

On the Threshold of Representation:  
The Function of the Holbein Christ in *The Idiot*  
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*The Idiot* is a novel which is frequently characterized as a flawed masterpiece, a grand experiment that doesn't quite come off. Critics are often drawn by it, yet defeated by its perplexing central character, the "truly good man" Prince Myshkin, who is unable to bring his goodness to bear on society without disastrous results. The Christ figure is a social misfit who ends his foray into society with a retreat into idiocy, offering no hope of resurrection. His moments of transcendence seem only, to his witnesses, horrifying epileptic seizures; his attempts at redeeming the fallen only drive them into further depths. Why does Dostoevsky offer us a vision of a Christ that is not a redeemer but a failure? It seems a calculated blow to our belief in goodness. As Myshkin says of the painting of Christ in the tomb that is frequently referred to in the novel, it is an image that could make one lose one's faith. I would like to focus on the play of images in the novel, particularly on the Holbein painting, and on its iconography, in order to gain some clues to understanding the Christ figure, Myshkin, and his place in *The Idiot*. I plan to contrast that paintings iconography with the traditions of the Russian icon and its approach to portraying the truly good, and finally to come to some conclusions about how Dostoevsky tries our faith and for what narrative purposes he does so.

Early in the novel we find images and their construction to be a topic of general interest to the characters of the book. Myshkin is said to be someone who knows how to see and who can teach the Yepanchins how to see. He comments on calligraphy in terms that are assured, knowledgeable, and even opinionated about aesthetic matters. He further analyzes the faces of the Yepanchin girls with a painterly scrutiny and discusses dramatic subjects for portraiture, not only interested in how to organize a painting to make an effective image, but in how to convey meaning through it. He enthusiastically proposes a condemned mans face as a fitting subject for portraiture because such a painting would do a lot of good (91). Though the topic of condemned criminals coming to their end may seem an odd one for drawing room conversation, Myshkins stories and analyses receive respectful attention. Myshkin is endowed with something of the carnivalized authority of the holy fool, and gets away with behavior that might otherwise be condemned because he is both foolish and an exotic, in Bakhtins terms on a tangent to the life of the Yepanchins, and as such not a threat to them. He is able to tap a spiritual and cultural yearning that is not normally encouraged in drawing-room conversation.

Later we find that art has an impact on all sorts of people, from the socially unacceptable Rogozhin to the suicidal young Ippolit. The painting that has the greatest impact in the novel is one hanging (predictably) over a dark threshold in Rogozhins house, a painting that Rogozhin takes a ghoulish pleasure in and which figures largely in the rambling manifesto that constitutes Ippolits suicide note. This is a reproduction of a painting which Dostoevsky encountered in Bern and which, according to his wife, made a tremendous impact on him. It is a painting by Holbein of Christ taken from the cross and laid out in the tomb. Ippolit describes it so thoroughly in his suicide note that his analysis has been quoted in art history texts.

I believe that painters are usually in the habit of depicting Christ, whether on the cross or taken from the cross, as still retaining a shade of extraordinary beauty on his face; that beauty they strive to preserve even in his moments of greatest agony. In Rogozhin's picture there was no trace of beauty. It was a faithful representation of the dead body of a man who has undergone unbearable torments before the crucifixion, been wounded, tortured, beaten by the guards, beaten by the people, when he carried the cross and fell under its weight, and, at last, has suffered the agony of crucifixion, lasting for six hours (according to my calculation, at least) . . . I know that the Christian Church laid it down in the first few centuries of its existence that Christ really did suffer and that the Passion was not symbolical. His body on the cross was therefore fully and entirely subject to the laws of nature. In the picture the face is terribly smashed with blows, swollen, covered with terrible, swollen, and bloodstained bruises, the eyes open and squinting; the large, open whites of the eyes have a sort of dead and glassy glint.

