



The Lived Body in Seizure: Epilepsy as an Ontological Mode of Being in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

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Abstract:

The Idiot by Fyodor Dostoevsky is a perfect presentation of two irreconcilable ontological modes. These modes are represented on the one hand, by Myshkin's no-mind, pre-reflective, natural consciousness in Switzerland and on the other, the socially constructed cultural consciousness of Petersburg society, divided by its concerns of status, wealth, and a compulsive obsession with ego. In the Russian Society with its pretensions and acquisitive ethos, the prince, a misfit, is never able to inhabit the categorical traps of culture. Myshkin's epilepsy is an escape into a pristine world of silence and stupefaction, away from the chaos of culture. Contrary to the societal perspective on his illness and his disability, Myshkin's epileptic condition is a relief from the cultural categories of time and place. Combining perspectives from social constructivism and theories of the pathological, this paper argues that Myshkin's epilepsy is not a medical deficiency but a different mode of being-in-the-world, one that society inevitably confines as 'idiocy'.

Keywords: Idiot, Ontology, Nature, Escape, Epilepsy.

The Rousseauian concept of *amour-propre* is vividly at play in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Set against the concept of *amour de soi*, which is an instinct of self-preservation, *amour-propre* is about how society conceives the subject based on its ideas of merit, distinction and competition (Rousseau; Neuhouser 29). It creates vanity and competitive selfhood as the very fabric of society and glorifies these attributes in a social being. Myshkin, the Prince, known as 'the idiot', is unknowingly drawn to the Petersburg society, which values *amour-propre* as an indispensable quality in a human being. Myshkin's sallies into the cultural world are brief, eventful, and tumultuous for both him and society. Dostoevsky presents Myshkin entering Petersburg as “a shivering neighbour, exposed to the chill and damp of a Russian November night, for which he was evidently unprepared” (Dostoevsky, *Idiot* 8). This unpreparedness for a civilised and pretentious culture is Myshkin's first nature. His genuine love for humanity is read as an unmistakable sign of his disabled state. His inability to read the cultural codes is marked as an idiotic trait, much to the bewilderment of the culturally intricate Russian society, which finally expels such a being. This paper analyses Myshkin's ontological displacement by demonstrating the artificial societal framework he fails to internalise, then examining how his natural consciousness—shaped by epilepsy and sanctuary—is pathologised by that same society.

Theoretical Background

Within social constructivist thought, the mind is seen as an "internalised" culture. Lev Vygotsky states that all higher mental functions appear 'twice': first at the social level through interaction with others and then at the psychological level within the child's mind (57). Since Myshkin escaped the first stage of social interaction due to his institutionalisation at the sanatorium, the second stage of psychological internalisation of culture never occurs. This absence is not merely a developmental delay but a fundamental ontological difference: Myshkin has not undergone the process that transforms biological existence into social being.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in their much-renowned work *The Social Construction of Reality*, argue that reality itself is constructed socially through institutionalisation and habitualisation. Further, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* informs us of how individuals acquire certain ways of thinking about and living in the world through socialisation, and how *habitus* serves as a navigational bridge between individual consciousness and social structure (Bourdieu and Wacquant 126). Myshkin, having spent his major years in a sanatorium, is outside this process, lacks '*habitus*' and does not know how to play the social game. He even mistakes the subtle game for openness and authenticity, qualities he possesses. At the Yepanchin's party, after the initial embarrassment triggered by Aglaia's warnings to be appropriate to the occasion, Myshkin feels elated at the seeming innocence and grace with which the participants accept him. His literal interpretation of social nuance reveals his inability to comprehend the encoded rules Bourdieu's *habitus* anticipates. Myshkin's awkwardness is ontological; he is a different being who has not internalised the practices of the social world.

