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## SECONDARY CHARACTERS AS SUBJECTS IN DOSTOEVSKI'S *IDIOT*

While many studies have focused on the protagonists of *Idiot*, little attention has been devoted to the secondary characters. In addition to creating the rich, multi-layered world of the novel, these characters provide for "the passing of a theme through many and various voices" (Bakhtin, 265). Indeed, we see everything reflected in the minor characters, who face the same problems, questions, and dilemmas as the major characters, each in his/her own way. Their voices reflect and contribute to the multivoiced dialogue in the novel, serving as background to the novel's central triangles (Nastas'ia-Myshkin-Aglaia and Myshkin-Nastas'ia-Rogozhin), for these figures do not exist in a vacuum, but are continually confronted by other consciousnesses. Indeed, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevskii's hero is faced by a "*world of other consciousnesses with rights equal to those of the hero*" [his emphasis]" (Bakhtin, 50).

Regardless of whether these others are perceived by the central characters as objects or subjects, the reader is, or becomes, aware that each is a personality in his/her own right, with his/her own views. This treatment of characters as subjects underlies the entire narrative: "What is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself" (Bakhtin, 47). Following Bakhtin's argument to its logical conclusion, the minor characters are not treated as objects by the text itself, but only by other characters and society, whose judgments are frequently questioned throughout the novel. One must then take exception to Bakhtin's statement in his notes "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book": "There are very few secondhand, materializing words sounding outside dialogue, and such words have an essential finalizing significance only for secondary, objectified personages (who are depicted essentially beyond the boundaries of dialogue, depicted as extras who do not have their own word with which to enrich or change the meaning of the dialogue)" (Bakhtin, 297).<sup>1</sup> Secondary characters, however, are objectified only by other characters, in other words, their objectification is subjective.<sup>2</sup> One can thus take Bakhtin's analysis of the hero's discourse to its logical conclusion, which, consistent with Bakhtin's analysis of the polyphonic novel, would consider *all* characters as subjects. Of

course, because "what the author used to do is now done by the hero" (Bakhtin, 49), we see only as much of the minor characters as do the central consciousnesses of the novel. In other words, every character is presented from the point of view of another character. All voices thus enter the dialogue of the text to some extent, even though they are at varying distances from the central consciousnesses.<sup>3</sup>

The notion that characters might be presented as objects is dealt with directly in the novel. The beautiful German lady at Nastas'ia Filippovna's name-day party is depicted as an object, an ornament produced for the occasion: "принято было приглашать ее на известные вечера, в пышнейшем костюме, причесанную как на выставку, и сажать как прелестную картинку для того, чтобы скрасить вечер, — точно так, как иные добывают для своих вечеров у знакомых, на один раз, картину, вазу, статую или экран" (134).<sup>4</sup> Rogozhin trods on her dress, failing even to notice her, much less apologize (135), further emphasizing her objectification. By calling attention to her treatment as an object by the other characters, the narrator implicitly protests such treatment of persons and characters. Indeed, although she does not speak (she knows no Russian), she demonstrates her own will in that she leaves the party during the ensuing scandal (145), and is the only one to do so. Her action demonstrates her disgust with the others, and unwillingness to be even a witness to such events. Interestingly, she reappears at the very end of the novel, where we learn she had been friends with Nastas'ia Filippovna, but had recently argued and broken off relations with her (498). This further evidence of the German lady's will suggests she too is a person with her own view of the world and her own life, independent of that of the main characters. Through the German lady one can demonstrate how even a most "objectified" character can be viewed as a subject. Indeed, such a character calls attention to the portrayal of characters as subjects, as opposed to objects, which is maintained throughout the novel.

The subjective nature of the presentation of each of the novel's characters derives in part from the fact that each is presented from various points of view. Furthermore, the text often compels the reader to view each character from that own character's point of view, to see the world through that character's eyes, and not judge him/her as the other characters might. This, of course, is not to suggest that how a character views himself/herself is necessarily indicative of that character's essential nature, for one can fool oneself just as easily, if not more so, than others. Rather, one should not attempt to understand a character from *any* single point of view, not even that own character's. Indeed, throughout the novel the reader's attention is called to the impossibility of really knowing another. Myshkin laments this inability at the end of the novel: "Почему мы никогда не можем *всего* узнать про другого" (484). But to learn *everything* would mean to close off, to finalize, to *objectify* another person, to deprive him/her of that

very facet which makes him/her human. Indeed, the key to "understanding" all the novel's characters is uttered by Myshkin earlier: "Бог ведь знает, что в этих пьяных и слабых сердцах заключается" (183). The final word cannot be said, because we cannot know everything about anyone, including ourselves.

General Ivolgin provides a compelling example of how secondary characters are raised above the status of object. Ivolgin is presented as a complex individual, motivated by complex desires, and his essential nature is as difficult to determine as that of any of the major characters.<sup>5</sup> He is, like others in the novel, presented from numerous points of view: we learn about him from others, his own stories, parallels to other characters, and especially his interaction with others. Most of what follows concerning Ivolgin applies with equal validity to the other characters (many of whom also confess to Myshkin, or/and he "confesses" to them) who will be considered later in this paper.

