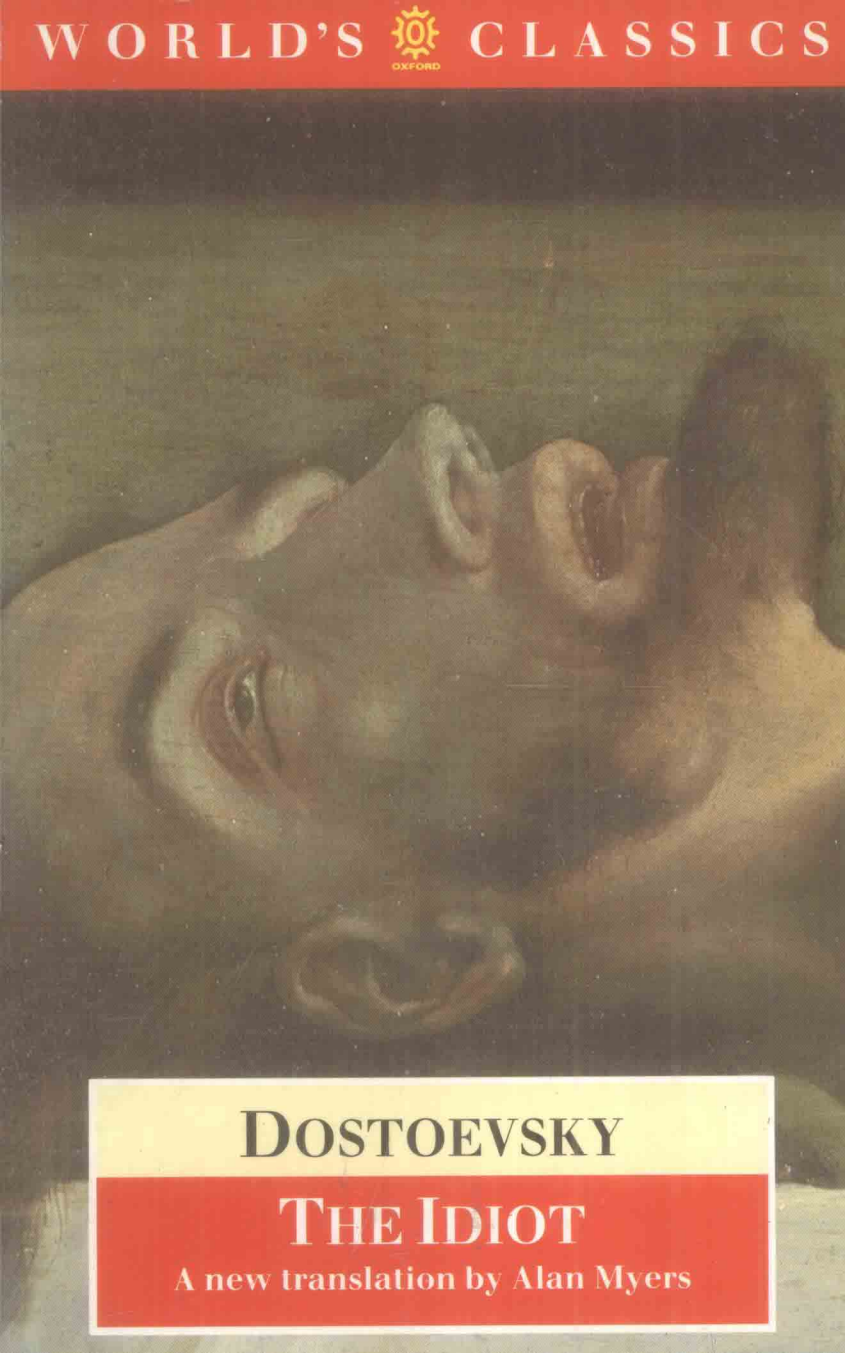


WORLD'S  CLASSICS



DOSTOEVSKY

THE IDIOT

A new translation by Alan Myers

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

The Idiot

Translated by
ALAN MYERS

With an Introduction by
WILLIAM LEATHERBARROW

Oxford New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford New York

*Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogota Bombay
Buenos Aires Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam
Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne
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First published as a World's Classics paperback 1992

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 1821-1881.