Ippolit not only describes the painting for his listeners, but attempts to place it in contrast with other depictions of Christ, correctly noting that this image offers an extremely naturalistic rendering of a dead human being. Holbein's Christ is, indeed, a minimalist rendering, one which reflects the iconoclastic controversy boiling in Europe in the early sixteenth century. It was painted at a time when the very production of images was in itself a questionable activity. In 1522, the same year in which Holbein's dead Christ was probably painted, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, a theologian and radical reformer, published "On the Abolition of Images," in which he asserted "God has forbidden images with no less diligence than killing, stealing, adultery, and the like" (Eire 58). He based his objections on Biblical prohibitions of idol worship, and argued that images are bound to the flesh and cannot transcend the flesh, so therefore will inevitably become the object of worship if they are used in worship. His opposition to images and to rituals of the mass caused riots in Wittenberg, during which the church hierarchy was mocked and its authority leveled, while religious images were smashed and burnt. This iconoclastic fervor reached Basel, where Holbein was working, and though an uneasy truce was struck with city authorities to contain its energies, it eventually worked up to a repetition of the riots in Wittenberg. Holbein's art, though unacceptable in the eyes of the iconoclasts, was nevertheless deeply influenced by their views. In Julia Kristeva's words, "Holbein disapproved of [the iconoclastic fervor]; he even fled from it when he left Basel for England; but without, for that matter, giving in to any form of exaltation, in fact he absorbed the spirit of his time--a spirit of deprivation, of leveling, of subtle minimalism. . . . [the effects of iconoclasm and his own personality] converge: they end up locating representation on the ultimate threshold of representability, grasped with the utmost exactness and the smallest amount of enthusiasm, on the verge of indifference. . ." (124-5). This form of exact and literal representation relates the death of Christ in a detached manner, depriving the figure the power of transcendence, making the death that much more dreadful. Ippolit recognizes and analyzes the power of this iconography in his rambling suicide note:

Looking at that picture, you get the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable, and dumb beast, or, to put it more correctly, much more correctly,

though it may seem strange, as some huge engine of the latest design, which has senselessly seized, cut to pieces, and swallowed up--impassively and unfeelingly--a great and priceless Being, a Being worth the whole of nature and all its laws, worth the entire earth, which was perhaps created solely for the coming of that Being! The picture seems to give expression to the idea of a dark, insolent, and senselessly eternal power, to which everything is subordinated, and this idea is suggested to you unconsciously. The people surrounding the dead man, none of whom is shown in the picture, must have been overwhelmed by a feeling of terrible anguish and dismay on that evening which had shattered all their hopes and almost all their beliefs at one fell blow. They must have parted in a state of the most dreadful terror, though each of them carried away within him a mighty thought which could never be wrested from him. And if, on the eve of the crucifixion, the Master could have seen what He would look like when taken from the cross, would he have mounted the cross and died as he did?" (446-7)

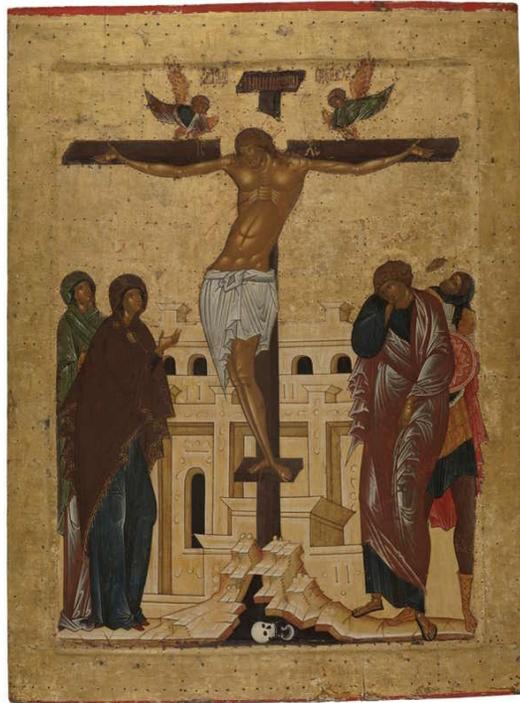
Holbein's dead Christ captures the fascinated gaze of the characters in *The Idiot* because it represents that which is nearly beyond representation. The unmediated image of a dead and brutally tortured human being is one which is quite inconsistent with the more popular images of a beautiful Christ (which Ippolit considers the norm) and with the iconography of the Russian icon. Viewing holy images, in the Russian Orthodox faith, is a form of worship which emphasizes man's striving toward godliness, a form of transformation through encounter with the divine, the icon forming a window through which the divine can be glimpsed. Thus, Christ's humanity is not a proper subject for representation at the expense of his deity. According to Leonid Ouspensky, "the icon is a likeness not of an animate but deified prototype, that is, is an image (conventional, of course) not of corruptible flesh, but of flesh transfigured, radiant with divine light . . . consequently, everything which reminds of the corruptible human flesh is contrary to the very nature of the icon(35-36). Every aspect of the Holbein Christ flies against Orthodox tradition. In the West since the Renaissance, the human nature of Christ has been celebrated in art, but in the Eastern church it is his deity that is his preeminent characteristic. A central point in Western theology is that man is sinful and must be redeemed through God taking human form. The Orthodox church focuses less on the fallen state of man than on his potential to emulate God, to redeem himself through contemplation of the image of God. Hence, the Holbein Christ violates Orthodox iconographic conventions by portraying, in an extreme sense, his humanity, excising his divine nature.