Myshkin's failure to acclimate himself to the *habitus* is not just socially awkward; it places him in the category of "the pathological". Michel Foucault's mentor, George Canguilhem, in his scholarly work *The Normal and the Pathological*, probes the scientific and societal attitudes towards illness, a work that inspired Foucault's iconic work on the history of madness, detailing the reasons behind the confinement and institutionalisation of people considered abnormal. Canguilhem suggests that "the pathological" is not merely the absence of the normal but a different mode of living (144). "The pathological" creates its own norms, its own way of being-in-the-world. Myshkin cannot be seen as "lacking" by operating in a mode unwelcome in society. Canguilhem's framework is particularly significant here: rather than measuring Myshkin against a pre-existing standard of health, we might understand his epileptic consciousness as generating its own normative standards—standards that are incomprehensible to a society that measures value through competition, status, and possession.

However, Foucault, in his historical analysis, states that since society cannot comprehend or share this mode of being, it confines them in a sanatorium or, as in the case of Myshkin, welcomes and patronises them in their perpetual state of idiocy, as a queer specimen for the amusement of society. The novel stages precisely this Foucauldian dynamic: Myshkin becomes a spectacle precisely because his mode of being cannot be assimilated into the social order, yet he cannot be entirely expelled due to his aristocratic status and unexpected inheritance.

Literature Review

The existing scholarship on *The Idiot* is a vast, ever-growing, often labyrinthine landscape. However, for the sake of pointing out how the view of this paper differs, it would be worthwhile to categorise the scholarship into different, though overlapping, reading angles. Joseph Frank's famous theological approach to Dostoevsky presents Myshkin as the extreme incarnation of the ideal of Christian love. Similarly, Rosenshield presents an apocalyptic view, while Mikhail Bakhtin's application of polyphony to the text examines how Myshkin becomes a catalyst for others' perspectival change. Other significant readings include Roger Anderson's, which sees the text as a critique of materialism; a narratological reading by Robin Feuer Miller; and, most recently, Artem Bykov's, which uses the cave metaphor in Plato to compare the return of Myshkin to Switzerland after he fails in the Russian world.

To engage with specific scholarly discourses on epilepsy in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* is equally important for this paper. They converge around two primary but interconnected domains. Numerous studies in the medical literature examine the novel's clinical accuracy in depicting an epileptic patient. Studies such as those by Miksanek (1982) and Rayport et al. (2011) analyse Prince Myshkin's seizures, affirming the precision with which Dostoevsky depicted temporal-lobe epilepsy—particularly the ecstatic aura—decades before modern neurology formalised it and connected it to Dostoevsky's personal experience with epileptic

fits. In addition, contemporary scholars like Anupama Shukla investigate the 19th-century stigma and mythological language surrounding the condition, arguing that epilepsy serves as a tool for social exclusion. The study often extends to the "interictal personality syndrome" (de Souza & Mendes), framing Myshkin's hyper-religiosity, hypo-sexuality and moral idealism as behavioural symptoms of his neurological state.

The second major domain explores epilepsy's constitutive role in the novel's philosophical themes and narrative architecture. Here, Myshkin's ecstatic seizures are interpreted not merely as symptoms of a mental illness but as transcendent, metaphysical experiences that grant him a perspective outside normative cultural frameworks (Morgan; Martinović; Ulitin). Researchers like Slattery argue that seizure rhythms and the doubling of characters (e.g., Myshkin and Rogozhin) generate the novel's intense plot and psychological depth. Tatyana Kasatkina reads *The Idiot* as "entirely built upon collisions, comparisons, and attempts at interaction between these two human natures" (32), consisting of higher and lower natures. Dostoevsky's intention of creating "a perfectly positive human being" is also explored as the positing of a mythical and ethical hero who fails miserably, yet heroically, in saving an undeserving and indifferent world and transcends through his mystical experiences (Sytina & Ryabokon, Brooks et al). Finally, this scholarship presents the narrative of epilepsy in *The Idiot* as a complex nexus where precise medical observation, cultural history, and innovative literary form converge to explore consciousness, morality, and the limits of human understanding.