Ivolgin's confession, which best demonstrates the complex nature of the internal division of his personality, comprises his most important interaction with Myshkin. An analysis of this passage provides insight not only into the General's relationship to Myshkin, but reflects that of all the characters. Moreover, we see that if Myshkin "fails" in some sense in the novel, he fails not an abstract idea of goodness, but rather the expectations which others have set for him. That is to say, he is as multifaceted and complex as others, and cannot be expected to fulfill the one-dimensional role into which others, including General Ivolgin, attempt to cast him.

Three days before his stroke, General Ivolgin asks for a special interview with Myshkin alone, stating that "that hour of conversation will be the hour of fateful decision" ("Этот час разговора будет часом окончательной судьбы" [404]). The seriousness of this request is underlined by the fact that Ivolgin is sober at the time of their discussion the next day.<sup>6</sup> The story he tells Myshkin is thus not told under the influence of alcohol, as are so many of Ivolgin's other stories.

After the time for Myshkin's discussion with General Ivolgin has been set, Myshkin discusses the General with Lebedev. He learns that Lebedev found the stolen wallet, but left it out in plain sight so that, Lebedev says, Ivolgin would have the pleasure of discovering it. Lebedev torments Ivolgin by refusing to find the returned money, although it is placed in obvious places. Thus General Ivolgin knows that Lebedev knows who stole the money. Learning this, Myshkin suspects what is bothering Ivolgin, but he does not mention this issue to him in any way, because he is afraid he will hurt Ivolgin. Rather, he treats Ivolgin like porcelain the next day (409), similar to the vase Aglaia is afraid Myshkin will break, and which he indeed does break (454).<sup>7</sup> Myshkin treats Ivolgin like an object, like a vase, and is so involved in himself, worrying whether he will hurt Ivolgin (trodding on him as Rogozhin trods on the German lady's dress), that he

does not hear what Ivolgin is saying. Bakhtin writes of Myshkin's fear of his own word, fear of its effect on others (Bakhtin, 242). Ivolgin wants to be heard; he is in search of responsive understanding: "It proceeds from the nature of discourse, that always wants to be heard, that always is in search of responsive understanding... For discourse (and, therefore, for man) nothing is more frightening than the *absence of answer*" (Todorov, 111). Nothing is more frightening than the absence of an answer, and if Myshkin does not listen, who will? Both scenes illuminate Myshkin's increasing lack of perception: his diatribe at the Epanchins ends with a broken vase (during this episode, too, Myshkin objectifies his listeners, as considered below), while his interview with Ivolgin results in a broken friendship.

Unfortunately, "the hour of fateful decision" begins with Myshkin arriving late to his appointment with Ivolgin (409). Ivolgin, already suffering from lack of self-respect, cannot help but interpret this as reflecting his own insignificance. Ivolgin begins by explaining the reason for his break with Lebedev. Lebedev had told him a preposterous story about how one of his own legs was buried in Moscow, and Ivolgin felt this lie showed disrespect (411). Lebedev had invented this story because Ivolgin maintained he had been a page of Napoleon. Ivolgin then relates to Myshkin presumably the same story he told Lebedev. Precise, colorful details fill Ivolgin's descriptions of the great events he participated in as a young page at Napoleon's court in Moscow of 1812. In fact, the decision to retreat from Moscow was made by the young Ivolgin, who, in Napoleon's presence, advised Davoust: "Улепетьвайте-ка, генерал, восвойся!" (416). When they part, Napoleon is said to write in the album of Ivolgin's sister "Ne mentez jamais" (417), which is, of course, ironic, for how can one forget what never was?

General Ivolgin is once again seeking respect and dignity, that is, the right to be treated as a subject, through a narration of his exploits.<sup>8</sup> This time, however, there is a twist, for he had intended to discuss a different matter, and he realizes Myshkin could not have believed the story about Napoleon. For Myshkin to listen and only pretend to believe is an indication that he does not consider him seriously, and this is a great insult, similar to the one he received from Lebedev. Lebedev implies the tale is ridiculous and that he does not believe Ivolgin by countering with an even more outrageous story of his own. Myshkin, on the other hand, encourages Ivolgin, listening as if he believed (Schultze, 242-245). Myshkin thus *participates* in the lie, for how Myshkin responds as Ivolgin tells his story affects how Ivolgin continues his story. Myshkin is thus partly responsible for what unfolds between them (Todorov, 30, 43; Jones, 7). Ivolgin is greatly upset by this response. First of all, it does not permit him to explain why he really came. They never explicitly get to the point. In effect, Myshkin does not allow Ivolgin to confess, so that Ivolgin's moment of great importance is

reduced to a retelling of a fictional event from his youth. Thus Myshkin's break with Ivolgin parallels Lebedev's break with Ivolgin in that both are a result of their responses to the same story told by Ivolgin. Although Myshkin pretends to believe Ivolgin, whereas Lebedev clearly does not, both positions indicate disrespect and a lack of acknowledgement of what Ivolgin has really come to discuss. Indeed, Ivolgin mentions respect repeatedly in these two conversations with Myshkin (403, 410, 411). He is, as always, seeking the respect of others in order to respect himself.

