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Nancy Rutenberg: Dostoevsky's Democracy

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Introduction



Can something that has no image appear as an image?
[Mozhet li mereshchit'sia v obraze to, chto ne imeet obraza?]
—F. M. Dostoevskii, *The Idiot*¹

The Image of the Beast

Just as he was preparing to write the penultimate book of his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and suffering from poor health, F. M. Dostoevsky received an invitation to address the Society of Lovers of Russian Literature at their June 1880 celebration of the poet Alexander Pushkin. The significance of this three-day event was by no means confined to what it purported to be: an occasion to bring together the nation's most prominent writers, artists, actors, journalists, editors, and intellectuals to pay tribute to a celebrated poet of an earlier generation. Instead, as with all such events in nineteenth-century Russia where there was no question of freedom of expression, the literary fête would also provide a platform for public discussion of urgent social and political matters in the guise of literary commentary and interpretation. This occasion, however, was distinctive from its inception for making participants feel, as one expressed it, like “citizens enjoying a fullness of rights.”² Speakers were not made to submit their addresses to the censor for advance review; indeed, the government of Alexander II, which had offered to pay the expenses of invited guests, made no attempt to control the planning, execution, or reception of the festivities. One journalist enthused that “in these festivities everything was the public's: public initiative, public participation, public thought, and public glory.” The boldness of the planning and acquiescence of the authorities testified to a collective desire for “freedom of thought, freedom of the press, a greater scope for society's independent activity in the name of the state and the public good,” proving, when all was said and done,

that Russian society does not exist only in the imagination but in living reality; that there is cement in it that connects it all together into one inspired mass; that it has matured and grown into manhood; that it thinks, and can grieve, and be conscious of itself; that it counts freedom of expression as one of its natural, inborn needs; and that, via its literature, it has earned itself its diploma.³

2 INTRODUCTION

The expressive latitude permitted first to the organizers and then to the press to cast the event as “epoch-making” was especially remarkable given the volatile political climate.⁴ Only months later, in March 1881, the tsar would be assassinated by the revolutionary terrorist group the People’s Will, six weeks after Dostoevsky’s own death from complications of emphysema.⁵ Alexander II, the “Tsar-Liberator,” had been extolled for the reforms he initiated soon after his coronation in 1855, particularly the emancipation of the serfs in 1861.⁶ Despite precautions taken in the planning and execution of the reforms, they generated social and political unrest across the class spectrum and, with the concomitant rise of a non-noble intelligentsia, anticipated the proliferation of radical thought and activity throughout the 1860s and 1870s.⁷ The romantic utopian socialism of the 1840s—the “crime” for which Dostoevsky himself had suffered a decade of Siberian exile (from 1849 to 1859), four of those years in a hard-labor camp—metamorphosed in the 1860s into the revolutionary socialisms which by 1870 had advanced far beyond the Moscow and St. Petersburg intelligentsia and into new demographic, geographic, and ideological terrain.⁸

At issue for radicals of whatever stripe, from the populists who spearheaded a “back to the people” movement to the nihilists ambitious to organize terror cells among those same people, was the nation’s unconditional liberation from its subjection to the autocratic state. They shared with liberals and conservatives an obsession with divining the significance of the Russian common people (*narod*) for the realization of their own political aspirations. To do so required the resolution of two related, and perpetually open questions: first, who, precisely, were the people and how could they be known? And, second, what part, if any, might they play in identifying and then helping Russia fulfill its world-historical destiny in relation to the West? These questions begged many others. Did “the people” signify all Russians regardless of class or only the common mass, the vast majority, whose illiteracy, poverty, and (for many) enslavement had kept them innocent of the Europeanization which had long marked the identity of the upper class? In the wake of emancipation, would a viable and genuine Russianness (*narodnost’*) manifest itself to embrace these extremes, and under whose direction would the rapprochement of the classes occur? Was it wishful thinking to imagine that a people largely sunk in poverty and barbarism might nevertheless possess an indigenous culture, almost entirely unknown to the elite but whose expressive forms were inherently worthy of broader attention? Could such a people play any but a subaltern’s role in a world consecrated to modernity, and would their inclusion in *narodnost’* doom the upper classes to assume a diminished role on the world’s stage? Or, on the contrary, might the unknown culture of the common people contain the new word destined to bring

world culture forward, resurrected from the cultural morbidity which modernity—secularism, individualism, and materialism—all but guaranteed?

Notwithstanding the variety of responses to these questions posed by radical, liberal, and conservative members of the educated class about the identity and destiny of the Russian people, opinion tended to fall into one of two camps. The Westernizers felt that, since the time of Peter the Great, Russia's sole option, for better or worse, had been to embrace its cultural colonization by Europe and commit the nation to adapting and perfecting all aspects of its culture. They confronted the Slavophiles, those who felt that the nation's survival depended on its recognizing and developing indigenous resources of cultural power. At the same time they condemned Europeanization for emasculating Russian culture by substituting foreign forms for its genuine cultural virility whose source lay in the common class, despite their having been cast into the oblivion of perpetual labor. Westernizers imagined that the Europeanized educated elite would eventually succeed in raising the illiterate masses to their level so that Russia might take its place in the family of (Western) nations. Slavophiles prophesied that the common people would lead Russia in pronouncing a "new word" to a moribund West, delivering it from modernity and to a universal (post-national) spiritual truth. Both camps based their programs and prognoses in some more or less theoretical portrayal of the Russian common people who, despite the emancipation and the attention it brought, could still be viewed as "the mysterious God of whom one knows practically nothing."⁹

The Pushkin celebration was not conceived as offering some respite from this long-ripened and acrimonious dispute. On the contrary, the burning question to which it was consecrated in the minds of the festival's organizers and participants was whether Pushkin was to be enshrined as the national poet in whose work one might find both the word of national reconciliation and the new word through which Russia would convert Europe to a higher level of global cultural existence. Thus the *fête*, anticipated to be epoch-making, did not disappoint; one commentator compared its cultural-historical significance to that of Russia's Christianization in the late tenth century or to Westernization by Peter the Great in the early eighteenth.¹⁰ Dostoevsky was asked to give the second of two keynote speeches. The first was given by that other literary lion, I. S. Turgenev, his ideological opponent since the mid-1860s when Dostoevsky began to develop views on Russia's national-spiritual preeminence that ran counter to Turgenev's Europhilism. In his address, Turgenev lauded Pushkin's accomplishment but refrained from crowning him the national poet as Shakespeare was undeniably the national poet of England or Goethe of Germany. He based his judgment not on a failure of Pushkin's poetic merits per se—quite the reverse, he had provided Russian literature

