Prince Myshkin's Night Journey: Chronotope as a Symptom

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Among the numerous scholarly works inspired by *The Idiot*, many of them address two crucial aspects of Dostoevsky's novel: (1) the themes and images associated with Christ and Christianity, and (2) the problem of time seen both as a philosophical subject of the novel and as the formative principle in the temporal structure of the text. In this chapter, I will focus on the question of time. However, I intend to address this question not solely within the context of Christian tradition but also to examine it against the background of a Koranic vision of time.

I would like to begin my analysis by establishing a connection between two vital issues presented in *The Idiot*. The first issue is Dostoevsky's preoccupation with the nature and meaning of time as it runs through the entire novel. The second issue has to do with a theme also frequently discussed by scholars of Dostoevsky: the Koranic motifs in his oeuvre and the author's implicit identification with the Prophet Muhammad as an epileptic.

There are three levels on which time functions in the novel. The lowest level is the ordinary flow of time, as we commonly understand it, in material reality. This time of, or rather within the narrative is, of course, an important matter since it serves as one of the novel's organizing principles. It is telling, for instance,

that the entire action of part 1 takes place in the course of one day. The flow of time is linear: it is explicitly recorded, almost to the minute, from the moment when Prince Myshkin's train arrives at the St. Petersburg railroad station "around nine o'clock in the morning." Myshkin appears at General Epanchin's apartment "around eleven o'clock," he is invited to join Lizaveta Prokofyevna and her daughters for lunch "at half-past twelve," and so on. The narrative progresses in such a linear fashion until the end of the day (and end of part 1). The termination of such a display of linearity is marked by Prince Myshkin rushing headlong after the troika that carries away Nastasya Filippovna and Rogozhin.

The remainder of the novel, when the events begin to unravel out of control, is however, fraught with time gaps and increasingly destructured. In terms of space, the novel's overall framework is circular: it begins with Prince Myshkin arriving from Switzerland and ends with his return to Switzerland. But the need to emphasize the symbolic circular structure of narrative time in the novel is also strongly pronounced: the main character returns to the same condition he was in before his journey to Russia; that is to say, he has undergone no transformation despite intense interaction with a host of other characters over six hundred pages. By thwarting our expectations of psychological change in his main protagonist, Dostoevsky freezes time or, rather, makes it relapse to the zero point of his story.

The highest level on which time functions in the novel is eschatological, or we may call it "apocalyptic," referring to the temporal aspect in the book of Revelation rather than to the metaphysical meaning of the Last Judgment. This is oriented towards the end of time, when time will be no more. In a sense, it is the denial of time in its habitual and accepted form, and Dostoevsky embraces this denial. When the end (*eschaton*) comes, time ceases to matter. In the earthly sense, death is the ultimate end. The author is fully aware of the narrative possibilities hidden in the fictional representation of this moment. He is fascinated by the human being on the threshold of imminent death, that is to say, death that will come at a precise and predetermined moment. Take, for example, the condition of an individual sentenced to execution. This was, of course, a major event in Dostoevsky's own life. Shattered by it, he makes Prince Myshkin equally fascinated with the phenomenon of a looming execution. Myshkin repeatedly returns to the description of such an event and his own response to it. Initiating his first conversation in the novel, he addresses the question of the human condition as magnified through the lens of the impending