What remains underdeveloped in this rich body of scholarship, however, is a sustained ontological reading that synthesises the medical and the metaphysical without reducing one to the other. The medical readings, while valuable, risk pathologising what the novel presents as epistemologically valid experiences; the metaphysical readings, while insightful, often neglect the specific, embodied texture of those experiences as they are rendered in the novel's prose. My attempt, therefore, is to read the case of Myshkin as "ontological"—one that reveals the

impossibility of a natural consciousness inhabiting a cultural world. I focus on Myshkin's own mode of consciousness, shaped by his epileptic condition and his confinement in the sanatorium—its origin in nature rather than culture. The paper synthesises the two domains and sees the medical and metaphysical interpretations as cultural reactions to a consciousness that remains outside culture, while insisting that the specific phenomenology of that consciousness matters—that Myshkin's seizures are not merely symptoms or symbols but the very texture of his alternative mode of being.

Analysis

The Journey to Russia

Myshkin's first encounter in the novel with the wild, passionate, and erratic Rogozhin and the greedy Lebedyev contrasts Myshkin's openness with the irreparable schism between his "idiocy" and the world's "sanity". Myshkin's first meeting with Rogozhin during the return from Switzerland is a perfect entry into the character of both Myshkin and Rogozhin. It points to the characters' like-mindedness: both intuitively recognise their antithesis and synthesis, and take an instant liking to each other, a bond that lasts till the end. This meeting also establishes the novel's central dialectic: Rogozhin, for all his violence and passion, represents a different kind of outsidership—one that is still within the economy of desire and possession, whereas Myshkin stands entirely outside that economy. The instant recognition between them suggests that those who operate outside social norms can recognise each other across apparently vast differences.

Myshkin's appearance and demeanour shock Petersburg society and make everyone see him as an alien, first with suspicion, then with growing curiosity at his absolute ignorance of high society manners, and his innocent, detached acceptance of his idiotic, invalid condition surprises everyone he comes into contact with. The liveried servants, the Yepanchins, Ganya,

Lebedyev and everyone else are astonished and respond in sheer disbelief at this epileptic, child-like figure. General Yepanchin says to his wife: "he is quite a child, and such a pathetic figure, he has some sort of fits" (Dostoevsky, *Idiot* 54) ... he is queerly dressed, like a German, and not a penny, literally (55). Dostoevsky is eager to posit the Prince as a foil to the suave, snobbish, condescending Yepanchins who represent the Russian politesse. He is a being who is indifferent to the names he is attributed with, be it Prince or Idiot. This indifference to social classification is precisely what Bourdieu's *habitus* cannot account for—Myshkin does not experience the shame or embarrassment that should accompany his social gaffes because he does not inhabit the field of social competition at all. His "idiocy" is thus not a failure of social performance but a refusal of the very premises on which social performance is built.

The Swiss Memories

Myshkin's memories of Switzerland are a stark contrast to the performative cultural world of Petersburg society, with all its foppish affectations. In the following chapters, which deal with the orphaned and stigmatised Marie, the children, the donkey and the waterfall, the author shows the natural world as Myshkin's proper home. Myshkin talks about how life abroad made him very happy, and that, too, without any apparent reason, unlike the restlessness at the beginning. In due time, in the midst of nature, he finds wisdom "that one might find a wealth of life, even in prison" (62). His affinity and complete union with the natural world are evident when one considers how he is brought to consciousness by the braying of an ass, a recounting which throws the Yepanchin sisters into fits of laughter. Myshkin recounts his journey from Russia to Switzerland when he was afflicted with violent attacks of his fits. He was silent, stupefied and felt entirely strange and disconnected, and on reaching Bale, Switzerland, he recollects:

... I was roused by the bray of an ass in the marketplace. I was immensely struck with the ass, and for some reason, extraordinarily pleased with it, and suddenly everything seemed to clear up in my head. ... and so through the ass, all Switzerland began to attract me so that my melancholy passed completely. (59)