4 INTRODUCTION

with a poetic language and a range of character types—but to the vagaries of his reception over the decades since his death in 1837, suggesting that, however talented Pushkin may have been, his time had not been ripe. In contrast to Turgenev’s modulated enthusiasm, Dostoevsky unhesitatingly, ringingly, and, as many testified, “prophetically” pronounced Pushkin the national poet on the grounds, elaborated previously in *Diary of a Writer* entries, that although of the nobility, this poet had been “a man who was reincarnated by his own heart into the common man, into his essence, almost into his image.”¹¹ Moreover, Pushkin had recognized that only through literature could the feat of his “reincarnation” be transferred to the nation at large through the creation of “a whole series of positively beautiful Russian types he found among the Russian people,” in comparison with which our “many experts on the people among our writers [are] merely ‘gentlemen’ who write about the people.”¹² According to a multitude of accounts, Dostoevsky’s speech was greeted with hysterical adulation. Joseph Frank attributes his success to the fact that his Russian messianism and exalted view of the people would have harmonized with the sentiments of the “vast majority” of his audience: in other words, unlike Pushkin in Turgenev’s estimation, Dostoevsky’s time was, indeed, ripe.¹³

Dostoevsky elaborated on the claims presented at the fête in the August 1880 issue of *Diary of a Writer*, the sole issue he would produce that year, by framing the text of the Pushkin speech with two polemical essays, the “Explanatory Note Concerning the Speech on Pushkin” and a four-part reply to a critique of his speech published in the liberal daily *Golos* (*The Voice*) by a professor and historian of law, A. D. Gradovsky. In this trio of essays, the problem that I call “Dostoevsky’s democracy” emerges, not with the power and complexity it had exhibited previously (it had been a focus of the writer’s work since his return from Siberian exile on the eve of emancipation) but yet with the concision and pathos of a valedictory address. The problem of Dostoevsky’s democracy is fundamentally a problem of perception which had led even “our democrats”—those among the educated class who believe most earnestly in the apotheosis of the people—to betray them. “Why in Europe,” he thus writes, “do those who call themselves democrats always stand for the people, at least base themselves on them, but our democrat [*nash demokrat*] is more often than not an aristocrat and in the final analysis almost always plays into the hand of those who suppress the people’s strength and ends by lording it over them?” (*PSS* 26: 153/1302). The elite’s betrayal of the people is inevitably self-defeating, since, as Pushkin had been the first to track and record in “Eugene Onegin” and elsewhere, the former’s existence had been “sickly” and abnormal since they had torn themselves from and elevated themselves above the people. This ultimately fatal malaise could be

remedied only by embracing the “people’s truth,” premised on the acquisition or recovery of “faith” in that truth (*PSS* 26: 129–30/1271–72). In the dialogical manner with which we are now familiar, Dostoevsky’s representative of the elite in his essay responds by protesting in all sincerity that this popular truth, despite the best efforts of members of the upper class, had remained entirely invisible to them. In its place, they see “only an unworthy, barbaric mass which must be forced merely to obey” (*PSS* 26:135/1279). The hypothetical exchange of views elicits from Dostoevsky not a statement of the people’s sublime truth but rather the prosaic truth of his elite speaker who regretfully, but without remorse, insists that “we didn’t encounter this spirit of the people and didn’t detect it on our path,” and for a very good reason: “we left it behind and ran from it as fast as we could.” Why flee beauty, truth, national reconciliation, spiritual and social health? Because when we look at the people, say the elite, “we see an inert mass [which we have] to re-create and refashion,” a mass “low and filthy, just as they’ve always been, and incapable of having either a personality or an idea” (*PSS* 26: 134–35/1277–78).

The Pushkin speech which immediately follows is dedicated to a refutation of the prosaic truth of the elite in the form of a hypothesis concerning the three stages of Pushkin’s development. Dostoevsky’s claim is that they led the poet to embody unerringly the elusive popular truth in a series of positively beautiful Russian types he found across the class spectrum. In his subsequent response to Gradovsky’s critique of the speech, large excerpts of which he includes in the body of his essay, Dostoevsky interjects a dose of realism into his defense of the people and their truth: “But let’s allow, let’s allow that our people are sinful and rude, let’s allow that they still bear the image of the beast”—illustrated by some lines from a popular song: “the son rode on his mother’s back / with his young wife in traces”—and again, “But let’s allow, in spite of everything allow that in our people are brutality and sin” (*PSS* 26:152/1300). The hint of acquiescence in the repetition conveys his distress; as always in Dostoevsky, we find no foregone conclusions. He offers several rationales for the people’s crude behavior: that all subject peoples behave so and the Russians may not be as bestial as most; that the elites are to blame for bestializing by enslaving the people; and so forth. But his most compelling argument for the existence of the people’s truth, paradoxically because to entertain it at all requires a sustained act of faith, refers not to a weakness of character or will on the part of the elite or the people but to a peculiar problem of vision in which both are equally inveigled.

Invoking his experience as a political convict in a Siberian hard-labor camp almost thirty years earlier, a member of the educated elite forced to live cheek-by-jowl with hostile peasant-convicts, Dostoevsky asserts that

6 INTRODUCTION

there are among the people not just crude and bestial sinners or mindless non-entities but “positive characters of unimaginable beauty and strength, whom your observation still hasn’t touched.” He continues:

There are these righteous ones and sufferers for the truth—do we see them or don’t we see them? I don’t know; to whom it is given to see, will, of course, see and comprehend them, but who sees only the image of the beast, will, of course, see nothing. (*PSS* 26:153/1301)

Here is the answer not to the problem of the people, but to that of the problem’s longevity. Twenty years after the emancipation, twenty years during which both traditionalists and revolutionaries passionately declared their commitment to its full (rather than merely official) realization, the problem of the people remained not just unresolved but poorly conceptualized and therefore inadequately articulated. The malaise of the decimated Russian elite had been personified in the strong characters of Pushkin and Gogol; the malaise of the bestial Russian people had been expressed in literary or polemical caricature, enshrined in specimens of folk literature, or sentimentalized in attempts to translate the folk character and milieu into a contemporary literary idiom such as the novel. Meanwhile, the popular truth, embodied by the unimaginably beautiful—that is, culturally invisible and aesthetically unrepresentable—people, remained abstract and unspecified: in attempting to embrace it, one all too often found oneself embracing a phantom, or worse, a projection of one’s own pathology. Dostoevsky’s democracy, as we will see, entails the development of an aesthetic based less on his vision of the people than of an uncanny cultural blindness which continued to obscure the image of the people and which, precisely because all are blind, no one even suspects. Although we find the most powerful elaboration of Dostoevsky’s democracy and the aesthetic to which it gives rise in the first of his great novels, *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861), the primary focus of this book, the problem is perhaps most concisely formulated, and with specific reference to the character of “the democrat,” in *The Idiot* (1868) to which I now briefly turn.