[Idiot. English]

*The Idiot / Fedor Dostoevsky : translated by Alan Myers : with an
introduction by William Leatherbarrow.*

p. cm.—(The World's classics)

Translation of: Idiot.

"First published as a World's classics paperback 1992"—T.P. verso.

I. Myers, Alan. II. Title. III. Series.

PO3326.I3 1992 891.73'3—dc20 91-29143

ISBN 0-19-282604-2

7 9 10 8

*Printed in Great Britain by
Caledonian International Book Manufacturing Ltd
Glasgow*

INTRODUCTION

NOTE: Readers who don't want to know the plot of *The Idiot* beforehand might prefer to read this Introduction after the book itself.

Between 1865 and his death in January 1881, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky wrote four incomparable novels—*Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868), *Devils* (also known as *The Possessed*) (1871–2), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80)—as well as *A Raw Youth* (1875), a work equally ambitious in both size and philosophical scope, but now generally recognized as less successful artistically. These works represent the very pinnacle of the nineteenth-century realistic novel, and they have exercised an immense influence on the subsequent development of the genre in the twentieth century. Of these novels Dostoevsky retained a special regard for *The Idiot* and for its hero, the saintly Prince Myshkin, even though its publication had a considerably more muted reception than that of *Crime and Punishment*, and even though Dostoevsky himself came to regard it as an artistic failure in which he had wasted a long-cherished idea. Indeed, the spectre of failure accompanied Dostoevsky throughout his work on this novel. From the outset he approached his task with reluctance and a sense of foreboding, writing to his niece in January 1868: 'The idea of the novel is my old favourite one, but it is so difficult that for a long time I did not dare attempt it; and if I have attempted it now, it is really because I found myself in a desperate situation . . . I am terribly afraid it will be a positive failure.' A few days later he wrote to his friend, the poet Apollon Maykov: 'For a long time now a certain idea has tormented me, but I have been afraid to make a novel from it, because the idea is too difficult and I am not ready for it, even though it is most tempting and I love it . . . Only my desperate situation has compelled me to use this premature idea.' This fear of failure certainly derived in part from the appalling personal circumstances under which Dostoevsky wrote *The Idiot* and the

importance for him of the novel's idea and hero. But it could also be argued (and this is a far more intriguing possibility) that it arose because in a very fundamental sense this was to be a novel *about* failure.

The special significance which *The Idiot* and its hero held for Dostoevsky is suggested by the fact that it is in some respects the most personal of his novels, drawing deeply from the well of his own experiences and articulating some of his most cherished convictions. The gauche, self-effacing, and unworldly Prince Myshkin is far from being an actual self-portrait of a writer who was in reality touchy and self-absorbed, and who had a remarkable history of participation in the political and intellectual currents of mid-nineteenth-century Russia. But in some important ways he is a sort of idealized self-projection. He is afflicted with the same disease, epilepsy, that marred much of Dostoevsky's life and which made his work on *The Idiot* such a nightmare; he embodies the same Christian conviction, love of children, and faith in humility and compassion that were the corner-stones of the writer's own philosophical stance; he describes in great detail the feelings of a man condemned to execution, in terms which recall Dostoevsky's own experiences in 1849 when, convicted of participation in a plot against the regime of Nicholas I, he too faced the firing squad for several agonizing minutes before his sentence was commuted to hard labour and Siberian exile. Myshkin is also drawn into a nerve-racking relationship with a proud and sensual woman, Nastasya Filippovna, which has much in common with Dostoevsky's painful affair with Polina Suslova, with whom he had travelled in Europe in the early 1860s and who drove him to extremes of passionate jealousy comparable to those experienced by Rogozhin in the novel. Other details, too, suggest autobiographical influences: like Dostoevsky, Myshkin is fascinated by calligraphy (the pages of Dostoevsky's notebooks are filled with extravagant examples of Gothic script); Myshkin's return to a strange and unfamiliar Russia after his years of enforced 'exile' in a Swiss clinic recalls Dostoevsky's own return from Siberian exile in 1859; and the views on beauty, Catholicism, socialism, and the spiritual bankruptcy of the contemporary age with which he confronts his often bemused listeners are almost verbatim transcripts of

convictions Dostoevsky himself had expressed in his earlier journalistic articles and which he continued to explore in his personal correspondence.

