial act of love, which he knows will result in his execution: “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were

¹⁴⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 433.

¹⁵⁰ The commentator on Dostoevsky’s New Testament sees Prince Myshkin as quoting directly Christ’s words in John 8:7 (*Evangelie Dostoevskogo*, vol. 2., 310.). This references a passage in John’s Gospel, where the scribes and Pharisees plan to stone an adulterous woman, as the Law of Moses commands. Christ says to them: “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). Dostoevsky also marked this verse in his New Testament (*Evangelie Dostoevskogo*, vol. 1., 258.). In connecting the prince’s treatment of Nastasya Filippovna to the adulteress woman in John’s Gospel, Dostoevsky, again, places action as the signifier of Christ-like beauty, for in action we see the personality of the mortal Christ in the world. In the scene from John, Christ directly opposes the practice of the community—literally going against the Mosaic Law—and offers an alternative way to behave towards “the fallen,” which is through compassion and sympathy, not judgement and execution. A love that disrupts the social order and places all the emphasis on *acts* of mercy and sympathy is the model of Christ-like love found in the incarnate Christ, which the prince especially epitomizes in this scene.

¹⁵¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 431.

¹⁵² Dostoevsky, 436.

¹⁵³ Dostoevsky, 582.

¹⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, 582.

already kindled! I have a baptism [the crucifixion] to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”¹⁵⁵

One of the most vivid depictions of the mortal Christ’s terror of his divine role occurs in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ declares that his “soul is very sorrowful” and prays: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me.”¹⁵⁶ Yet the mortal Christ still fulfills his mission, despite his fear. An element of Christ’s sacrificial love is not that he simply died as an innocent man, but that he sacrificed his psychological comfort, as a human being, out of love. Christ did not perform a miracle on himself to assuage his dread and numb his pain on the cross.

Referencing the Incarnation, G.K. Chesterton writes that “Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. [...] Christianity has added courage to the virtues of [...] [Christ]. For only a courage worth calling courage must necessarily mean that the soul passes a breaking point—and does not break.”¹⁵⁷ Despite the prince’s fear of actively loving Nastasya, and his transitory temptation to flee St. Petersburg,¹⁵⁸ he is still willing to marry Nastasya because “the impression of compassion and even of suffering for this being never left his heart,”¹⁵⁹ and, most importantly, “he sincerely believed that she could still resurrect.”¹⁶⁰ Like the mortal Christ, the prince pursues

¹⁵⁵ Luke 12:49-50. Prince Myshkin also goes on at length about the unique horror of capital punishment (*The Idiot*, 23.).

¹⁵⁶ Mark 14:34, 36; this scene also appears in Matthew 26:36-46 and Luke 22:39-46.

¹⁵⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *G.K. Chesterton’s Christian Writings* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2012), 282.

¹⁵⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 307.

¹⁵⁹ Dostoevsky, 350.

¹⁶⁰ *PSS*, vol. 8., 489. (My own translation from “No on iskrenno veril, chto ona mozhet eshche voskresnut’.”)

his mission of active love regardless of the dread, and torment, and annihilation he faces. As Christ states: “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life [...]”¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Matthew 20:28.

6. Conclusion: Two “Pictures” of Christ

The critics who consider Prince Myshkin (and Dostoevsky) a failure do not base the prince’s beauty on his imitation of Christ and Christ-like love. They measure the prince’s success solely on the prince’s immediate results in the world. Michael Holquist reminds us of the context surrounding the events of Christ’s actual time on earth: “While Christ’s coming may have altered the state of mankind’s spiritual life, no change was apparent in the historical world.”¹⁶² However, as we have established, the prince’s immediate effects on society and those around him are not a requisite for him to portray absolute beauty, according to Dostoevsky’s Christ-like conception of beauty. On the contrary, there is an interplay between the prince’s positive and negative reception in his community that showcases his unique Christ-like beauty.

From Dostoevsky’s Orthodox Christian perspective, one’s measurable effect upon the world by no means determines if one genuinely imitates or reflects Christ. On the contrary, it is one’s Christ-like heart and behavior that constitute one’s Christ-likeness. Dostoevsky underlined Revelation 14:13 in his New Testament, which sheds light on this idea:¹⁶³ “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!’”¹⁶⁴ In this verse John demonstrates that one is truly Christ-like not from one’s relative success and effect in the world (the individuals mentioned in this passage died as martyrs), but by the extent one behaved and acted in a Christ-like manner. John the

¹⁶² Michael Holquist, “The Gaps in Christology: *The Idiot*,” in *Dostoevsky: New Perspectives*, ed. Robert L. Jackson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 130.