If you consider the two paintings I have given you, you can see many distinct differences. The Holbein Christ is, as I have said, a naturalistic painting of a dead body. Its horizontal position,

contorted hand, detailed musculature and disturbing face, with its eyes open but rolled back in the head, the mouth parted slackly, all emphasize death. The coloring of the painting is cold earth tones, emphasizing brown, gray, and muddy green, and the flesh tones are pale and bloodless. The only color is provided in the blood of the wounds.

The crucifixion icon also depicts a dead Christ figure, but differently. Here the message that we are looking at Christ after his death is conveyed by the swayed position of the body, bowed head, and closed eyes, yet the figure retains majesty and dignity. The figures at the sides are restrained, rather calm, with Mary gesturing toward her son as if to direct the attention of John, who is shielding his eyes from the sight. The colors here are warm reds, yellows, and purples and the flesh color is rosy. There is no sense that we are witnessing a body beginning its state of corruption. Though within the Orthodox tradition Christ can be shown dead, he cannot be shown as dead as he is in Holbein's painting.



Interestingly, both the Russian icon and Holbein's art were indelibly shaped by iconoclastic controversies. The Orthodox image of Christ (and the Orthodox attitude toward image production) developed out of the iconoclastic struggle of the eighth and ninth centuries. As during the reformation, early church iconoclasts considered it impossible to portray the deity of Christ, but on the other hand found it heretical to portray his humanity. The Eastern solution was to focus on the image which God made visible in the flesh, emphasizing the divine nature of the human Christ. It adhered strictly to a traditional representation by transferring a likeness from one image to another, harkening back to early portraiture, rather than deriving from invention or interpretation. The features of icons are similar because they are portraits based on historical prototypes, not, as in Western art, individual visions of figures who are available for endless reimagining. Though these representations are inevitably flawed, they aid in worship by providing a dim vision of spiritual truth.

The very different response of the West to an iconoclastic challenge led to a different Christ

figure than of the East, one which emphasized his humanity. The Christ figure Dostoevsky gives us in Myshkin is very much a Western Christ, one who is undeniably human, vulnerable to suffering and death, not a deity in human form offering us redemption. In some ways, Myshkin and the Christ of the *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* are similar. Each makes a brief appearance among the people, coming and going quite suddenly and without warning. They both suffer criticism and insults meekly. They both are silent on the essential questions, and it is their silence, their inability to offer answers, that generates the central tension of both texts. The Inquisitor bases his charges on the fact that Christ has unkindly burdened mankind with unanswered questions, and Aglaya Yepanchin accuses Myshkin of similar cruelty: "You have no tenderness: only truth and that's why you're unfair" (465).

On the other hand, Myshkin offers a very different sort of Christ figure than the Christ portrayed in the *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*. That Christ is undoubtedly an object of worship, a miracle-worker, a deity with the beauty and calm of an Orthodox icon. He is silent, ultimately, but his silence is eloquent and resounding; he retains his authority in the face of the inquisitor. Myshkin, on the other hand, does not have the authority of the Christ in the *Legend*. He is, without a doubt, human, a Christ figure with all the human side exposed, the divine side invisible or negated.