The *Ne To* and the “Democrat”

In the spring of 1868, having finished the first part of his novel *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky wrote a letter to Apollon N. Maikov from Geneva in which he asks his trusted friend (“perhaps my only friend!”) to stand as godfather to his first child, Sonia, born a month earlier (*PSS* 28 [II]: 279/282). He describes the powerful and novel sensations of parental love and the equally intense feelings of anxiety arising from a sudden inability to write,

threatening to delay submission of his novel and thus repayment of his significant debt to his publisher. His only chance of meeting his deadline is to write the novel's second part in eighteen days. But this seems unlikely: he describes his sleeplessness and the consequent exacerbation of his epilepsy; his wife's physical and emotional stress before and after their child's birth; their pending eviction because of the baby's crying, and their desperate need to find new living quarters with extremely limited financial resources. He discusses his anxiety over his dependents left behind in Russia—his stepson, Pasha, who has not written to congratulate him on the birth of Sonia and may not have contacted his editor, as Dostoevsky had urgently requested; and the wife of his deceased brother who had also failed to acknowledge the baby's birth. He laments that the state of his finances has forced him to live abroad, away from Russia, the source of his inspiration. The tenor of the letter then changes as he writes about Russia itself and its "enormous regeneration under our current great sovereign," Alexander II: "Here abroad, I have conclusively become with respect to Russia a perfect monarchist" (*PSS* 28 [II]: 281/283). Only the tsar, Dostoevsky claims, managed to accomplish things in Russia, "simply because he is the tsar. In Russia the people have given and will give their love to every one of our tsars and in the end they believe only in him. For the people, this is mysterious, holy, sacramental."¹⁴ The Russian Westernizers, however, were blind to this truth; having taken pride in grounding themselves not in a sentimental attachment to tradition, but in facts, "they've overlooked the most important and greatest fact of our history": "that our constitution is the mutual love of the monarch for the people and the people for the monarch" (*PSS* 28 [II]: 281, 280/283).

This unconditional faith in the sovereign at which Dostoevsky claims to have arrived—induced, perhaps, by his involuntary exile and painful nostalgia for Russia—is accompanied by unambiguously hostile observations of all aspects of Western culture and its Russian sympathizers in this and other letters from the late 1860s during which he conceived and wrote *The Idiot*.¹⁵ He is particularly incensed by the Russian monarchy's political opponents living voluntarily or otherwise in exile. His utopian socialism of the 1840s, for which he spent a decade in Siberian exile, seems completely eclipsed.¹⁶ He excoriates the moribund worldliness of the Roman Catholics, the self-contradictions of Protestantism, the vulgarity and stupidity of the Germans, the despicable mediocrity of the Swiss republic, and the pettiness of Western bourgeois culture generally. He denounces the Westernizers, that "unfortunate class of little smart-asses [*umniki*] uprooted from the soil," and all Russian liberals as "poor wretches," "nonentities," "garbage, bloated with self-love," and "turds" (*PSS* 28 [II]: 280, 259, 282/283, 275, 285).¹⁷ He lumps Turgenev together with Herzen and all the other "stupid little liberals and progressives [*liberalishki i progressisty*]"

8 INTRODUCTION

as “obscenely vain,” “shamelessly irritable, mindlessly proud”; taken together, they represent the “cursed dregs of what is obsolete and retrograde” (*PSS* 28 [II]: 210, 259/254, 259). These characterizations of liberals and progressives and their beliefs, not surprisingly, make a strong appearance in the novel on which Dostoevsky worked so intensively during these months. They appear in a refracted (dialogic, rather than monologic) way, voiced by various characters, some of whom have little if any claim to the reader’s uncritical acceptance. Nevertheless, the valence of liberal and radical ideas in the novel, and their association with the extremes of socialism and nihilism, seems clear, with one exception: despite Dostoevsky’s appreciation of monarchism, the term whose meaning remains uncertain, in part because it is foregrounded as such, is “democrat.”

In the final part of *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky’s famously failed attempt to portray a “wholly beautiful man,” the title character, Prince Myshkin, is accused five times of being a “democrat” (*demokrat*).¹⁸ Initially somewhat comical, the scenes of accusation become increasingly dire, yet neither the political nor the characterological significance of the epithet, and thus its explanatory value in relation to the novel’s tragic denouement, ever materialize. Far from helping to explain the rationale for tragedy—Rogozhin’s murder of Nastasia Filippovna and Myshkin’s return to imbecility—it remains unclear (despite the tone of disapproval with which it is pronounced) if to be a “democrat” is in any substantial sense a good or a bad thing. Lizaveta Prokofevna Epanchina, the comically and perpetually distressed mother of one of the two women the Prince loves and the first in the novel to denounce him as a “democrat,” wonders, “Was the prince good or not? Was the whole thing good or not? If it was not good (which was unquestionable), what precisely was not good about it? And if it was good (which was also possible), then, again, what was good about it?” (*PSS* 8:421/507).¹⁹ The question, she feels, is urgent and demands immediate resolution, “yet not only was it impossible to resolve it, but poor Lizaveta Prokofevna could not even pose the question to herself with full clarity, try as she might.” As she struggles to articulate her own objections to Myshkin’s reputed interest in her daughter Aglaia, the word “democrat” incorporates everything that makes him unquestionably bad yet possibly good. “First of all there was the fact that ‘this wretched princeling is a sick idiot, second of all he’s a fool, who neither knows society nor has any place in society: to whom can he be shown, where can he be tucked in? He’s some sort of impermissible democrat, without even the least rank,’ ” and yet “at the same time something stirred in [her] heart which suddenly said to her: ‘And what makes the prince not the sort you want?’ ” Lizaveta Prokofevna’s objection to the prince as “some sort of impermissible democrat” is, finally, one made “against her own heart” (*PSS* 8:421/507, 508).