If, as the evidence so clearly suggests, *The Idiot* is a repository for Dostoevsky's most intimate memories, cherished precepts, and personal details, then this can only be because the novel was the sole focus of all his hopes for salvation during an extremely trying period in his life. On Good Friday 1867, only a month or so after his second marriage, Dostoevsky left St Petersburg for Europe with his new wife, the 20-year-old stenographer Anna Grigorevna. Dostoevsky had met Anna in the autumn of 1866, while working on *Crime and Punishment*, and he had employed her shorthand skills in order to dash off in less than a month the novel *The Gambler*, and thus meet a contractual obligation with the unscrupulous publisher Stellovsky. The professional relationship blossomed into an unlikely, but highly successful, marriage. The European trip, however, was no conventional honeymoon; it was an attempt to escape from debts and importunate relatives, which were threatening the newly-weds with financial ruin. Despite the success of *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky still owed large sums of money as a result of the collapse of his periodical, *The Epoch*, in 1865 and the burden of supporting the family of his brother Mikhail, who had died in 1864. He had barely escaped debtors' prison, and the flight abroad was made possible only by the redoubtable Anna's financial acumen and willingness to pawn her dowry. The trip was planned to last for three months, but the Dostoevskys were not to return to Russia until July 1871. Their journey took them first to Berlin and Dresden, where the writer's xenophobia and aversion to Germans in particular were only partly offset by the cultural riches offered by the Royal Picture Gallery in Dresden. There he took Anna to see Raphael's *Madonna* and Claude Lorrain's *Acis and Galatea*, both of which embodied for Dostoevsky that ideal beauty which sustained man through the difficulties of an imperfect existence, affording glimpses of a harmony and perfection that normally eluded him. This aspect of Dostoevsky's aesthetic convictions is summed up in *The Idiot* in the assertion, attributed to Myshkin, that 'the world will be saved by beauty' (Part III, Ch. 5), and the theme of the redeeming

power of beauty is central to the novel's philosophical design.

The Dostoevskys led a rather difficult life in Dresden. Fyodor Mikhailovich's anxiety about the age-difference between himself and his wife was matched by Anna's jealousy of her husband's continued correspondence with Polina Suslova. Moreover, the couple's financial difficulties were exacerbated by Dostoevsky's pathological addiction to roulette, an addiction which Anna must have anticipated as she took down the novelist's dictation of *The Gambler*. Occasional visits to the casino at Homberg did not satisfy his craving, and in July the couple set off for Geneva via the gaming tables of Baden-Baden. They passed seven disastrous weeks in Baden, during which Dostoevsky lost everything, borrowed extravagantly until his credit ran out, and met and quarrelled with the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev, who remained a bitter foe until the very last months of Dostoevsky's life. Dostoevsky disliked Turgenev's foppishness and condescendingly aristocratic manner; he envied him the wealth and material comfort that allowed him to compose and refine his novels with no regard for pressing deadlines or financial hardship; but above all, he was opposed to Turgenev's liberalism and admiration for all things European. Turgenev had spent much of his life in the West, where he moved easily among European literati. By conviction he was a *Zapadnik* or Westernizer, a term first applied in the 1840s and 1850s to those Russian intellectuals who dismissed indigenous Russian culture as inferior to that of Western Europe, and who argued that Russia's salvation lay in catching up with the cultural and technological advances made by the West. Turgenev's Westernism took the form of a preference for French over Russian, an admiration for the liberalism and individualism enshrined in much European political thinking, and a tendency to consign Russia to the historical dustbin. Such ideas were anathema to Dostoevsky, who had moved far from the political liberalism of his youth. The young conspirator who had faced execution in 1849 for subversion and plotting the overthrow of the Tsarist regime had 'died' in Siberia. Firsthand experience of the criminal mind had convinced him that earthly paradise was not to be achieved through rational progress or liberal social reform. The sort of depraved human souls he had encountered in prison

would not respond to enlightened humanism; they could be retrieved only by the complete moral transfiguration of the sinful individual through religious experience. What was needed were not 'good' institutions or 'good' political systems, but positively good men. Through the darkness of his Siberian torment Dostoevsky had been sustained by his copy of the New Testament and his developing religious conviction. He had returned to freedom as a writer with a religious mission, anxious to persuade his compatriots that the religious spirit, lost in the West's headlong pursuit of political and material progress, was still alive in that same unspoiled Russian past so scornfully dismissed by Turgenev.