¹⁶³ Kjetsaa, *Dostoevsky and His New Testament*, 75.

¹⁶⁴ Revelation 14:13.

Baptist's "severed head struck terror from a dish";¹⁶⁵ the Sanhedrin condemned Stephen to be stoned to death; the Romans crucified Peter upside down; and Paul was reviled and abused by society. It is inconsistent with both Orthodox Christianity and Dostoevsky's vision of the mortal Christ to determine the prince's Christ-like beauty based upon the extent the prince changes the world and the tragic manner in which he departs from the world.

Two paintings of Christ appear in *The Idiot*: Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* and Nastasya Filippovna's ekphrasis of her imagined picture. In her painting Christ shows compassion to a child and "gazes into the distance, at the horizon; a thought as great as the whole world reposes in his eyes; his face is sad."¹⁶⁶ While her painting certainly sounds like a description of the prince, the focus is on the simple *act* of the mortal Christ loving a child (an act one can imitate). We witness Christ's beautiful personality in her painting. The moment for the child to be exploited by the adult becomes the moment for the adult to take personal responsibility for the innocent child and show love, which sews a pure and compassionate seed in the child's heart.¹⁶⁷

Both paintings focus on Christ's mortality, yet they highlight the two aspects of Christ's mortality that have been the focus of this paper: his inevitable defeat in death (a display of earthly weakness and failure) and his active love (a display of his human personality). Contrary to the Anna Grigorievna Dostoevsky's *Reminiscences*, Holbein's *Dead Christ* did not horrify Dostoevsky or set him on the verge of an epileptic fit: he was

¹⁶⁵ Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 17.

¹⁶⁶ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 454. It would be interesting to explore if the child represents Nastasya and the painting she brushes in her imagination is a happy recapitulation of her childhood: in it she shows how Prince Myshkin would have treated her vs. how Totsky treated her.

¹⁶⁷ See Dostoevsky's "Peasant Marey" for a similar occurrence.

enamored of it.¹⁶⁸ In Holbein's painting, as Ippolit says, we see Christ's corpse "fully and completely subject to the laws of nature"¹⁶⁹ and incapable of resurrection. Christ's death is the final and full display of his mortality, which is the consequence of his Incarnation. Moreover, as Paul writes, his death poses the greatest threat to his credibility as being fully-God.¹⁷⁰ What could be less compelling than a dead God? This is why the prince recognizes that the painting has the capacity to make one lose his/her faith.¹⁷¹

Dostoevsky intended to portray "a positively beautiful person" in the modern world, and he intended for this person to reflect not Christ the resurrected king, but the mortal Christ of the Gospels, the fully "man" aspect of the God-Man. This is the vision of the incarnate Christ who proclaimed a message of love, interacted with other people, and physically died. Prince Myshkin is a failure by worldly standards, as Christ was a failure by worldly standards. Were the incarnate Christ's actions and mode of being enough to convey his divinity, beauty, and perfection? Or, is it true, as the inquisitor says, that "man seeks not so much God as miracles."¹⁷² Dostoevsky did not compromise his paradoxical vision of Christ-like beauty by making the prince appealing and desirable. He did not wish to coerce us with a character inconsistent with Christ's persona, but to challenge us with the persona.

¹⁶⁸ Robert L. Jackson, "Once Again about Dostoevsky's Response to Hans Holbein the Younger's Dead Body of Christ in The Tomb," in *Dostoevsky Beyond Dostoevsky: Science, Religion, Philosophy*, ed. Svetlana Evdokimova and Vladimir Golstein (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 181-3. Jackson makes this point after comparing Dostoevsky's wife's 1867 *Diary* entry to her posthumous *Reminiscences* (1925). In her original account of their viewing, Anna Grigorievna recalls Dostoevsky's ecstatic response to the painting. In *Reminiscences* she claims that Dostoevsky was so horrified over the painting that she feared he might have an epileptic seizure.

¹⁶⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 408.

¹⁷⁰ See 1 Corinthians 15:13-19.

¹⁷¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 218. Rowan Williams, therefore, calls Holbein's painting an "anti-icon." Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction*, 53.

¹⁷² Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 255.

Dostoevsky leaves us with the prince reduced to idiocy in the same house where Holbein's *Dead Christ* hangs. We are faced with a similar option in our evaluation of the prince as the characters in the novel: is he merely a pathetic idiot who perishes in vain and embodies weakness and failure or does his nature and behavior point to something that transcends worldly ideals, that still remains true and beautiful even as he gawks in a sanatorium?

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