The unspoken summary condemnation, however inexact and inadequate a description of Lizaveta Prokofevna's potential son-in-law, stands, as Myshkin intuitively in the second scene of accusation. This occurs at the Epanchins' engagement party for Aglaia, prematurely arranged by her mother who has become impatient with her own doubts. On this occasion, Myshkin is to be presented to "high society" for the first time, a social circle, Aglaia frets, to which her own family, "people of the middle circle, as middle as can be" despite their wealth and social respectability, do not belong: she condemns the event in advance as "ridiculous" (*PSS* 8:435/525). But the explicit focus of her fear about appearing ridiculous is Myshkin's propensity to "start talking," to introduce lofty subjects of conversation, which she forbids in advance (*PSS* 8:436/526). Despite this prohibition and his own anxious dream that he would nevertheless speak somehow inappropriately in an effort "to convince [the guests] of something," at the party Myshkin talks uninhibitedly, inspired by his increasing delight with the guests' elegant civility, which he "took at face value, for pure, unalloyed gold" (*PSS* 8:437, 445/527, 537). Myshkin is inspired, that is, by a kind of optical illusion of class which leads him in this scene to see aristocratic vanity as candor, cynicism as naïve friendliness, and conventional politesse—"tact and cunning"—as the warmest sincerity.²⁰ His "eyes shining with rapture and tenderness," his heart filled with "the warmest and sincerest gratitude to someone for something," he "starts talking" when one of the party's dignitaries tells him that he remembers the prince as a child and was a distant relation of his late guardian (*PSS* 8:448, 449/540, 541). This distant connection, just short of kinship but imbued with its pathos, provides Myshkin with a platform and referent for what has been building into a groundless emotional ecstasy, "out of all proportion to the subject of the conversation" (*PSS* 8:448/541). When he learns from the dignitary that his guardian, Pavlishchev, had converted to Roman Catholicism before his death, he becomes distraught and delivers an impassioned monologue on the sinister attraction of Roman Catholicism for educated Russians who have lost their instinct for religious truth along with their connection to the common people, but whose Russianness is evident in their continuing thirst to believe in something higher.

In this monologue, Dostoevsky puts in his hero's mouth his own "personal and long-standing" conviction that only the advent of the Russian Christ could defeat the power of Roman Catholicism—an "unchristian faith" worse than atheism, a faith which had led those mourning "the lost moral force of religion" first to socialism and then to the violence of nihilism (*PSS* 8:450, 451/543, 544).²¹ But even before he had derived the weighty and therefore inappropriate topic of religious truth from what the dignitary had intended as an item of gossip, Myshkin had already begun

10 INTRODUCTION

to speak strangely to him. By then his conversation was marked by the kind of tittering self-abasement mixed with a seemingly inadvertent denigration of the character of his lofty interlocutor typical of another character who voices some of Dostoevsky's own beliefs: the crudely learned, often drunk, and always half-cocked Lebedev.²² A shameless busybody entirely without personal allegiance and therefore ever-present, Lebedev functions as a go-between among the various social classes who collectively produce the novel's tragic plot. With the conscientiousness of the scandal monger whose practice is an art form (unlike Myshkin, Lebedev's equal in abetting scandal but who does so inadvertently, out of a principled reluctance to recognize social hierarchies), Lebedev draws social lessons for the prince's benefit from his facilitations of forbidden contact, based on a *reductio ad absurdum* of social principles. While informing Myshkin that he enabled the rivals for the prince's attention, Aglaia and Nastasia Filippovna, to exchange letters, for example, he conspicuously leaves out the women's names, referring to them instead in a coded terminology which he explains to the prince: "one of them I designate by the name of 'person' [*litsa*], sir, and the other only as 'personage' [*personazha*], for humiliation and for distinction; for there is a great difference between the innocent and highly noble daughter of a general and a . . . kept woman, sir" (PSS 8:439/529). When Myshkin rents a room in Lebedev's dacha in Pavlovsk, it becomes the site of motley gatherings where "persons" and "personages" encounter each other with naked antagonism in ways impossible in more public venues. The opportunity to vent their mutual outrage enables some unmediated communication and even friendships, but finally produces a greater entrenchment of class positions. The constant chaos of social mixing when rules of decorum no longer apply and which so fatigues him at Lebedev's elevates for Myshkin the charm of the elegant manners and easy mutual understanding of the Epanchins' guests.

In his conversation at the party, it becomes clear that, for the dignitary, Pavlishchev's conversion to Catholicism spells his abandonment of "his service"—his abandonment, that is, of the conventional life of "a man of good family, with a fortune, a gentleman-in-waiting" (PSS 8:449/542).²³ The unseemliness of the conversion rather than its meaning disturbs the dignitary. To comment on the meaning, as Myshkin does, extends and exacerbates this unseemliness. The effect is amplified when the prince, trembling with enthusiasm, prophesies before the Epanchins' astonished guests the advent of the Russian God as "a mighty and righteous, wise and meek giant [rising] up before the astonished world, astonished and frightened" (PSS 8:453/546).²⁴ As Aglaia foretold in the earlier scene when she forbade him to "start talking" at the party, Myshkin, declaiming and gesticulating, then breaks her mother's expensive Chinese vase. In the wake of this accident, in an excess of gratitude toward the guests for not

taking offense at his clumsiness, Myshkin proceeds, with characteristic earnestness, to tell the assembled dignitaries court jester's truths in the guise of confession. As himself a member by birth of that class of "our foremost people, the elders, the ancient stock," Myshkin insists that he felt driven to acquaint himself with the Epanchins' guests.