From the very beginning, General Ivolgin plays the role of a retired general who demands respect: "Фигура была бы довольно осанистая, если бы не было в ней чего-то опустившегося, износившегося, даже запачканного. ... Вблизи от него немного пахло водкой; но манера была эффектная, несколько изученная и с видимым ревнивым желанием поразить достоинством" (80). This outward attempt to appear dignified is echoed in Ivolgin's speech. He insists on being treated honorably, although he knows he is in disgrace. It is, indeed, for this very reason that he insists on being respected, for if he were not in disgrace, there would be no need to demand this so strenuously. Ivolgin thus appears as one who is trying to impress others, rather than as one who actually does. Krieger states that "*The Idiot* is a novel of the desperate struggle for personal human dignity in a world that finds endless ways of depriving man of it" (Krieger, 226). Ivolgin, like many, if not all of the novel's characters, thirsts for the respect of others, desiring to be treated as a subject, and not an immutable object.

Myshkin later realizes that Ivolgin might be offended by his having so easily accepted Ivolgin's incredible tale. Indeed, he receives a note to that effect from Ivolgin that very evening: "Генерал уведомлял, что он и с ним расстанется навеки, что уважает его и благодарен ему, но даже и от него не примет 'знаков сострадания, унижающих достоинство и без того уже несчастного человека'" (418).<sup>9</sup> Several critics have noted how, especially as concerns General Ivolgin, Myshkin's willingness to forgive defeats its purpose (Krieger, 221–223, 226–227; Lesser, 223; Molchulsky, 375–378; Peace, 115; Schultze, 224–225; Skaftymov, 161–162). It seems that Ivolgin comes to Myshkin to confess, be forgiven and accepted for what he is. He knows his own failings, and although he defends his honor before others, Ivolgin cannot forgive nor respect himself. Myshkin in a sense kills him with compassion. He fails to understand that Ivolgin is *not* now drunk and that he would like perhaps to be called to task for his absurd tale. General Ivolgin suspects that Myshkin may know about the theft, and certainly knows about his lies, and he takes offence at what he considers to be degrading pity. Bakhtin refers to pity as a lower form of love, whereby a person ceases to be a thing but is nonetheless not a personality (Bakhtin, 297). It is this objectification, this distance that Myshkin places

between himself and Ivolgin, that the latter finds so upsetting. Ivolgin sees himself as he imagines Myshkin sees him, that is, his self recognition is intimately tied to another's perception. Myshkin will not acknowledge General Ivolgin's crime or lies, and without that recognition, he cannot forgive Ivolgin. By treating General Ivolgin like porcelain, Myshkin destroys Ivolgin's dignity, rather than reaffirming it.

Although Ivolgin leaves the interview feeling worse than when he came, it seems unlikely that the result could have been otherwise given the nature of the situation and Ivolgin's casting Myshkin in the role of confessor.<sup>10</sup> In his analysis of the confessional dialogue in Dostoevskii, Bakhtin notes the dual attitude of the confessing subject toward the other as that of one desperately needing forgiveness and simultaneously rejecting it (Bakhtin, 262). No matter what Myshkin said or did, Ivolgin would have felt humiliated by the very fact of his having confessed, or attempted to confess, for in such a situation the one confessing views herself/himself as inferior to the confessor. Thus while attracted to Myshkin as an ideal in his search for love and forgiveness, Ivolgin is simultaneously repelled, first by feelings of unworthiness, then out of pride.<sup>11</sup> This pride is closely connected with the need to be respected and concern with how one is viewed by others. Because of his inability to overcome his pride and dependence on society's values, Ivolgin is unable to accept another's forgiveness, and thereby forgive himself.

As Carr notes, all the characters see in Myshkin their confessor (Carr, 209). Ivolgin, similarly, expects Myshkin to be a confessor, and the question then arises as to whether this is a realistic expectation on his part. One need only compare Ivolgin's early stories and Myshkin's response to them to wonder why Ivolgin assumes Myshkin has changed. For example, they wander all over town in search of Ivolgin's friends (108–109), and for a long time Myshkin actually believes Ivolgin has such friends. Myshkin believed Ivolgin then, so why should he not now? Myshkin even lent Ivolgin money, although he was told by others it would never be returned. Ivolgin, as well as Nastas'ia Filippovna, Aglaia, and others, refuse to view Myshkin as human and multifaceted. In their desire to categorize Myshkin, they objectify him, viewing him alternately as saint or idiot. Myshkin, however, is divided about himself, and just as double-voiced as others: "The internal dialogism of his discourse is just as great and anxiety-ridden as that of the other characters" (Bakhtin, 242). Because he is unusual, others have difficulty fitting him into preconceived categories. Indeed, Dostoevskii's characters, like people, cannot be narrowly, rigidly defined. Myshkin himself comments on this several times, noting that human laziness causes people to categorize one another at first glance: "это от лениости людской происходит, что люди так промеж собой на глаз сортируются" (24). Todorov, in his analysis of Bakhtin, writes of the incompleteness of Dostoevskii's characters as a