The closest thing to a transcendent vision offered in *The Idiot* is the sense of extraordinary clarity and timelessness experienced by Myshkin just before he has an epileptic fit. This moment of "ecstatic and prayerful fusion in the highest synthesis of life" (258) is followed by "stupor, spiritual darkness [and] idiocy" (259). He is quite unable to share this epiphany with others, who instead witness a grotesque and disturbing scene, one described with the sort of painterly detail with which Ippolit describes the Holbein Christ:

At that instant the face [of an epileptic in a seizure] suddenly becomes horribly distorted, especially the eyes. Spasms and convulsions seize the whole body and the features of the face. A terrible, quite incredible scream, which is unlike anything else, breaks from the chest; in that scream everything human seems suddenly to be obliterated, and it is quite impossible, at least very difficult, for an observer to imagine and to admit that it is the man himself who is screaming. One gets the impression that it is someone inside the man who is screaming. This, at any rate, is how many people describe their impression; the sight of a man in an epileptic fit fills many others with absolute and unbearable horror, which has something mystical about it. (268)

This Western Christ figure in a Russian drawing room can only offer his spectators a disturbingly grotesque picture of suffering; they cannot share his visionary epiphany but rather have an opposite mystical experience, one of horror. The Christ in the *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, on the other hand, is the spiritual and calm Christ of an orthodox icon, unexpectedly appearing in a Spanish counter-reformation prison.

The Inquisitor cannot experience transcendence as he faces Christ, but rather chooses to organize religion as a spectacle for the people, who otherwise will become distressed and confused by unanswered questions and insoluble mysteries. The pacifically mystical and utterly silent Christ is a failure to him because he wants a more authoritative and commanding image. The Orthodox tradition of mystical contemplation does not offer explanations or rules of conduct. "The Tradition," according to orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky "is Silence. . . The words of Revelation have then a margin of silence which cannot be picked up by the ears of those who are outside" (15). Though the iconography

appealed to is different, both Christ figures practice a tradition of silence, offering icons of goodness without imposing authority. Each figure, though drawn according to different iconographic traditions, attempts the same task, to represent something that must defy representation.

Dostoevsky has dislocated the iconography of Christ, East and West, to carry out what might be called an iconoclastic project of his own. In portraying the "truly good man," an important and even necessary task for an artist, he runs the risk of closure, of producing an authoritative discourse which answers those questions which must remain open, that can only be dealt with through experience and suffering. If he were to successfully create the image, he would destroy its power. In discussing polyphonic narration, Bakhtin says:

Dostoevsky seeks the highest and most authoritative orientation, and he perceives it not as his own true thought, but as another authentic human being and his discourse. The image of the ideal human being or the image of Christ represents for him the resolution of ideological quests. This image or this highest voice must crown the world of voices, must organize and subdue it. Precisely the image of a human being and his voice, a voice not the author's own, was the ultimate artistic criterion for Dostoevsky: not fidelity to his own convictions and not fidelity to convictions themselves taken abstractly, but precisely a fidelity to the authoritative image of a human being. (97)

He adds, in a footnote, "We have in mind here, of course, not a finalized and closed image of reality (a type, a character, a temperament), but an open image-discourse. Such an ideal authoritative image, one not contemplated but followed, was only envisioned by Dostoevsky as the ultimate limit of his artistic project; this image was never realized in his work" (100). This is the heart of the iconoclastic controversy in *The Idiot*: Dostoevsky approaches the threshold of portraying a truly good man, in terms that are carnivalistic and fully human, but purposefully stops at that threshold, taking representability to its furthest reach without finalizing an image of authority. If, indeed, the image was authoritative, providing answers and resolving our quest for meaning, the dialogue would have to cease. Hence, Myshkin as a "truly good man" remains a disturbing icon of something not only unrepresentable but silent--an invitation for questioning that must refuse to answer.

The "open image-discourse" of *The Idiot*, with its resonant appeal to the traces of the iconoclastic crisis that shaped Holbein's disturbing portrait of the dead Christ, stretches the boundaries of representation, opening gaps through which we might see more than the image represented. Like the Orthodox icon, the image is a window to the unknown, but in this case an image which radically departs from Orthodox tradition. As with the iconoclasts of the reformation, this challenge to images engenders an image of particular power, one which is leveling, direct, and unmediated, carnivalizing its own authority. In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky has tangentially probed the image of Christ, crossing our expectations by dislocating familiar iconographies, making the image of the "truly good man" an occasion for probing the limits of images themselves.

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