I've always heard so much more bad than good about you, about the pettiness and exclusiveness of your interests, about your backwardness, your shallow education, your ridiculous habits [. . .] I had to see for myself and become personally convinced: is it actually so that this whole upper stratum of the Russian people is good for nothing, has outlived its time, has exhausted its ancient life, and is only capable of dying out, but in a petty, envious struggle with people . . . of the future, hindering them, not noticing that it is dying itself? (*PSS* 8:456–57/550–51)

That it is "actually so" the dignitaries "sarcastically" deny, and Myshkin goes on to insist that the guests' gracious sincerity (which the narrator has thoroughly debunked) disproves in and of itself "that in society everything is a manner, everything is a decrepit form, while the essence is exhausted." Nor does he stop at characterizing (albeit in the mode of vigorous denial) his interlocutors as members of a moribund and (in the mode of joyful approval) a "ridiculous" class (*PSS* 8:457/551).²⁵ Beyond these unintentional insults to the guests' collective amour-propre, he also poses damaging rhetorical questions about individuals: given the story he had told so artlessly, for example, can Prince N. really be "a . . . dead man, with a dried-up heart and talent?" (*PSS* 8:457/551). Myshkin does not spare himself in this scene of unseemly exposures: as the guests try to soothe and silence him, he insists on speaking even though his ridiculous "gesture" compromises and even "humiliates" his idea, and even though—as Dostoevsky had claimed of himself—"I have no sense of measure either" (*PSS* 8:458/552).²⁶

The breaking of the vase signals the shift in Myshkin's address to the Epanchins' guests from a polemical to a confessional tone. As this confession proceeds, it is increasingly marked by what M. M. Bakhtin calls the "sideward glance," the speaker's anticipatory acknowledgment of that which he imagines others are about to accuse him:²⁷

Do you think I'm a utopian? An ideologist? Oh, no, by God, my thoughts are all so simple . . . You don't believe it? You smile? You know, I'm sometimes mean, because I lose my faith; today I was walking here and thinking: "Well, how shall I start speaking to them? What word should I begin with, so that they understand at least something?"

Despite Aglaia's prohibition, here Myshkin reveals that he looked forward to the party as an occasion to put forward his "word," to "start speaking."

12 INTRODUCTION

His eagerness to have his say, along with the doubts he voices about the adequacy of his interlocutors to his word (“This I tell you, you, who have already been able to understand . . . and not understand . . . so much”) and his anticipation of their condemnation of his word, make him a type of the Underground Man, as Bakhtin has powerfully described that character (*PSS* 8:458/552–53).²⁸ Unlike the Underground Man’s narrative, Myshkin’s brief confession here is not motivated by spite or cynicism, nor does his discourse betray the “vicious circle,” the endless internalized polemic, of one who would refute the irrefutable: that “one’s attitude toward oneself is inseparably interwoven with one’s attitude toward another” (*PDP* 229, 231). On the contrary, Myshkin joyfully identifies himself with his auditors in the spirit of mutual understanding and forgiveness:

For it’s actually so, we are ridiculous, light-minded, with bad habits, we’re bored, we don’t know how to look, how to understand, we’re all like that, all, you, and I, and they! [. . .] You know, in my opinion it’s sometimes even good to be ridiculous, if not better: we can the sooner forgive each other, the sooner humble ourselves. (*PSS* 8:458/553)

It is in this manner, and not (like the Underground Man’s) through a deliberately annoying or inelegant style of address, that Myshkin’s speech is marked by what Bakhtin calls the reverse aestheticism of holy foolishness, which makes him “ambiguous and elusive even for himself” (*PDP* 231, 234). Intended to convert his noble auditors, to resurrect them from spiritual and cultural death, his address fails in its intent because it fails (as Myshkin recognizes) “to set an example,” to assert a stable self-definition built on a stable referential word (*PSS* 8:459/553). His very sense of integrity compels the prince to give pride of place to the “contrary evaluation of oneself” which he suspects his hearers have made (*PDP* 233).

In particular, the uncertain status of the “we,” and therefore of the “them,” in his address to the Epanchins’ guests leads Myshkin to articulate their unspoken suspicion that he is a “democrat.” In the fashion of the Underground Man, he denies by anticipating the “impermissible” truth that he knows circulates among friends and detractors alike and to which he has become acutely sensitive, as he has with the epithet “idiot” itself.²⁹ In both cases, his denial of the epithet’s truth is also an assertion of its truth:

“You thought I was afraid for *them*, that I was *their* advocate, a democrat, a speaker for equality?” he laughed hysterically (he laughed every other minute in short, ecstatic outbursts). “I’m afraid for you, for all of you, for all of us together. For I myself am a prince of ancient stock, and I am sitting with princes. It is to save us all that I speak, to keep our estate from vanishing for nothing, in the darkness, having realized nothing, squabbling over every-

thing and losing everything. Why vanish and yield our place to others, when we can remain the vanguard and the elders? Let us be the vanguard, then we shall be the elders. Let us become servants, in order to be elders.” (*PSS* 8:458/553)

Denying that he advocates indifference, a collapse of the hierarchies, Myshkin obscures the distinctions of class and ideology indicated by his pronouns, elides the difference between the secular standing of the prince and the theological standing of the elder (*starshii*), and reverses the priority of first and last, of elders and servants. Denying the desire of the one who would be first, he invokes the quintessentially democratic gesture of Jesus in Mark 9:35. In an agony of self-consciousness, having just proclaimed himself not the destroyer but the would-be savior of his estate, Myshkin, who would preserve their authority by making them the servants of servants, has an epileptic seizure and loses consciousness.³⁰

Two weeks later, the term “democrat” is applied to Myshkin for the third time. It reemerges in the wake of the fateful engagement party and the subsequent face-to-face encounter of Aglaia Epanchina and Nastasia Filippovna at which the prince, crucified between his romantic and spiritual inclinations, appears to “choose” the latter. That the prince is a democrat is part of a general evaluation of Myshkin’s character concocted by “several serious gossips.” The epithet then circulates “over almost the whole town and even its environs.” No longer an unspoken or intuited accusation, the epithet is now the staple of a communally produced narrative, “embroidered with scandals” involving “many well-known and important persons,” and intended to make sense of the fact that “a certain prince [. . .], having caused a scandal in an honorable and well-known house, and having rejected the daughter of that house, already his fiancée, had been enticed away by a well-known tart.” This narrative circulates through all classes of Pavlovsk society in the form of “one and the same story” but in “a thousand different versions” of the same “irrefutable and graphic facts” about Myshkin: he is “a young man, of good family, a prince, almost wealthy, a silly fool, but a democrat [*durachok, no demokrat*], and gone crazy over modern nihilism which was discovered by Mr. Turgenev, barely able to speak Russian,” and so on. (*PSS* 8:476/573–74). As the story goes, the “democrat” is first and foremost a dissembler, like a fabled French atheist who had gone to the trouble of being ordained simply in order to proclaim publicly the inauthenticity of his ordination. Myshkin’s version of the French atheist’s trampling of the pieties had been to use the Epanchin party as a forum at which “to proclaim his way of thinking aloud and in front of everyone, to denounce the venerable dignitaries, to reject his fiancée publicly and offensively, and, while resisting the servants who were taking him out, to smash a beautiful Chinese vase.”