virtue, in that such incompleteness makes them more life-like: "A character in Dostoevsky is an unaccomplished, incomplete, heterogeneous being, but that is the reason of its superiority, because we are, all of us, as we have seen, subjects only in unaccomplishment" (Todorov, 103). Bakhtin argues that Dostoevskii's heroes fight against categorization: "They [Dostoevskii's characters] all acutely sense their own inner unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow, as it were, from within and to render *untrue* any externalizing and finalizing definition of them... Dostoevsky's hero always seeks to destroy that framework of *other people's* words about him that might finalize and deaden him" (Bakhtin, 59). Just as Ivolgin is not only a drunk, and fights such a narrow definition of his self, so Myshkin is not a saint, and will certainly fail others' expectations if cast rigidly in such a role.

Another person Myshkin apparently fails in the novel is Nastas'ia Filippovna. Indeed, much of what has been said about Ivolgin's relationship with Myshkin can be applied to her relationship with Myshkin, with the comparison shedding further light on Ivolgin. Both Ivolgin and Nastas'ia have fallen in the eyes of society: he is a drunkard and a thief and she is a prostitute. More importantly, Ivolgin and Nastas'ia consider themselves to be fallen and unworthy. Both create and thrive on scandal, in order to punish themselves and others.<sup>12</sup> An example is provided by General Ivolgin's behavior during Nastas'ia's visit to the Ivolgins. Part of the reason for his scandalous conduct is to take revenge on Gania for having considered marrying such a woman under such circumstances. Nastas'ia, who loves scandal and also seeks revenge on Gania, enjoys every minute of their conversation. Ivolgin plays the role of drunken father of the family, while Nastas'ia acts the prostitute who would marry his son. Ivolgin and Nastas'ia Filippovna have defined themselves in certain positions as regards society, both are "fallen" and fit categories, namely the courtesan and the drunkard, which they cannot themselves fully escape, although both know these definitions do not fully describe them as individuals. Both are characterized by an internal duality of self-condemnation and self-vindication (Bakhtin, 234–235; 257–258). Both see in Myshkin someone who recognizes the other side of their personalities, yet they cannot accept his forgiveness (Bakhtin, 254, 262; Skaftymov, 152–153).<sup>13</sup> Myshkin, however, to a certain degree does not forgive, for he asks, what is there to forgive?<sup>14</sup> He thereby denies their sins and one side of their characters. They turn to him because he sees the good in them, but both reject him because of his forgiveness, which is really a nonforgiveness. Indeed, by recognizing the positive side of their characters, Myshkin exacerbates their internal division. Myshkin's "penetrating word", defined by Bakhtin as Myshkin's ability to interfere in the interior dialogue of another person, helping that person to find his/her own voice (Bakhtin, 242), awakens in them a view of themselves which they believe to be inaccessible, at least in this world. Unlike Myshkin, both Ivolgin

and Nastas'ia Filippovna desire too much the respect of others to be free of the values of society which has objectified them by categorizing them in inescapable roles.

Indeed, most of the novel's characters are marked by some internal division, which, however, does not necessarily result in tragic consequences. Lebedev, like Ivolgin, is a drunk and inveterate liar, yet he manages to secure a sound financial base for his family.<sup>15</sup> Lebedev is a terrible intriguer, frequently playing one party off against another, cheating whomever he can, always concerned with obtaining some sort of advantage for himself. One of his many betrayals of Myshkin includes his proofreading of the scandalous article written by Keller concerning the Burdovskii affair. Typically, Lebedev is more worried that he will be held accountable for the grammatical errors in the second half of the article (which he did not correct), than he is concerned about the content of the first half of the article (which he proofed) (242). Although he confesses his guilt, he would, of course, undertake a similar adventure again, for, after all, he was paid for his services. Because Lebedev appears such an unprincipled scoundrel, Myshkin is surprised to discover that his house is pretty, neat, and well-managed (159), that Lebedev's children are charming, and that Lebedev prays for the soul of the Countess du Barry. Lebedev thus becomes a riddle for Myshkin, and the reader, defying attempts to categorize and define him: "Да вот Лебедев же задал ему сегодня задачу: ну ожидал ли он такого Лебедева? Разве он знал такого Лебедева прежде?" (190). Although Lebedev places too much value on the material world, he is not totally morally bankrupt, testified to in part by his devotion to his family and the reciprocated love of his family members.