Stung by his encounter with Turgenev, anxious to have his say in a major new novel of his own, but prevented from working by financial hardship, Dostoevsky moved on with Anna, who was now pregnant. They left Baden in late August for Basle, where Dostoevsky was profoundly struck by Hans Holbein's painting of *Christ in the Tomb*, which depicts with harrowing realism a corpse which has already begun to decompose, and in which there is no sense of imminent resurrection or of life eternal. Dostoevsky remarked that such a painting could make a man lose his faith, and similar words are put into Myshkin's mouth in *The Idiot*. In fact, Holbein's painting has an almost anti-iconic significance in Dostoevsky's novel: a copy of it hangs in Rogozhin's house and a full description of its horrific effect is given by the dying Ippolit Terentyev:

The picture shows Christ, just taken down from the cross. I believe artists usually depict Christ, whether on the cross or taken down from it, as still retaining a trace of extraordinary beauty in the face; they seek to preserve this beauty in him, even during the most terrible agonies. There was no hint of beauty in Rogozhin's picture; it is an out-and-out depiction of the body of a man who has endured endless torments even before the crucifixion—wounds, torture, beatings from the guards, blows from the populace, when he was carrying the cross and fell beneath it, and finally the agony of the cross . . . In the picture the face is terribly mangled by blows, swollen, with terrible, swollen, bloody bruises, the eyes open and unfocused; the whites wide open, gleaming with a kind of deathly, glazed lustre. But it's odd; as you look at this corpse of a tortured man a most curious question comes to mind: if a corpse like that (and it must certainly have been exactly like that) was seen by all his disciples,

his future chief apostles, and seen by the women who followed him and stood by the cross, by all in fact who believed in and worshipped him, how could they have believed, looking at such a corpse, that the martyr would rise again? The compulsion would be to think that if death was so dreadful, and nature's laws so powerful, how could they possibly be overcome? How could they be overcome when even he had failed, he who had vanquished even nature during his lifetime, he whom nature obeyed, who said '*Talitha cumi!*' and the girl arose, who cried '*Lazarus come forth!*' and the dead man came forth? Looking at that picture, one has the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable, dumb beast, or more precisely, strange as it may seem—in the guise of a vast modern machine which has pointlessly seized, dismembered, and devoured, in its blind and insensible fashion, a great and priceless being, a being worth all of nature and all her laws, worth the entire earth—which indeed was perhaps created solely to prepare for the advent of that being!

(Part III, Ch. 6)

If we remember that in his approach to *The Idiot* Dostoevsky was preoccupied by both the fear of failure and his conviction that salvation could be achieved only on the basis of good men, rather than good institutions, then it becomes clear that he found in Holbein's painting of a defeated Christ an idea that allowed him to reconcile these two conceptions, that galvanized his thinking and came to dominate his novel: that of the failure of the positively good man.

Dostoevsky began work on the first draft of *The Idiot* in the autumn of 1867. An already difficult task was made worse by family tragedy (the death of his infant daughter Sonya) and by further travel, which took the couple first to Geneva and then on to Vevey, Milan, and Florence, where Dostoevsky finally finished *The Idiot* at the end of 1868. Dostoevsky's epilepsy was also at its worst during these months, and frequent fits, punctuated with painful periods of recuperation, rendered his work on the novel haphazard and confused. In the light of this it is hardly surprising that the evolution of this novel from original conception to final form was particularly tortuous and trying. On his own admission Dostoevsky felt unready for the task, as he confessed to Maykov in January 1868:

Many embryos of artistic thoughts flash in my head and in my heart . . . But they only flash, when what is needed is a complete embodiment, which always comes suddenly and unexpectedly, and you can never tell

when exactly. And then, having received the complete image in your heart, you can proceed to its artistic realization.