Although he loved the general's daughter, he had rejected her solely out of nihilism and for the sake of the immanent scandal, so as not to deny himself the pleasure of marrying a fallen woman before the whole world and thereby proving that in his conviction there were neither fallen nor virtuous women, but only free women; that he did not believe in the social and old distinction, but believed only in the "woman question." That, finally, a fallen woman, in his eyes, was even somewhat higher than an unfallen one. Though some aspects of the story were murky, "there remained not the slightest doubt that the scandalous wedding would actually take place" (*PSS* 8:476–77/574).

The novel's narrator reproduces the anecdote about Myshkin, "a fool, but a democrat," not as an absurd rumor and not as the unvarnished truth but because of its advantages as explanation: it is "graphic" (*nagliadnyi*)—its import is clear, it can be seen without obstacle, and therefore grasped immediately and without difficulty, if not necessarily believed. Its clarity rather than its truth is what recommends the "graphic anecdote" to the desperate narrator as a solution to a narrative impasse he finds otherwise impossible to surmount. The communally produced, "strange, rather amusing, almost unbelievable" account, the narrator insists, should not be considered a "digression" from a story that has become untellable. Nor, on the other hand, does it contain some otherwise unavailable insight into the prince, his motives and beliefs; its illogic—on the "woman question," for example—is a familiar absurdity, reminiscent of the novel's self-styled nihilists who have convinced themselves that they have the "right" to steal from Myshkin. Instead, the narrator offers it in the absence of any other way to take his readers from the engagement party for Aglaia and Myshkin to the wedding planned for Nastasia Filippovna and Myshkin two weeks later—he offers it, that is, simply because it delivers us to the fact of the prince's wedding to Nastasia which, at this juncture, although baffling to everyone, including the narrator, is "indeed appointed" (*PSS* 8:477/575). In the absence of the narrator's own explanation and out of his reluctance to fabricate one, the graphic anecdote serves not as substitute explanation (we are never supposed to accept it at face value) but for its purely structural advantage as "a direct and immediate continuation of the story" (*PSS* 8:476/573).

Yet, the question intrudes itself: In what sense can an absurd fabrication, no matter how opportune and even if sanctioned by the community, be considered a direct and immediate continuation of the story? Where is its principle of continuity located if not in the logic—or at least the plausibility—of its details? Because the individual details of the graphic anecdote in its several versions are patently false and even far-fetched, it can only be the reiterated characterization of the prince as fool and democrat that bridges the gap for a mystified community between the engagement party

for one woman and the wedding plans for another. The “democrat” of the anecdote is first and foremost he who allows such things to happen and such stories to be told, stories that cohere around a bewildering motive, inscrutable and therefore unrepresentable. The graphic anecdote serves as direct and immediate continuation of the story, then, not simply because it offers a trumped-up narrative to bridge the informational abyss but because the narrative it offers features precisely this unrepresentability in its central formulation. The conceptual difficulty is highlighted, moreover, by the oppositional rather than complementary conjunction joining its paired terms—“a fool, *but* a democrat.” The phrasing suggests that although the terms are incompatible, both are improbably operative in the prince’s character, and this foundational improbability is metonymically replicated in each of the anecdote’s constitutive assertions. The narrative, both the graphic anecdote collectively produced by the gossips and the larger narrative in which it is embedded and used as connective material, thus sustains the centrality of the epithet “democrat.” Produced by the narrator’s odd *crise de confiance* and the communal judgment of the prince, the narrative carries the epithet forward as a simultaneously absurd and authoritative explanation for the novel’s escalating tragic tension, suspending its meaning along with the questions of goodness or badness, truth or falsity with which it is surrounded.

Evgeny Pavlovich Radomsky, Myshkin’s urbane and amiable rival for Aglaia’s attention, embellishes the community’s indictment, to which the narrator tells us he had “perhaps contributed,” with his psychological diagnosis of the prince’s motives (for whose insightfulness the narrator praises him twice) in the fourth and final instance in which he is branded a democrat. Myshkin’s “innate inexperience,” “extraordinary simple-heartedness,” “phenomenal lack of the sense of measure,” and “enormous, flooding mass of cerebral convictions” which the prince’s “extraordinary honesty” led him to mistake for “genuine, natural, and immediate convictions”: these traits of character underlay his “*conventionally democratic*” relations with Nastasia Filippovna, attributable, when all is said and done, to “the charm, so to speak, of the ‘woman question.’” Despite his recognition that the prince is “strange enough not to be like all other people,” which leads many to consider him an idiot, Evgeny Pavlovich judges Myshkin to have behaved “conventionally” (*PSS* 8:481/579; emphasis in original). His indictment is especially curious, because he is the only character in the novel to have aggressively sought out the prince’s views on the subject of progressive reform in Russia, and to have been astonished at his unconventional responses.

On that occasion, upon Myshkin’s arrival in Pavlovsk, Evgeny Pavlovich raised the subject of Russian liberalism. He maintained (and Dostoevsky’s own views of the late 1860s are again clearly audible) that Russian liberal-

ism was deeply fraudulent: unlike his Western counterpart, the Russian liberal attacked not just the “existing order of things,” but “the very essence of our things,” “the things themselves” and not merely “their order.” The Russian liberal, that is, denies and even hates “Russia itself”—he “hates and beats his own mother”; liberalism, he argues, a Western phenomenon fatally embraced by “the former landowners (abolished) and the seminarians,” contains the seed of Russia’s self-destruction (*PSS* 8:277/335).³¹ The liberal reform on which Evgeny Pavlovich especially wished to sound Myshkin out was the jury trial, established in 1864 along with open courts by Alexander II’s judicial reforms.³² In particular, he wanted to ask Myshkin’s opinion of an infamous case in which the jury acquitted a man who had murdered six people on the basis of his defense attorney’s argument that the “environment”—the murderer’s poverty—was responsible for his crime. For the lawyer and those who acquitted his client, such an argument exemplified “the most liberal, the most humane and progressive” reasoning, but Evgeny Pavlovich condemns it as a “per-*version of notions and convictions*” that had become generally accepted (*PSS* 8:279/337).