Lebedev, interestingly, preaches the Apocalypse, while himself embodying a perfect example of the material mentality which he claims reigns during the current age of the black horseman (167-168). Keller directly criticizes Lebedev for this disjunction between word and action: "Нападает на просвещение, проповедует изуверство двенадцатого столетия, кривляется, и даже безо всякой сердечной невинности: сам-то чем он дом нажил, позволяйте спросить?" (316). Lebedev himself confesses to Myshkin that everything is all mixed up in him, and that all his contradictory feelings and actions are equally sincere:

и слова, и дело, и ложь, и правда — всё у меня вместе, и совершенно искренно. Правда и дело состоят у меня в истинном раскаянии, верьте не верьте, вот поклянусь, а слова и ложь состоят в адской (и всегда присущей) мысли, как бы и тут уловить человека, как бы и чрез слезы раскаяния выиграть! (259)

This passage could apply equally well to all of the characters in *Idiot*, for each is guilty of contradictory statements, thoughts, and/or actions which, signi-



ificantly, provide further evidence for the complex nature of each individual, each defying definition, finalization, constantly in a state of becoming.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in the case of Lebedev, one is never certain what he will do or say next.

Keller, who criticizes Lebedev for his apparent hypocrisy, is himself not a particularly noble character. He, too, is a liar, drunk, and, according to Lebedev's nephew, as well as Keller's own later confession to Myshkin, a thief, yet he seems to view himself as a loyal, trustworthy friend. This same man who cheats at cards and composes the scandalous article about Myshkin is later to be Myshkin's best man at his wedding. Like Ivolgin, he calls everyone "friend," *друг*, and is always willing to be of service, "to sacrifice himself for his friends," as he so often expresses it: he volunteers to spend the night watching Ippolit, after the latter's physical breakdown at Myshkin's: "я готов жертвовать для дру́га" (248); he defends Nastas'ia Filippovna at the park (291); he volunteers to serve as Myshkin's second in the event of a duel: "готов жертвовать и даже умереть" (299); and he stands up for Ippolit, demanding that no one dare suggest Ippolit had neglected to place a firing-cap in the pistol on purpose (349). Keller, too, confesses to Myshkin, and confesses that he does so that he might then borrow money. Myshkin is not only not shocked, but uses the occasion to talk about himself, his own double thoughts and double motives:

Две мысли вместе сошлись, это очень часто случается. Со мной беспрерывно. Я, впрочем, думаю, что это нехорошо, и, знаете, Келлер, я в этом всего больше укоряю себя. Вы мне точно меня самого теперь рассказали. Мне даже случалось иногда думать... что и все люди так, так что я начал было и одобрять себя, потому что с этими *двойными* мыслями ужасно трудно бороться; я испытал (258).

Thus, like Lebedev, Keller usually acts and speaks out of at least two motives, one base and one decent, both equally sincere. Just because such double thoughts are not only common, but perhaps the rule behind human motivation, does not, as Myshkin indicates, justify base motives, and Myshkin himself constantly strives, albeit unsuccessfully, to drive these thoughts away.

Keller claims that motive is what is important concerning the article he writes about Myshkin: "прежде всего инициатива важна, прежде всего цель и намерение" (225). The reader, however, is likely to disagree, given the outrageous character of the article, especially its lack of concern for accuracy and truth. Whether one judges another based on that other's motives or actions (including negative actions resulting from positive motives) becomes a major issue in the novel, affecting our interpretation of the characters. It seems, taking for example Keller's case, as well as that of Burdovskii, that one cannot be judged by motive alone. In other words, just because one does not know one is commit-

ting a crime does not mean the action is not a crime. Indeed, it appears from several discussions in the novel that the problem with society is that people do not know they are doing wrong (once again, Keller, Burdovskii). Evgenii Pavlovich provides an example of this by recalling the famous defense of a lawyer who pleaded the poverty of his client as a justification for his having killed six people at once in order to rob them: "Естественно, говорит, что моему клиенту по бедности пришло в голову совершить это убийство шести человек, да и кому же на его месте не пришло бы это в голову?" (236). In a later discussion Myshkin notes that such distortion of ideas and understanding is often found, and that it is far more of a general than a particular occurrence (279). He concludes by contrasting those criminals who know they are guilty (such as the cannibal described by Lebedev) to those who refuse to consider themselves criminals and believe they are in the right (280). Those who do not consider their crimes as wrong are the greater criminals, for their crimes are not only of action, but also of thought. The relationship between action and feeling in regard to morality presented in the novel helps to explain Dostoevskii's tolerance for thieves, liars and drunkards: "the subordination of action to feeling obviously has a profound effect on the conception of sin ... and makes the sin inherent not in the action but in the state of feeling" (Carr, 210). However, Keller believes he is acting honorably, just as Myshkin intends no harm to others by his actions. Who, then, determines what is a crime and what is not in order to identify "thought" criminals? The stories discussed by the characters seem to imply that sinful states of mind are morally more reprehensible than the crimes themselves. Thus, although General Ivolgin is an irresponsible and weak drunkard, because he has a moral conscience he is higher on the moral scale than those who consider their crimes to be right and do not suffer on account of them. Myshkin, too, internalizes his guilt, which drives him not to death, but to insanity, whereas Lebedev, Epanchin, and Keller, among others, continue to believe that many of their actions are justifiable.