execution: "The strongest pain may not be in the wounds, but in knowing for certain that in an hour, then in ten minutes, then in half a minute, then now, this second—your soul will fly out of your body and you will no longer be a man."¹ We must note that Prince Myshkin returns to the same haunting image "about an hour and a half" later when he proposes a subject for Adelaida's picture: a portrait of "a condemned man a minute before the stroke of the guillotine, when he's still standing on the scaffold, before he lies down on the plank."² Another variation on the same theme is presented by Lebedev, who prays for "the repose of the soul of the countess Du Barry" and justifies this rather extravagant move by emphasizing the countess's alleged last words before the execution: "*Encore un moment, monsieur le bourreau, encore un moment!*" ("Минуточку одну еще повремените, господин буро, всего одну!").³ There is little doubt that Lebedev's obsessive interest in the final book of the New Testament underlines a pivotal connection between the image of the last moment of the condemned human being and the apocalyptic notion of time that runs through the entire novel. The predicament of death's imminence confronts Dostoevsky's characters and the reader with the challenge of comparing "historical," or "ordinary," time and eschatological time. After all, if the afterlife means eternity, then *eschaton* signifies the beginning of existence beyond death where time is irrelevant. Consequently, any near-death condition may—or may not—signify, in Dostoevsky's artistic reality, a presentation of time in its various forms. Ippolit, for example, exemplifies such variation: he undergoes his own personal apocalypse that involves a catastrophe and judgment, but it does not result in the *eschaton*. This same limitation is put into relief in the famous scene where Myshkin contemplates and then comments on the copy of Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, which he observes at Rogozhin's house. The prince utters in desperation that this dead and hopeless body may destroy one's faith. The fact remains, however, that neither his nor the author's faith is thus destroyed, because—unlike Ippolit or Rogozhin—they both knew (and not simply intuited) that Christ had

1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 2001), 23.

2 Ibid., 63.

3 Ibid., 197. It is worth noting that Dostoevsky uses here a particular verb, "повремените," which is related to "время": "Минуточку одну еще повремените, господин буро, всего одну!" ("Just one moment more, Mr. Executioner, just a small moment!")

existed and died only within limited, historical, ordinary time, and not in the timeless eschatological realm where he continues to exist. The question remains, however: How did they know?

At one point Myshkin says, "My time is all my own." Though it is pronounced casually, the novel's reader may be able to figure out that this phrase means that Myshkin exists outside of time as we know it. However, Myshkin's statement does not point toward some kind of philosophical solipsism but, rather, refers to his experience of time that may be called "epileptic" (as in comparison to "apocalyptic"). Phonological similarity aside, this epileptic time is shared by both the novel's main character and its author. Myshkin speaks of his epilepsy (known for centuries as a "sacred illness," *morbus sacer*) on several occasions, but perhaps the clearest depiction of the transformation of time is given when Myshkin reflects upon it shortly before he suffers his first seizure in the novel:

He fell to thinking, among other things, about his epileptic condition, that there was a stage in it just before the fit itself ... when suddenly, amidst the sadness, the darkness of soul, the pressure, his brain would momentarily catch fire, as it were, and all his life's forces would be strained at once in an extraordinary impulse. The sense of life, of self-awareness, increased nearly tenfold in these moments, which flashed by like lightning. His mind, his heart were lit up with an extraordinary light; all his agitations, all his doubts, all his worries were as if placated at once, resolved in a sort of sublime tranquility, filled with serene, harmonious joy, and hope, filled with reason and ultimate cause.⁴

This passage continues with Myshkin's narrating his epileptic experience in the first person: "'At that moment,' as he had once said to Rogozhin in Moscow, when they got together there, 'at that moment, I was somehow able to understand the extraordinary phrase that "time shall be no more."'"⁵ For Dostoevsky himself, to judge from recollections of several memoirists and particularly of Sofia Kovalevskaya, a similar experience proved to be one of the dramatic affirmations of his own faith: "'I felt,' said Fyodor Mikhailovich, 'that Heaven descended to earth and swallowed me.' 'Yes, God exists!' I cried. 'And I recall no more.'"⁶ One might expect, given Dostoevsky's passionate adherence to the Orthodox faith, that in elaborating on his epileptic condition he would portray

4 Ibid., 225.

5 Ibid., 227.

6 S. V. Kovalevskaya, *Vospominaniia detstva: Nigilistka* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1989), 117.

it, as so many Christian mystics did, as his soul's ultimate union with Christ. Instead, rather remarkably, he makes a connection not to Christ but to the Prophet Muhammad:

"All of you, healthy people," Dostoevsky continued, "don't even suspect what happiness is, that happiness which we epileptics experience for a second before an attack. Muhammad avows in his Koran that he saw Paradise and was in it. All the wise folks are convinced that he is simply a liar and deceiver. But no! He does not lie! He actually was in Paradise during an attack of epilepsy, from which he suffered just as I do. I don't know whether that blessedness lasts seconds or hours or months, but trust my word, all the joys which life can give I would not take in exchange for it!"⁷

Similarly, Dostoevsky makes Prince Myshkin describe the epileptic fit with a Koranic reference: "'Probably,' he added, smiling, 'it's the same second in which the jug of water overturned by the epileptic Muhammad did not have time to spill, while he had time during the same second to survey all the dwellings of Allah.'"⁸ The allusion is of great significance, because it demonstrates that this particular Koranic motif is highly relevant to Dostoevsky's perception of time and, therefore, should be relevant to our understanding of the novel's design.

Dostoevsky's relationship to Islam, and specifically his view of the Prophet Muhammad, has been addressed a number of times, for example, in James Rice's *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art*, which provides both medical and literary examination of Dostoevsky's life and work. There is also a more recent exploration of the topic in an insightful essay, "On the Koranic Motif in *The Idiot* and *Demons*," by the late Diane Thompson.⁹ The episode discussed in *The Idiot*, the Prophet's night journey, in which he ascends to heaven, is only briefly mentioned in the Koran (which, as we know, Dostoevsky had perused in French and Russian translations). Its rendition in English reads, "Glory be to Him who took His servant on a night journey from the sacred place of prayer to the furthest place of prayer upon which We have sent our blessing that We might show him some of our signs. He is the all-hearing, the all-seeing."¹⁰

7 Ibid.

8 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 227.

9 Diane Denning Thompson, "On the Koranic Motif in *The Idiot* and *The Demons*," in Robert Reid and Joe Andrew, eds., *Aspects of Dostoevskii: Art, Ethics and Faith* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 115–34.

10 *Quran*, chap. 17, Surah Al-Isra' ("The Journey by Night").

It is important to note that the episode was further orchestrated and given multiple details in the Hadith literature. In addition to reading the Koran, Dostoevsky must have learned about Muhammad from Washington Irving's *Life of Mohammed*, translated into Russian by Pyotr Kireevsky in 1857. Irving's version of the legend says that the Prophet had been woken one night by the Archangel Gabriel and under his guidance ascended to seven heavens, traveling on the miraculous animal called Al-Buraq. Irving also conveys that, according to some Islamic accounts of the night journey, Muhammad, upon his awakening by Gabriel, knocked over a jug of water and that, after having seen all the glories of Allah's universe, at the moment of his descent he observed that the water continued to spill.¹¹ This detail, emphasized by Myshkin in his conversation with Rogozhin, finds its way into the climactic scene during the "evening gathering at the Epanchins' dacha. The prince, at the end of his "feverish speech," knocks over the "beautiful Chinese vase." This happens just a few moments before his second epileptic fit and creates an echo with the jug of water knocked over by Muhammad on his legendary departure to paradise. The episode of the water jug in Muhammad's epileptic experience also illustrates Myshkin's own memory of "epileptic time." Like the Islamic prophet or Dostoevsky, who insisted that Muhammad "actually was in Paradise during an attack of epilepsy," the novel's protagonist "could not doubt nor could he admit any doubts" that this was "the highest synthesis of life."¹²

The nature of what, in the context of this article, I call "epileptic time" can be further elucidated with the use of the *kairos* concept. In Greek, it signifies the right, or opportune, or supreme moment for something to happen. *Chronos* means "ordinary" sequential time, *kairos* implies its indeterminacy; *chronos* is quantitative, but *kairos* has a qualitative nature. In the New Testament, *kairos* means "the appointed time in the purpose of God," the time when God acts (e.g., Mark 1:15). As used in the Eastern Orthodox liturgy, the word indicates the time when it intersects with eternity. In *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin's epileptic seizure serves precisely as *kairos*, transporting him into "epileptic time," which makes him experience, appreciate, and realize what eschatological, or apocalyptic, time—eternity—is like. Furthermore, this epileptic *kairos* (being, in medical terms,