To his niece Sonya he wrote: 'If only you knew how hard it is to be a writer, and to carry such a burden! I know for certain that if I had two or three stable years for this novel, as Turgenev, Goncharov, and Tolstoy have, I would write a work they would talk about for a hundred years!' Yet it is clear that during his work on *The Idiot* Dostoevsky had neither such peace of mind nor the 'complete image' he described to Maykov. Quite the contrary, in fact: financial pressures compelled him to publish the first part of the novel at a time when he had no idea of how to continue!

Dostoevsky's working notebooks for *The Idiot* have survived, and they show very clearly the confusion in his mind. The work went through no fewer than eight different drafts, each quite different from the others. Indeed, the first six are hardly recognizable as preparation for *The Idiot*. They suggest that Dostoevsky's original intention was to write a novel about the Russian family and its decline through an over-emphasis on material, rather than spiritual, values. This idea came to dominate Dostoevsky's thinking in the 1870s, when it provided the conceptual framework for his two last novels, *A Raw Youth* and *The Brothers Karamazov*; but it also survives after a fashion in *The Idiot*, in Lebedev's apocalyptic indictment of contemporary materialism (Part II, Ch. 2), and in Ganya Ivolgin's conviction that all men are usurers at heart and that money can make even the most ordinary person interesting (Part I, Ch. 11).

What is not recognizable in these early drafts is the figure of Myshkin. Initially, the central character was to be the epileptic illegitimate son of a family that was to evolve into the Ivolgin family of the finished novel. But this figure has nothing but his epilepsy in common with Myshkin. He emerges as a dark and passionate character, burning with pride and egoism and indifferent to the hurt he inflicts on others. In the final novel these characteristics are to be attributed to the figures of Rogozhin and Ganya Ivolgin. In the subsequent drafts there gradually developed a new idea: the novel was to be the one Dostoevsky promised in the Epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*, an account of the moral and spiritual regeneration of a proud and

demonic soul. In these pages of the drafts the 'Idiot' is still a vengeful and violent figure, but he is now possessed of 'a spontaneous thirst for life' which will allow him to develop 'a high moral sense' and a nature capable of compassion: 'He could have evolved into a monster, but love saves him.' An important catalyst in this change was to be a new figure—the legitimate son of the family—who is meek, virtuous, and simple-minded. (In the final novel, of course, the legitimate son of the Ivolgin family is the distinctly unvirtuous Ganya.) This 'new' Idiot, a lost soul burning with the desire for salvation, at times bears a striking resemblance to Stavrogin, the hero of Dostoevsky's later novel *Devils*, and this reminds us that the titanic artistic struggle that eventually gave rise to *The Idiot* also produced valuable fragments that were to mature and then lodge in the novels of the 1870s.

It is clear that the figure of Myshkin was beginning to emerge in the meek and childlike legitimate son of the 'Ivolgin' family. But the real breakthrough came at the end of Dostoevsky's sixth plan, written in November 1867. Of the central figure Dostoevsky suddenly remarks: '*He is a Prince!*' and '*Prince Yurodivy*. (He is with the children)?!' The *yurodivy*, or God's fool, was a distinctive phenomenon in Russian Orthodox Christianity, a crazed but saintly figure who sought salvation through meekness and self-abasement. The association of his hero with this figure, along with the image of him surrounded by children, allowed Dostoevsky to develop in the seventh and eighth drafts a more complete picture of a forgiving, compassionate, Christlike prince, fully recognizable as the Myshkin of the final novel. It would seem that Dostoevsky reached a creative crisis in the sixth draft, after which he abandoned his earlier work on the novel and proceeded to write the final version of the first part in only twenty-three days. This crisis was brought about by a problem that had confronted Dostoevsky before, in the Epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*: how to depict in art the mysteries of a soul's salvation and spiritual regeneration. Then he had, frankly, avoided the issue by deferring the problem until a later novel. Now, too, in his work on *The Idiot* he shrank from the difficulties of the task before him. The theme of the spiritual rebirth of a sinner was put aside for his later, unrealized project, 'The Life of a Great Sinner', and the depiction of a positively good man,

already fully developed, became the focus of *The Idiot*. This new focus was clearly defined by January 1868, when he wrote the following to his niece:

The main idea of the novel is to depict the positively good man. There is nothing more difficult than this in the world, especially nowadays. All writers—not only ours, but European ones too—who have set about depicting the *positively* good have always shirked the task. It is because this is a task that is immeasurable. The good is an ideal, and neither we nor civilized Europe have yet succeeded in working out such an ideal for ourselves. There is only one positively good man in the world, and that is Christ. The appearance of this immeasurably, infinitely good figure is therefore in itself an infinite miracle . . . Of all the good figures in Christian literature, Don Quixote is the most complete. But he is good only because he is at the same time ridiculous. Dickens's Pickwick (an infinitely weaker conception than Don Quixote, but still immense) is also comic and succeeds because of this. Sympathy is aroused for the good man who is ridiculed and who does not know his own worth, and this sympathy is aroused in the reader too. This arousing of sympathy is the secret of humour . . . I have nothing of the kind, absolutely nothing, and therefore I am terribly afraid that [my novel] will be a positive failure.

The emergence of a 'positively good man' from the confusion of the creative process provided Dostoevsky with the central dramatic confrontation his novel required. Into an almost apocalyptic depiction of a contemporary Russia beset by the evils of materialism, egoism, and political opportunism, and dominated by the ethics of self-interest and personal wealth, Dostoevsky introduced the idealized figure of Myshkin, untouched by these failings and driven by the conviction that 'meekness is a mighty force' (Part III, Ch. 6) and that compassion is 'the most important, perhaps the sole law of human existence' (Part II, Ch. 5).

Dostoevsky's portrait of contemporary Russia is informed by the anti-European sentiments and Christian belief he acquired in Siberia. His distaste for Western capitalism, sharpened by his travels abroad, is evident in the important role played by money in *The Idiot*. In this novel Dostoevsky's attack on the spiritual poverty of modern man is centred on his seduction by the power of finance. The arrival of the destitute Myshkin provokes amused contempt in Russian society, until he suddenly inherits a fortune, from which point he is regarded as a man of substance. Money is

indeed the primary determinant of social worth in this novel; the characters at the top of the social pile are those who are skilled in investment: the businessman Totsky; the financier General Ivolgin; and the vulgar but well-heeled money-lender Puitsyn. The would-be usurer Ganya Ivolgin articulates the hidden ethos of this world when he confesses: 'Once I've got my hands on a fortune, you'll see I'll be extremely original. The most disgusting and hateful thing about money is that it even endows people with talent' (Part I, Ch. 11). In the society depicted in *The Idiot* nearly all are mesmerized by money. One of the most striking features of this novel is that many of the characters Myshkin meets on his arrival from Switzerland introduce themselves with a remark about money. In the opening scene on the train Rogozhin speaks of his recent inheritance and quizzes Myshkin about the cost of medical treatment in Switzerland; later, when Myshkin lodges in the Ivolgin household, he is warned not to lend money to the General; the other lodger, Ferdischenko, peers around Myshkin's door to ask for a loan; the 'progressive' Burdovsky and his henchmen try to deceive Myshkin out of his inheritance; and the rivalry between Ganya and Rogozhin for the favours of Nastasya Filippovna culminates in an auction where the two try to outbid each other. Rogozhin's winning bid of a hundred thousand roubles is, significantly, wrapped in a copy of *The Stock Exchange Gazette*.

It is the minor character Lebedev who invests this depiction of widespread acquisitiveness with a profound philosophical significance. At Myshkin's birthday gathering (in Part III, Ch. 4), Lebedev, a self-styled interpreter of the Apocalypse, is goaded into an intemperate attack upon the spiritual vacuum at the heart of modern society: '... the whole thing, sir, altogether accursed, the entire spirit of these last centuries, in its scientific and practical totality, is perhaps really accursed, sir.' In Lebedev's analysis, contemporary man, driven by greed and self-interest, has lost the spiritual basis of his existence. In a comically irreverent anecdote, Lebedev goes on to tell of a twelfth-century monk who, after twenty years of cannibalism, confessed and went to the stake. What was it, asks Lebedev, that drove him to confess despite the punishment that awaited him?