However, it is not whether a character is viewed positively or negatively by the reader, narrator, other characters, or even by himself/herself that makes each a unique personality. The question of motive is one which divides how a character views himself/herself from how others, who may ascribe different motives to that character, judge him/her. The characters thus judge themselves differently from how others judge them, which may be different yet from an evaluation based on some objective standard. Indeed, the narrator calls attention to the difficulty of determining human motive: "Не забудем, что причины действий человеческих обыкновенно бесчисленно сложнее и разнообразнее, чем мы их всегда потом объясняем, и редко определенно очерчиваются" (402). Motive thus provides one of the motifs in the novel which focuses on the difficulty of "knowing" another, and thereby the impossibility of finalizing/

objectifying another. As considered above, the motivation for any particular action is never totally unified, and it is difficult to pin down these characters who seem to act one minute from the best of motives, at other times from the worst of motives, and often from both simultaneously, as expressed by Keller. Furthermore, it seems that no one is completely free of "thought" crime, that is, convincing oneself of the rightness of one's questionable actions. While each strives to succeed within his/her own moral code, Lebedev suggests in his story of the cannibal that a common moral code is needed, by which each must be judged (315).<sup>17</sup> The difficulty for the characters, as well as for the reader, is in determining this moral code. If, indeed, it can be determined. So that, *the greatest "thought" crime might consist of certainty in one's own judgments of others*, no matter what that judgment is or on what it is based, *for such certainty objectifies, finalizes, and judges others*.<sup>18</sup>

Ferdyschenko provides a further example of how the motifs of theft, honesty, lying, crime, and especially motive provide a basis for examining the complex nature of the individual. The guests play a game at Nastas'ia Filippovna's party in which everyone is to tell the worst thing he/she ever did. Ferdyschenko tells of stealing three rubles while at the country house of a friend (124). Suspicion fell on a certain servant, Daria, who was then discharged on account of the theft. Ferdyschenko spent the three rubles on wine and states that he did not feel any particular remorse, either then or afterward (124). He did nothing to rectify the situation. His crime is not so much in the action of the theft as in his feelings concerning it. His theft of three rubles is presented as a greater crime than Ivolgin's theft of four hundred, because of his lack of conscience. General Ivolgin has a conscience, and is so shocked by his own action that he not only returns the money, but dies because of it. Indeed, Myshkin advances this very interpretation of events to Kolia: "смерть-то старика происходит, главное, от ужаса, оставшегося в его сердце после проступка" (461). That a guilty conscience could lead to death is made explicit by the narrator in Dostoevskii's short story "Честный вор": "а что вот умер с тоски да от совести, так всему свету доказал на себе, что каков он ни был, а он всё человек [my emphasis]" (Dostoevskii, II: 427). That this plot was developed much earlier by Dostoevskii, and used repeatedly in his works, attests to its importance. Indeed, the "honest" thief is one who acknowledges his crime, whereas the one who does not, even though society may judge his crime as less, is far more guilty.<sup>19</sup>

However, in the case of Ferdyschenko, the situation may not be so simple. For we know that Ferdyschenko, like Ivolgin, often played the fool, and lied to please others. Indeed, Ferdyschenko has been cast by others into the role of court jester, and he willingly accepts this role, stating that otherwise he would not be admitted into such company (117). Ferdyschenko's conscious fulfill-

ment of the *role* of fool, as well as the acknowledgement of others that he *is* playing a role, implies that it does not represent his entire character. Here it is possible he is retelling an episode from Rousseau's *Confessions*, in which Rousseau stole a ribbon, and let the blame fall on an innocent servant girl (Rousseau, 84-87).<sup>20</sup> However, while Rousseau expresses feelings of guilt, Ferdyschchenko claims that he felt no remorse for his action.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, we are told that Ferdyschchenko was even surprised at the disgust of his listeners, for he had expected a different response (124). Ferdyschchenko may have expected to win praise for his frankness or originality. Here he could be telling his story to please others, to produce an effect, but he fails as we are told he frequently does:

Князь узнал потом, что этот господин как будто по обязанности взял на себя задачу изумлять всех оригинальностью и веселостью, но у него как-то никогда не выходило. На некоторых он производил даже неприятное впечатление, отчего он искренно скорбел, но задачу свою все-таки не покидал (80).

Ferdyschchenko desires to please others, and is distressed that his attempts usually have the opposite effect. In this and in the liberties he takes with the truth he is similar to Ivolgin, who admits that "some people" may lie simply to please those with whom they are speaking: "иной и лжет-то, если хотите, из одной только дружбы, чтобы доставить тем удовольствие собеседнику" (411). Myshkin, similarly, allows the Swiss children to believe he is in love with Marie simply in order to please them (61). Thus, in the end the question again arises as to the relative merits of motive and action. Here, specifically, the problem concerns lying: is lying ever justifiable, and by what standard do we judge? At the same time this question of the underlying motive of lying points to the difficulty of "knowing" and thereby of judging, in effect, objectifying, another.