Asked for his opinion, Myshkin agrees, and adds that he had recently spent time in prisons and become acquainted with some inmates. The difference between these convicts and the liberals “whom Evgeny Pavlych has begun speaking about” is that even “the most inveterate and unrepentant murderer still knows that he is a *criminal*, that is, in all conscience he considers that he has done wrong, though without any repentance. And every one of them is the same,” whereas the latter, those ostensibly influenced by liberal theories of crime and punishment, “do not even want to consider themselves criminals and think to themselves that they had the right and . . . even did a good thing” (*PSS* 8:280/339). I return to this conversation in part 2 of this study (section 4). At this juncture, it is worth noting that Myshkin’s response, which Evgeny Pavlovich purposely elicited, is anything but “*conventionally democratic*” insofar as it condemns the abstract notion of “right” as an excuse for denying individual moral accountability.³³ Perhaps more accurately, it is anything but conventional: the prince’s views are *sui generis*—they do not conform to those of any ideological camp, nor, as Evgeny Pavlovich observes “with astonishment,” do they appear to conform to Myshkin’s own tolerant response toward the would-be nihilists who in an earlier scene had maintained the “right” to fleece him (*PSS* 8:280/339). Despite his thus having elicited the prince’s views just weeks earlier, in the fourth scene of accusation Evgeny Pavlovich betrays his own inability to imagine something other than a conventional—not to say muddled—explanation for Myshkin’s behavior: he reiterates, for example, Lizaveta Prokofevna’s vague suspicion that the prince’s unaccountable behavior

must somehow come down to the “woman question” (*PSS* 8:422/509). He can only revert to the hackneyed explanation concocted by the community at large that, in the management of his romantic affairs, the prince had acted on the basis of conventionally unconventional—“democratic”—theories he had impermissably put into practice.

In his zeal to persuade the prince to give up his perverse democratic convictions, Evgeny Pavlovich rehearses the circumstances surrounding Myshkin’s return to Russia. Insofar as it is factually accurate but fundamentally false, his narrative resembles the community’s narrative of what had transpired at the Epanchins’ engagement party. He notes the prince’s sheltered upbringing in a Swiss sanatorium and his estrangement from his native country; his bookish expectations of Russia; his desire to act; his fatigue and illness; the difficult Petersburg weather; the powerful impression made by Nastasia Filippovna which elicited all Myshkin’s chivalry; the beauty of the Epanchin sisters and particularly Aglaia; and, finally, his quintessentially Dostoevskian first day “in an unknown and almost fantastic city, a day of encounters and scenes, a day of unexpected acquaintances, a day of the most unexpected reality.” Myshkin concedes that his experience on that fateful day had been “almost so” (*pochti chto ved’ tak*) and Evgeny Pavlovich, encouraged, presses on, insisting that the prince had been wrong to think that he could love two women and wrong to expect their understanding of his love (*PSS* 8:482/580). Finally, however, despite the fact that Evgeny Pavlovich’s representations are commonsensical, emotionally generous, and factually accurate, Myshkin rejects the limitations of his understanding and condemns Aglaia and Nastasia Filippovna, too, for being unable, at their encounter, to talk “about the right thing, not about the right thing at all” (*ne pro to, sovsem ne pro to*) (*PSS* 8:483/581). If he could speak to Aglaia, Myshkin insists, she would understand that “it’s all not *that*, but something completely, completely different!” (*vsio eto ne to, a sovershenno, sovershenno drugoe*). Evgeny Pavlovich confirms that Myshkin is, in fact, about to marry Nastasia Filippovna, and asks, “Then how is it not that?” (*Tak kak zhe ne to?*), to which Myshkin can only reply, “Oh, no, not that, not that!” (*O nyet, ne to, ne to!*) (*PSS* 8:483/582). The pragmatic Evgeny Pavlovich is incredulous:

“How’s that? So you want to love them both?”

“Oh, yes, yes!”

“Good heavens, Prince, what are you saying? Come to your senses!”

(*PSS* 8:484/583)³⁴

Myshkin cannot come to his senses. Consistent with his earlier description of the state of mind of the common criminals he had interviewed in prison whose view of their crime bore no trace of progressive theory, he cannot

repent or renounce his love for both women. Without remorse but with genuine sorrow, he accepts that he is to blame.³⁵

The two scenes in which Evgeny Pavlovich and Myshkin attempt to come to an understanding are linked by a set of shared and interrelated themes: specific touchstones of Russian social and political reform; the perversion of convictions under the influence of theory; the acknowledgment of wrongdoing and responsibility even in the absence of remorse; and, finally, the phenomenon of the “*ne to*,” or “not that.” In his brilliant study of Nikolai Gogol, Donald Fanger identified the *ne to* as the “central principle” of the earlier writer’s aesthetic where it signifies “a constant denial (as fact or as value) of what appears in the represented reality and in the representation itself”: “varieties of displacement [in which] things are not what or where or as they should be; parts usurp the function of wholes; expectations are baffled.”³⁶ In contrast, Dostoevsky uses the *ne to* to indicate the inadequate expression or enactment of an as-yet inarticulable or unrealizable belief, idea, or ideal. Often linked to a conventional, bookish notion, the *ne to* stands in, as a negative signifier, for that which cannot be named or performed, that for which an “image” does not yet exist. The theme of the *ne to* is powerfully present throughout the novel. It is central to Ippolit Terentyev’s confessional “Explanation.”³⁷ It makes its last shocking appearance as Myshkin sits playing cards with Rogozhin beside Nastasia Filippovna’s corpse: “he suddenly realized that at that moment, and for a long time now, he had not been talking about what he needed to talk about, and had not been doing what he needed to do” (*vse govorit ne o tom, o chem nado emu govorit, i delaet vse ne to, chto by nado delat*) (PSS 8:506/610; my emphasis). The *ne to* is negatively linked to the prince’s propensity to “begin talking,” which Aglaia had warned him against before their engagement party, not because of its impropriety (although this was the reason she gave) but because he would not be understood, confirming his reputation as an idiot. In the fourth scene of accusation, having acknowledged the plausibility of Evgeny Pavlovich’s insistence that his “democratic” tendencies underwrite his anomalous views of love (such as the “incredible exaggeration” of his “compassion” for Nastasia Filippovna), Myshkin can only object that in the last analysis what motivates him is “not that” (PSS 8:482/581).