There must have been something much stronger than the stake, the fire,

even the habit of twenty years! There must have been an idea more powerful than any disaster, famine, torture, plague, leprosy, and all that hell which mankind could not have borne without that one binding idea which directed men's minds and fertilized the springs of life! Show me anything resembling that power in our age of depravity and railways . . . Show me a force which binds today's humanity together with half the power it possessed in those centuries . . . And don't try to browbeat me with your prosperity, your riches, the rarity of famine and the speed of communications! The riches are greater but the force is less; there is no more a binding principle; everything has grown soft, everything and everyone grown flabby!

(Part III, Ch. 4)

Lebedev's anecdote is absurd, but it serves a serious purpose, disclosing Dostoevsky's own vision of modern Europe, devoid of spiritual purpose or strength, distracted by empty materialism, and poised on the brink of Armageddon. Lebedev finds a symbol of mankind's state in the vivid apocalyptic image of the four horsemen:

. . . we're in the time of the third horse, the black one, the one that has the rider with scales in his hand, because in our age everything is weighed in the balance and settled by agreement, and all men seek only their own due: 'one measure of wheat for one denarius and three measures of barley for one denarius' . . . as well as wanting to have freedom of spirit, a pure heart and a sound body, and all God's gifts added thereunto. But they cannot have these things by right alone, and the pale horse will follow and he whose name is Death, and after him, Hell . . .

(Part II, Ch. 2)

The apocalyptic atmosphere, created by Lebedev and by the novel's emphasis on money and materialism, provides the crucible in which Myshkin's Christian ideals are tested. Both literally and metaphorically, the prince is from another world. Afflicted with an illness that has always kept him apart from his fellow men, he has spent his formative years not amidst the pressures of contemporary life, but in the sterile environment of a Swiss clinic. He is a man of 27, but his emotional and spiritual growth has been arrested, and he retains the heart and mind of a child. His ideals remain bright and intact, for they have never before been challenged by experience. In these respects he is

clearly analogous to Cervantes's unworldly hero in *Don Quixote*, and it is clear that Dostoevsky intended his hero to be read, on one level at least, as a contemporary restatement of the quixotic knight-errant, intent on transforming the iron age of nineteenth-century materialism into a golden age of chivalry and Christian virtue. When Aglaya Yepanchina receives a letter from Myshkin, she conceals it in her copy of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, and she also reads aloud Pushkin's poem 'The Poor Knight', whose theme clearly parallels Myshkin's self-denying love for Nastasya Filippovna.

As well as suggesting the figure of the chivalrous knight, Myshkin also appears as a Christlike figure, preaching the same virtues of meekness, truth, and compassion. At the time of his work on *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky had been reading Renan's *Life of Jesus*, and many of the details of Renan's account of Christ's ministry are incorporated into Myshkin's personal history. Both Christ and Myshkin enter the world from other, very different, ones in order to preach their ideals. Indeed, Myshkin confesses to the Yepanchin sisters that he regards himself as a philosopher who has come to teach. Moreover, throughout the novel he continues to look upon Switzerland as a sort of paradise, where his innocence was intact and his faith unshaken by the complexities of Russian reality. It is to there he longs to retreat when the pressures of his new life become too much for him. The anecdotes Myshkin relates about his period in Switzerland also offer parallels between his life and that of Christ. His story of his friendship with the young girl Marie, who had been seduced by a travelling salesman and spurned by the whole village, and who was rehabilitated through Myshkin's compassion, is clearly designed to be read as an allegorical reworking of the tale of Christ and the fallen woman, Mary Magdalene. Myshkin's friendship with the children of the Swiss village, whom he teaches and to whom he refuses to lie, much to the annoyance of the village elders, recalls another biblical image—that of Christ surrounded by the children.