The theme of "knowing," in other words, finalizing, another, is brought to the fore again at Myshkin and Aglaia's engagement party at the Epanchins. The passage begins with the narrator's rather one-sided introduction of the various guests (442-446), concluding that most of them are rather empty people (442). Myshkin attempts a corrective, commenting not only on the many praiseworthy character traits of this class of people (457), but noting positive actions by many of the guests (456). His praise of their attributes and actions, however, has already been undercut by the narrator, who has informed us that Myshkin is too predisposed to think well of this company (443). Myshkin, for example, commends Ivan Petrovich for giving his peasants timber when their huts burned down, a rumor which the narrator tells us is false (456).<sup>22</sup> Myshkin, who earlier criticized himself for too hastily reaching negative conclusions about others (104, 190), here goes to the other extreme, attributing positive qualities to others, where few, if any, exist. By doing so, however, he once again calls the

reader's attention to the difficulty of "reading" people, of the impossibility of finalizing others, and of the frequent divergence between self-perceived motivations and the motives others attribute to one's actions. By focusing exclusively on the rumored positive qualities of these members of society, as well as their superficial veneer of manners, Myshkin objectifies these guests. He explains them (at least to himself), closing them off, and in doing so, strips them of their subjectivity. Yet, just because Myshkin misreads their personalities, one must not conclude that these guests are devoid of any redeeming qualities. For example, the narrator later informs us that the old "patron" of the Epanchin family is really a kind man, even though his interest and kindness toward Myshkin is largely due to his curiosity about Myshkin's affair with Nastas'ia Filippovna (459). Here double motives, considered above in connection with Keller, are ascribed to the "patron," who is both kind and curious. It is important to note that the scene ends with the narrator's comment on the kindness of this old "patron," in other words, the narrator indicates that these people are not as bad as first the reader, and Aglaia, assume, nor as good as Myshkin supposes, but, rather, complex individuals, about whom we, the readers, Myshkin, and Aglaia, do not know everything.

Secondary characters in *Idiot* are not as one-sided as might appear at first glance, for each is characterized by internal division, and none is closed/finalized. What Bakhtin writes about the discourse of the hero, and his/her subjective presentation, may be applied with equal validity to the secondary characters in Dostoevskii's work. Their individual voices do not merely reflect, but contribute to the dialogue of the novel. Other characters could, following the above argument, be examined in their roles as subjects and in their contribution to the numerous views expressed (verbally and in action) on the various issues the novel explores. While this presentation of characters as subjects may also be found in other Dostoevskii novels, it is central to *Idiot*. Myshkin, the central character and focus of the novel, repeatedly calls attention to this theme, and the reader is constantly aware of how Myshkin perceives others, how they perceive him, and how our perceptions, Myshkin's, and those of other characters change as the novel progresses. Indeed, Myshkin is constantly reassessing his views of others, questioning his ability and even his right to judge others: "А впрочем, что же он взялся их так окончательно судить, он, сегодня явившийся, что же это он произносит такие приговоры?" (190).

*Idiot* presents not a finalized truth, but a search. Just as the novel does not provide any certainty on a spiritual level, so it does not close off or limit its characters. Nothing and no one is final: "При этом ни одна человеческая фигура не кажется вам у Достоевского мелкою, с ограниченным внутренним содержанием, с неподвижно установившимся замкнутым характером" (Волынский, 494). Dostoevskii's work derives its depth from secondary

characters, who respond to, reflect, and *contribute* to the dialogue of the novel. Indeed, they are not "extras" in the world of the novel, but essential to its structure, for each is a consciousness, a subject, whom the others must confront. The text provides no simple answers, no simple relationships between characters and themes, but rather, all is interwoven and interrelated in a complex network, without beginning or end, thereby reflecting the complexity of the world beyond the text. The novel is thus truly multivoiced, reflecting both the complexity of each individual and, by extension, of the human world.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Part of the difficulty with this passage from Bakhtin is that it comes from his unfinished notes, and is not further elaborated. Characters in *Idiot*, such as the unnamed companions of Rogozhin who accompany him to the Ivolgins and later to Nastas'ia Filippovna's, or those comprising the mob outside Nastas'ia Filippovna's door the evening of her wedding, are not only unnamed, but unindividuated, and therefore cannot be depicted as subjects. However, one could argue that these are not "secondary" characters. Once a character is presented as an individual (named or not), and addressed/viewed by another, that character becomes a subject, treated from various points of view and not locked into one finalized interpretation. Interestingly, very few of the novel's characters are unnamed, and the named characters, all of whom are presented as three-dimensional subjects, appear at the various parties and gatherings occurring throughout the novel, which provide ample opportunity to provide varying views on the character of each.
- <sup>2</sup> One could, of course, argue whether or not a particular character is secondary. Such characters are those who either occupy little space in the novel (for example, the German lady and Ferdyschenko), or those who play no essential role in the core plot (in other words, in the two love triangles) (Ivolgin and Lebedev, for example). As considered in the above note, an unindividuated character would not be considered secondary.
- <sup>3</sup> Henry James, in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, argues for a single Central Intelligence, through whom everything in the text should be filtered. In Dostoevskii's work, the reader is confronted by several such intelligences, creating the impression of a chaotic world.
- <sup>4</sup> F.M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh*, Leningrad, Nauka, VIII, 1973. All further references to *Idiot* are to this edition and are noted in the text parenthetically.
- <sup>5</sup> Works on *Idiot* mentioning General Ivolgin include Brody, 132-135; Curle, 65-67; Peace, 101-102, 105, 115; Schultze, 151-162, 237-245; and Skartymov, 161-162.