This passage deserves closer attention. The ass does not communicate through language or cultural signification; its bray is purely animal, a sound that belongs to the pre-cultural world. That this sound, rather than any human speech, restores Myshkin to himself suggests that his consciousness is fundamentally attuned to a register of being that precedes or bypasses linguistic mediation. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body is illuminating here. Merleau-Ponty's theorisation of the "lived body" could just be apt for the interpretation of Myshkin's epilepsy. His fits are not just pathological but moments of intense "being-in-the-world"(385). During epileptic fits, Myshkin feels a profound oneness with the world, a perfect harmony and a return to the world before culture. As explained by Jennifer Bullington in her paper on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological psychosomatic theory, during a psychosomatic condition, there is a disarticulation of self and the world, which causes the body to express itself in a specific mode of being-in-the-world which would be outside the bounds of the psycho-social levels of meaning construction (1). The ass episode stages precisely such a disarticulation and rearticulation: Myshkin's body, disconnected from the social world, finds its reconnection through a non-human sound that reorients his entire perceptual field. His body is not a vessel for cultural meanings but a site of pre-cultural openness to the world.

Myshkin's tale of witnessing an execution sheds light on the concept of relative time; he remembers the conversation with the reprieved man, who says that "those five minutes seemed to him an infinite time" (Dostoevsky, *Idiot* 63). The possibility of death places the eternity of life in front of an individual and makes him notice the moments before him, counting them one by one, trying to make the most out of each experience. Four years in Switzerland,

in the company of innocent and understanding school children, he feels at home and at ease. In the treatment accorded to the invalid and orphaned Marie, he perceives the prejudice of the society which leads to unbearable misery for her. Myshkin, like Christ himself, extends affection and compassion to the suffering soul, leading her towards a peaceful death. The temporal experience described here—the stretching of time under the pressure of mortality—offers another perspective on Myshkin's mode of being. If cultural time is linear, progressive, and oriented toward achievement, Myshkin's time is durational, intensive, and oriented toward presence. His epilepsy, with its sudden breaks in temporal continuity, might be understood as another manifestation of this alternative temporality—one that interrupts the smooth flow of social time with moments of pure intensity.

The Epileptic Aura

Myshkin's epileptic fits occur at decisive moments when reality stares him in the face, and he feels the enormity of life and death intensely, completely taking him out of his mind to face existence. Just one minute before he loses consciousness, triggered by the epileptic fit, he feels: “The sensation of life, the consciousness of self existence, was almost ten times stronger in those moments” (230). The vision of harmony with the entire universe floods his soul: “His mind and heart were flooded with extraordinary light; all his uneasiness, all his doubts, all his anxieties were relieved at once; they were all merged in a lofty calm, full of serene, harmonious joy and hope”(230).

The imagery of "light" and "calm" suggests not the confusion we might associate with pathology but rather a clarity that exceeds ordinary consciousness. The repetition of “all” (“all his uneasiness, all his doubts, all his anxieties”) emphasises the totality of the release—this is not a partial relief but a complete transformation of consciousness. The phrase “lofty calm” suggests a spatial elevation, as if Myshkin's consciousness ascends above the ordinary plane of

experience. The prose itself, with its accumulating clauses, enacts the flooding sensation it describes. This is not merely a symptom to be diagnosed but a phenomenological event that challenges our assumptions about what consciousness can be. The seizure reveals a mode of perception that is not accessible through ordinary consciousness, a mode in which selfhood is not dissolved but intensified, not lost but expanded. Dostoevsky's literary rendering of the aura gives us access to this alternative mode, not as a medical case study but as lived experience.