As with Christ, little is known of Myshkin's formative years. He dimly recalls that when he was taken into Switzerland to be treated at Schneider's clinic, the only thing he heard through his epileptic confusion was the braying of an ass. This suggests,

albeit faintly, Christ's entry into Jerusalem on an ass. The first people Christ encountered in Jerusalem were the merchants and moneylenders on the steps of the Temple: Myshkin's arrival in Russia is marked by his immediate acquaintance with merchants (Rogozhin and Totsky, for example) and moneylenders (Ptitsyn). In an episode that runs parallel to Christ's retreat into the wilderness, Myshkin flees from St Petersburg for six months, between Parts I and II of the novel, in order to collect his thoughts. There are many other examples of such parallels with the life of Christ, and these are complemented by the many occasions when the other characters discern Christlike qualities in the prince.

Yet, if Myshkin is a Christ he is a flawed one, and his mission is doomed to failure. His Christian meekness and compassion, which translated so effectively into positive achievements in Switzerland, have disruptive and ultimately lethal consequences when practised in the 'real' world of nineteenth-century Russia. In Switzerland his innocence and simplicity win the trust of those he meets; in Russia the same qualities breed mistrust, embarrassment, and hatred. The honesty and truthfulness that win him friendship in Switzerland only serve to offend those he encounters in Russia. The compassion that served to resurrect Marie provokes the insane jealousy of Rogozhin and leads to the death of another fallen woman, Nastasya Filippovna. In Russia Myshkin discovers, for the first time in his life, the gulf between ideals and reality and the impossibility of achieving paradise on earth. His epilepsy becomes a metaphor for this tragic discovery: it provides him, in the aura which precedes the fit, with his greatest insights into beauty and harmony, but these divine moments are instantly wiped away in the darkness and chaos of the fit itself. At the end of the novel, the Myshkin who arrived in Russia hopeful of recovery and anxious to please, and who pledged himself to the salvation of Nastasya Filippovna through Christian love, is found gibbering unintelligibly alongside her mutilated body in the company of her murderer. All are destroyed by the passions unleashed by the 'positively good man'.

Yet, as we have seen, this is a failure which Dostoevsky anticipated. He drew back from the challenge of presenting a flawless hero, for he knew that such a figure would not be

human, but would be, like Christ, divine. Myshkin's decline from innocence and idealism to renewed idiocy and complicity in the death of Nastasya is the device Dostoevsky chooses to convey his acknowledgement of man's imperfect state, and his lack of faith in human perfectibility. Paradise on earth is, indeed, an unrealizable dream, and the Myshkin who arrives from Switzerland carries within himself, in the form of his epilepsy, the seed of his eventual destruction. Prior to his arrival he is not, in Dostoevsky's eyes, a human being at all, for he has not known sin. He is the product of a retort, a homunculus bred in the protection of Schneider's clinic. From the moment he enters Russia and is exposed to the passions and intrigues of the real world, he begins his inevitable decline as his humanity, suppressed by the years of his isolation, asserts itself. Myshkin, of course, resists his fall, but the process is unstoppable and the end-result inescapable; for only Christ, and not a merely Christlike figure, is without sin. Thus, Myshkin's Christian love for Nastasya Filippovna is gradually compromised by a growing sensual love for Aglaya; his initial belief in the goodness of men yields to his realization that Rogozhin is bound to kill Nastasya; and his purity of heart, suggested by his total lack of material wealth, is darkened by his highly symbolic inheritance. Myshkin inherits far more than money—he acquires also his due legacy of human weaknesses.

Myshkin is indisputably the thematic and structural centre of *The Idiot*, serving to articulate Dostoevsky's lack of faith in paradise on earth, and acting as a catalyst unleashing the dramatic forces latent among the other characters. But the novel's secondary characters are equally effectively drawn and invested with a strong symbolic charge. The reader is alerted to Dostoevsky's approach to characterization in this novel at the beginning of Part IV, where the narrator observes:

In their novels and stories, writers for the most part try to take certain social types and present them vividly and skilfully—types who are very rarely encountered in real life precisely as they are drawn, but who are nevertheless almost more real than reality itself . . . In real life the typical characteristics of people seem to get diluted . . .

(Part IV, Ch. 1)

The characters in *The Idiot* are, indeed, 'more real than reality