- 6 Kolia states on the day of Ivolgin's stroke that the general has had nothing to drink for three days (394), and the interview with Myshkin occurs two days before Ivolgin's stroke. It would thus appear that the general has not been drinking for at least twenty-four hours before his fateful interview with Myshkin.
- 7 Ippolit implies he is insulted that Myshkin, as well as others, treat him like porcelain ("как фарфоровую чашку" [433]), for Ippolit, too, would prefer to be treated as a subject, and not as an object. The German lady, too, is compared to a vase (132).
- 8 Schultze's study includes a detailed analysis of Ivolgin's speech patterns (151–161).
- 9 Myshkin's compassion also alienates Gania: "он [Ганя] успел и возненавидеть князя за то, что тот смотрел на него слишком уж сострадательно" (387). Similarly, Nastas'ia Filippovna exclaims: "что она ни от кого не требует ни высокомерного сострадания, ни помощи, ни 'возвеличения до себя'" (362).
- 10 Ivolgin's confession may be compared to Ippolit's, which is also central to the novel's structure. Concerning Ippolit's confession, see, for example, Bakhtin, 241; Frank, 321–323; Skaftymov, 149–154; Wasiolek, 92–100.
- 11 Here I paraphrase Skaftymov on Nastas'ia Filippovna (Skaftymov, 148). What he writes about her in this respect applies to every character's relation to Myshkin.
- 12 Aglaia similarly resorts to various forms of misbehavior to punish herself and others (Seeley, 5).
- 13 Everything Skaftymov writes about Nastas'ia Filippovna's pride could be equally applied to General Ivolgin. Skaftymov views pride as *the* obstacle to forgiveness and love, concluding that pride and forgiveness are the central themes not only in *Idiot*, but in all of Dostoevskii's novels.
- 14 Slattery argues that Myshkin misunderstands sin, guilt, and thus forgiveness, analyzing Myshkin's interpretation of the story of Marie as evidence (Slattery, 19–22).
- 15 Works on *Idiot* mentioning Lebedev include Curle, 113–118; Frank, 318–319; Peace, 109–110; Skaftymov, 162; Terras, 88–89; and Wasiolek, 101–103.
- 16 Another example of such disjunction between words/thoughts and actions is provided by the old schoolteacher at Nastas'ia Filippovna's name-day party. He remains during the scandal in order to protect Nastas'ia Filippovna, because of his great love for her, and yet he not only fails to act in any way, but

even to speak in her defense (indeed, he seems incapable of even understanding the situation, much less providing any assistance) (132). Interestingly this old schoolteacher who appears to be just another object in the room, much like the German lady, surprises the other guests by actually speaking once (119), thereby reminding the others, as well as the reader, that he, too, is a person and not an "ornament" produced for the occasion.

- 17 Lebedev never states explicitly what this idea was, but he notes that it no longer exists, that men are no longer bound together by an idea. It seems likely that he is speaking of some sort of religious idea, especially as this tale is followed by a discussion of the Apocalypse. For an analysis of the apocalyptic themes and imagery in *Idiot*, see David M. Bethea, *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 62-104.
- 18 Note the similarity of the ideas developed here to those presented in Ras-kolnikov's dream in Siberia in which men are infected with parasites which cause them to go insane, each believing that the truth has been entrusted to him alone. Similar ideas are also discussed in *Notes From the House of the Dead*.
- 19 Despite all of his stories and lies, Kolia maintains that his father is an honest man, a "честный человек" (113). Myshkin agrees with Kolia, and later echoes his opinion concerning the general, when he asks Lebedev why he is tormenting such a "честнейший человек" (409). Similarly, Myshkin refers to Nastas'ia Filippovna as "честная," "honest" (138).
- 20 Ferdyschchenko is not the only one to take credit for another's story. When Nastas'ia Filippovna arrives on a surprise visit to the Ivolgins, General Ivolgin recounts an incident with a lapdog, his fanciful version of the cause of his break with the Epanchins (93-94). Nastas'ia Filippovna remarks that she recently read the very same story in the *Indépendance*.
- 21 Indeed, Rousseau states that the burden on his conscience of this particular incident was one of the main motivating factors in the writing of his *Confessions* (86). Although Rousseau's insistence on his feelings of guilt are undercut by his attempt to justify his action and by his certainty that his suffering has atoned for his earlier weakness ("je crains peu d'en emporter la culpabilité avec moi" [87]), he does wrestle with the morality of his action. If Ferdyschchenko's story is a recasting of Rousseau's, this could explain Ferdyschchenko's lack of remorse, for, why should he have strong feelings about something he never did?
- 22 Ivan Petrovich, interestingly, finds it flattering to let others believe he did act in this manner, in other words, he is content to do one thing, yet have others believe another.



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