In his conversation with Rogozhin, Myshkin says, "I didn't want to come here; I want to forget everything here, to root it out of my heart" (Dostoevsky, *Idiot* 221). An array of events ensues. Myshkin is entranced by the Holbein painting of the dead Christ and by the exchange of crosses between Rogozhin and himself. In a fit of fury, Rogozhin attacks Myshkin with a knife, trying to murder him, causing Myshkin to utter a terrible cry, "Parfyon, I don't believe it"—suddenly, something seemed to ascend before him; his soul was flooded with intense light and an epileptic fit and falls down the stairs (239). The Holbein painting, which depicts Christ's body in the starkest physical degradation, confronts Myshkin with the absolute contradiction between spiritual ideals and corporeal reality. His epileptic response to this confrontation is not an evasion but an integration: the seizure allows him to hold together the spiritual and the physical in a mode of consciousness that transcends their opposition.

Nastasya Filippovna's Birthday Party

Nastasya's birthday party reveals Myshkin's true nature. While everyone, including Totsky, Ganya and Yepanchin, values money and societal acceptance and looks upon Nastasya as an easily available commodity to be traded off, Myshkin treats her as an equal, and even above him, he reaches out to her desperation with love and compassion, and with Christlike divinity, he consoles and reassures Nastasya, showing his genuine, flawless affection for the miserable soul.

Myshkin's lack of jealousy, possession and rancour in love, which is so part of the cultural assumptions of love, proves him to be a natural man. His asexual relationship with women takes on different but complementary modes: compassion and pity for their souls, as in the case of Mary, the orphan and sometimes admiration of the ideal beauty as a sublime concept, in his relationship with Aglaia and Nastasya, and Christ-like compassion for the self-destructive Nastasya Filippovna. He responds to Aglaia's question about love: "I have been happy in a different way" (Dostoevsky, *Idiot* 70). The prominent women in the novel, from Mrs Yepanchin to Nastasya and Aglaia, immediately strike a chord with the "idiocy" of the Prince. Women seem to pierce through his tender heart to shed their imposed cultural pretences and recognise the inherent naturalness in Myshkin, and are drawn to him instantly. Lizaveta Prokofyevna, the hysterical but kind-hearted mother, declares at one instance: "I'd be ready to turn away all those people who were here last night and to keep him. That's what I think of him" (561). This attraction of women to Myshkin is significant not because he is a romantic hero but because women in the novel are themselves positioned at the margins of the patriarchal social order. They recognise in Myshkin a mode of being that is not structured by the competitive, possessive masculinity that dominates Petersburg society. His "idiocy" appears to them not as a deficiency but as liberation.

The Encounter with the Nihilists

The episodes featuring the nihilists reveal Myshkin's refusal to defend himself before his accusers, his unbelievable sympathy for them, and his total apathy towards wealth and inheritance. It also unravels the sheer difference between the Prince's genuine philosophical reflections and the performative acts of the nihilists, who perform to identify with a particular philosophy as a means of satisfying their ego. In the long, drawn-out scenes, at Nastasya's birthday party and the chaotic encounter with the four young men at Lebedyev's home, we see the convergence of all the novel's characters, revealing the complexities of Petersburg Society

at its pinnacle. It is a space where rivalries, prejudice, animosity, distress, and judgment are blatantly at play again. Against this volatile, stressful environment is posted the Christlike figure of Myshkin, in his innocent yet futile attempts to restore peace and reconcile differences. Nastasya's birthday party is absolute pandemonium with characteristic performances by the capricious Rogozhin and his noisy attendants, all inebriated and out of bounds, and an equally ferocious Nastasya lashing out at her oppressor Totsky, her suitor Ganya, her betrayers and the society as a whole. In this uproar, Myshkin's misplaced compassion invites ridicule, causing the Prince to retreat into his melancholic mood. The Prince is totally helpless in saving the mercurial Nastasya and her self-inflicted torment. He persists in his attempt, so much so that he falls headlong into the chaos, unable to sort out the clutter. However, he is not able to help Nastasya as she is damaged by the cultural constructs of shame and guilt, which Myshkin's natural compassion cannot cure. This failure is crucial to the novel's ontological argument: Myshkin's mode of being, while offering a genuine alternative to cultural pathology, cannot heal those whose suffering is itself produced by culture. His compassion is not ineffective because it is insufficient but because it addresses a different register of being than the one in which Nastasya's suffering is constituted.