11 See Washington Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2003).

12 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 226.

a symptom of this disease) functions as an element of Dostoevsky's chronotope: the most essential moment within the novel's time-space. In other words, physiological dysfunction evolves into a literary form. Of the three time representations perceptible in the novel, traditional, "ordinary" time is finite as regards an individual human being—it ends with the end of his or her life. The eschatological time consists of the finite and the infinite stages. Its finite stage, up to the point of *eschaton*, denotes an end, but it is also infinite, by the very fact of its disappearance. In other words, Dostoevsky's eternity, in accordance with the apocalypse, is apophatic. It is described in terms of negation, when "time shall be no more." What is represented as "epileptic" time is also finite and infinite, but in a different sense: it is finite, since it has a beginning and an end at the brief moment prior to the actual fit. Yet it is also infinite, since at that point, as at the moment of the *eschaton*, it transforms to time that is "no more." The function of "epileptic" time is to mediate between the other two. It is rooted in the "ordinary" world for the very reason of its occurrence amidst ordinary temporal circumstances. And it pertains to the eschatological realm because it allows an immediate breakthrough into timelessness. One recalls that in the Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muhammad's role is likewise that of a mediator between Allah and his people. With this in mind, one may describe the Christian eschatological time model in *The Idiot* as inclusive of the "epileptic" form of time taken from the Islamic tradition of the Prophet's miraculous night journey to heaven.

Furthermore, the same legend shapes an artistic paradigm that looms over the whole time-space framework of *The Idiot*. Prince Myshkin's journey from Switzerland to Russia ends exactly where it begins, in the sanatorium for the mentally ill. What is more important is that despite—or because of—all the events that have occurred in between, he returns in the same "idiotic" condition, that is, as if nothing has happened at all.

On several occasions in the novel, Prince Myshkin evokes a beautiful landscape in Switzerland. At the beginning of the *vokzal* scene in Pavlovsk we read,

Sometimes he imagined the mountains and precisely one familiar spot in the mountains that he always liked to remember and where he had liked to walk when he still lived there, and to look down from there on the village, on the white thread of the waterfall barely glittering below, on the white clouds, on the abandoned old castle. Oh, how he wanted to be there now and to think about one thing—oh! All his life only about that—it would be enough for a thousand years! Oh, it was even necessary, even better, that they not know

him at all, and that this whole vision be nothing but a dream. And wasn't it all the same whether it was a dream or a reality?"¹³

And about hundred pages later we again witness the prince immersed in his memory:

It was in Switzerland, during the first year of his treatment. He was still quite like an idiot then, and could not even speak properly, and sometimes did not understand what was required of him. Once he went into the mountains on a clear, sunny day, and wandered about for a long time with a tormenting thought that refused to take shape. He remembered now how he had stretched out his arms to that bright, infinite blue and wept. What had tormented him was that he was a total stranger to it all. Every morning the same bright sun rises; every morning there is a rainbow over the waterfall; every evening the highest snowcapped mountain, there, far away, at the edge of the sky, burns with a crimson flame; every little blade of grass grows and is happy! . . . only he knows nothing, understands nothing, neither people nor sounds, a stranger to everything and a castaway.¹⁴

It is not by accident that in the final scene we see Prince Myshkin in his "preexisting" condition back in Switzerland on the "familiar spot in the mountains" looking at the white thread of the waterfall. What we readers observe is not merely a "circular composition," a well-known literary device, but something deeper. It is the realization or, rather, the filling out of the time metaphor within the novel's narrative fabric. Time relapses to the zero point of the story about "the night journey" of "a positively beautiful person." And the water continues to spill.

13 Ibid., 347.

14 Ibid., 423.