In the scene at Lebedyev's house, there is a similar uproar over Myshkin's new inheritance from his benefactor. The world takes sides with the Prince and his opponent, whose enmity with the Prince is not reciprocated, causing confusion and a resolution hitherto unknown to the conventional society. In this instance, Ippolit, the consumptive bachelor facing imminent death, finds a tranquil hospice in the presence of the Prince and reunites the warring people into a solidarity centred on the Prince as the Messiah. Ippolit's case offers a parallel to Myshkin's: both face the imminence of bodily dissolution, but whereas Ippolit's response is rage and nihilistic rebellion, Myshkin's is serenity and openness. Their difference is not merely

temperamental but ontological. Ippolit remains within the logic of cultural selfhood even as he rejects its values, while Myshkin has never entered that logic at all.

The Soiree and the Broken Vase

The Prince, unaware of the subtleties of Russian society, is warned by Aglaia to eschew his usual philosophical discussions and to behave like a gentleman worthy of the party. He is asked to conduct himself “modestly, quietly with dignity, and without gestures and too many words” (Dostoevsky, *Idiot* 539). However, after the initial embarrassment, Myshkin is enchanted by the seeming simplicity and openness of the guests: “the charm of elegant manners of simplicity and of apparent frankness was almost magical. It could never have entered his head that all the simple frankness and ability with, and refined personal dignity was perhaps only an exquisite artistic veneer” (539). This passage reveals the fundamental asymmetry of perception between Myshkin and the society he encounters. Where a socially competent individual would recognise performance, Myshkin sees authenticity. This is not simply naivety; it is the consequence of a mode of being that does not distinguish between surface and depth because it does not inhabit a world structured by such distinctions. For Myshkin, what appears is what is—the very possibility of deception presupposes a separation between appearance and reality that his consciousness does not generate.

In the course of the party, Myshkin's speech on religion hurts the soullessness of their knowledge and faith; the speech confuses and confounds the guests at the Epanchin party. He passionately argues for the essential life-giving, world-saving nature of Russian Orthodox Christianity, an antidote for the degradation of the modern world for him as opposed to the worldly, power-mongering, Western Christianity, which he calls an “unChristian faith” that is very much like Russian atheism and nihilism, which, according to him, are all products of

Western influence. He asserts the need to return to the instinctive faith and values of ordinary Russian people and to Christ as the answer to all the terms of materialism.

The speech, which the guests invariably find boring, politically sceptical, or hostile, reaches an emotional peak, triggering the prince's usual epileptic seizure. His intense feeling and religious fervour, thoughts of beauty in the world, overpowers his body so much that it has a negative impact on the audience, as they are shocked at the sick man lying on the carpet. The prince's profound moment of spiritual insight and oneness with the beauty of the world surpasses their understanding of the superfluous, supercilious Russian landed gentry. As he reaches a climax, ranting on the beauty of the world, he exclaims:

And what beautiful things there are at every step that even the most hopeless man must feel to be beautiful! Look at the child! Look at God's sunrise! Look at the grass, how it grows! Look at the eyes that gaze at you, and love you! (560)

and Myshkin sinks down into the carpet with an epileptic fit. The progression of this passage from abstract philosophical argument to exclamatory address to the natural world enacts the movement from culture to nature, from language to presence, that characterises Myshkin's entire ontological trajectory. His epilepsy is not merely a physiological response to emotional intensity but the culmination of a mode of thought that cannot be contained within cultural frameworks. The seizure, in this instance, is the body's assertion of its own truth against the demands of social performance.

The Final Scene with Rogozhin

In chapter eleven, there is a queer account of the prince's response to Nastasya Filippovna's murder and the infinite anguish he goes through along with the murderer, Rogozhin. Physical sensations of trembling and immobility overpower his body. As his body responds to the news after the initial shock, he regains composure. He responds to his alter ego,

Rogozhin, most compassionately, soothing him, consoling him in every possible way, as if the inevitability of her death was intuitively known to him. Myshkin shows remarkable maturity in facing the gruelling situation as he descends back into his idiocy and profound silence. There is no more linguistic or philosophical acrobatics, only a deep, melancholic aura that surrounds him. This final scene is the novel's most radical statement of Myshkin's alternative ontology. Confronted with the ultimate failure of his compassion—the murder of the woman he sought to save—Myshkin does not react with rage, despair, or philosophical reflection. He retreats into silence, into the no-mind state that is his native mode of being. This is not escapism; it is the only authentic response to a situation that is beyond the reach of cultural solutions. The mutual recognition between Myshkin and Rogozhin in this scene, which is featured in Rogozhin's confession and Myshkin's wordless consolation, suggests that their bond, which was established in the novel's opening, is ultimately more fundamental than any social relation. They share an 'outsidership' that the social world cannot accommodate.

The final chapter describes Myshkin returning to his doctor, Schneider, and reverting to the no-mind state, away from the desperation and agony of the societal world, back to the comforting presence of the mountains, his proper home. Descending back into his idiocy seems to be the only way in the ruthless world, and, unlike the other characters in the novel, the Prince seems to revive his pristine existence and merge with the natural world, indifferent to the tribulations of the human world. He frees himself by shutting his mind out of the world and enters his idiotic state, not as pathology, but as freedom. This conclusion is not a defeat but a vindication of the novel's ontological argument. The world of Petersburg society cannot accommodate Myshkin because it cannot accommodate the mode of being he embodies. His return to the sanatorium is not a regression but a return home—to the only context in which his consciousness can flourish. The novel thus does not depict the tragic failure of a beautiful soul in a corrupt world; it depicts the necessary separation of two irreconcilable ontological modes.

The world's loss is not Myshkin's; his idiocy is not a pathology but a freedom that society can neither understand nor tolerate.

Conclusion

The nature/culture distinction in the novel is not just thematic but ontological: not just another worldview, but the very condition of worldviews. *The Idiot* stages a collision between two incommensurable worlds, one of being and another of performance. Myshkin stands "outside" the frameworks of cultural signification through his epileptic condition, which is not just a pathological condition but a no-mind status free from the symbolic order, another framework for being in the world as proposed by Canguilhem, which, in turn, is inconceivable to the inhabitants of culture with its chaotic notions of *amour-propre* and *habitus*. Their reading of Myshkin as a fake philosopher or a naive idiot is structured by the cultural norms which are alien to Myshkin. Epilepsy, for Myshkin, is not pathological but normal, ontological, and consequential to encounters with the ultimate realities of existence. A frenzied mind is a product of culture and language, from which Myshkin escapes through his epileptic fit into the natural world reflected in the serene Swiss mountains. Myshkin is a being rooted in nature, where concerns regarding normality and abnormality do not feature as they do in culture, and represents a life of transcendent unity with being. He embarrasses not himself but others by his inability to perform before the cultural world and, unwittingly, questions the society's hypocrisies. Ego, greed, possession, shame, guilt, and revenge are unknown to him, all of them being cultural traps that ensnare the individual, who falls headlong into them, forgetting their natural existence. When society considers Myshkin's epilepsy and his idiocy as dysfunctional, he, on the other hand, raises genuine queries about the dysfunctionality of the cultural world. Myshkin's return to the mountains suggests that there is no room in such a world for the "positively good and beautiful human being" (Dostoevsky, *Letters* 135) that Dostoevsky wished to portray in his autobiographical work. The novel's tragic register thus does not derive

from Myshkin's fate but from the impossibility of his mode of being finding any place in the cultural world. His idiocy is not a personal tragedy but a structural condition: society cannot accommodate what it cannot produce, and it produces only what it can recognise.

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