Although the *ne to* in the instances I have cited are associated with his reputation as “idiot” and “democrat,” Myshkin had earlier in the novel used the phrase insistently in connection with a quartet of encounters he had had on his travels through the Russian provinces. In this key scene, which immediately precedes Rogozhin’s attempt to kill Myshkin and the latter’s first epileptic seizure, the prince, just returned from his travels, visits Rogozhin in his grim mansion. The meeting is extraordinarily fraught: they discuss Rogozhin’s family history; Nastasia Filippovna, at

length; the religious import of a copy of Hans Holbein's painting *Christ's Body in the Tomb* (1522) which hangs in Rogozhin's reception room and to which Myshkin responds in Dostoevsky's own words upon seeing it in Basel.³⁸ This leads to a discussion about religious faith, in which Rogozhin quotes a drunk man who told him that there were more atheists in Russia than abroad " 'because we've gone further than they have' " (*PSS* 8:182/219). Myshkin's discussion of the significance of Russian atheism at the Epanchins' party, which precedes his second epileptic seizure, echoes this comment. In response to Rogozhin's introduction of the topic of religious unbelief in the presence of Holbein's depiction of Christ's mutilated corpse, Myshkin describes the four "different encounters in two days" that he had had on his trip. The first was with an atheist, an educated man with whom he talked for hours on a train. Myshkin had appreciated the man's "rare courtesy" but was struck by the disjuncture in his conversation between the concept of disbelief and its articulation: "it was as if the whole time he was not talking about that at all" (*chto on voyse kak budto ne pro to, govoril, vo vse vremia*). This same peculiarity, the prince notes, marked other conversations he had had with atheists as well as books he had read on the subject: these were also "as if not about that at all, although in appearance it seemed that it was about that" (*sovsem budto ne pro to, khotia s vidu i kazhetsia, chto pro to*) (*PSS* 8:82; my translation, my emphases). The "that," the *to*, stands in for the positive content of religious belief which cannot be positively named but only negatively indicated by means of the demonstrative pronoun that gestures, vaguely, elsewhere. This observation by the prince, however, is itself unspeakable and, despite his efforts to express it to his learned interlocutor (as to Evgeny Pavlovich later in the novel in relation to the nature of his love), the latter understands nothing of it.

In contrast to the learned atheist's conversation, the next three encounters involve the common or "simple" people (*prostonarod'e*) and are anecdotal rather than theoretical, the first explicitly so. Myshkin learns that, at the provincial hotel where he spent the night, a peasant slit his friend's throat because he coveted his watch, and in the very act crossed himself and prayed for God's forgiveness "for Christ's sake" (*PSS* 8:183/220). Myshkin doesn't comment on the story, although it provokes hysterical laughter in Rogozhin. The second encounter is with a drunken soldier who, addressing Myshkin as "master" (*barin*), tries to sell him his tin cross for the price of a silver one. The prince refrains from judging "this Christ-seller": "God knows what's locked away in these drunken and weak hearts" (*PSS* 8:183/220). Immediately afterward, he meets a young peasant woman nursing her infant and, noticing that she suddenly crosses herself, asks her the reason. Her child had just smiled for the first time, she explains, and she realized that a mother's joy upon seeing her infant's first

smile is precisely like God's joy in seeing a sinner pray. In this quartet of encounters, Myshkin represents the peasant woman's observation as the fulfillment of the hidden or elusive content of the first three: her statement, "in almost those words," the prince notes, "was such a deep, such a subtle and truly religious thought, a thought that all at once expressed the whole essence of Christianity, that is, the whole idea of God as our own father, and that God rejoices over man as a father over his own child—the main thought of Christ! A simple peasant woman!" (*PSS* 8:183–84/221).³⁹ The woman's successful articulation of an elusive or hidden spiritual significance, its function in the prince's narrative as the fulfillment of a meaning deferred in the first three encounters, leads the prince to raise again the problem of the *ne to* with which he had begun:

The essence of religious feeling doesn't fit in with any reasoning, with any crimes and trespasses, or with any atheisms; there's something else here that's not that, and it will eternally be not that [*tut chto-to ne to, i vechmo budet ne to*]; there's something in it that atheisms will eternally glance off, and they will eternally be talking *not about that* [*vechmo budut ne pro to govorit'*]. (*PSS* 8:184/221; emphasis in original)

If the peasant woman's truth proves beyond the powers of less simple people to formulate or receive it, the prince asserts nevertheless that this truth—this "something else," which exists beyond reason, beyond sin, beyond atheism—may be seen "sooner and more clearly in a Russian heart" (*PSS* 8:184/221).

It is a lack of such vision, however, that leads the community to overlook an essential truth which the prince claims is clearly visible in the Russian heart and to embrace instead the "graphic" anecdote that proclaims him an idiot and a democrat. The communal diagnosis of the prince's behavior as following from the fact that he is a "democrat" or has "democratic" tendencies—casually associated with nihilism, socialism, liberalism, atheism, feminism, and egalitarianism—is, finally, also an instance of the *ne to*, not precisely true and not precisely false.⁴⁰ The "democrat" stands in for that which cannot be named and is, in this sense, not simply fallacious. The accusation hovers on the verge of meaninglessness yet captures something significant about Myshkin that the metonymically allied terms—all of which support more precise definition in a distinctive set of reformist prescriptions—do not.⁴¹ The metonymic chain spawned by the "democrat" appears to reproduce the comedy of the Gogolian *ne to* wherein represented reality is endlessly undermined by comic displacements along an unexpected chain of signifiers. But whereas Gogol's comedy celebrates the ability of language to effect a "creation out of nothing" through its very plasticity, Dostoevsky's novel registers the tragic significance of the limitations of language, doomed to reiterate its *ne to* in the hope that the pathos

of its repetition alone will propel speaker and writer, listener and reader, across the abyss of understanding toward which it gestures.⁴² In the 1868 novel in which Dostoevsky hoped to portray a perfectly beautiful man, the “democrat” thus names an inscrutable and seemingly agentless motive that functions as a center of gravity around which the actors—persons and personages alike—unwittingly conspire to organize the events of the story. In the final analysis, whereas the epithet “idiot” describes Myshkin’s beginning and his final destination, “democrat” describes the set of beliefs and subsequent actions that move him along that destined road, beliefs and actions that can be described—like spiritual truth and the simple people who complexly embody it—by nothing other than the *ne to*.

The *Ne To*, the Writer, and the People

If the anecdote, whether graphic or allusive, must be read against its own grain just to intimate (never convey) an unspeakable or impermissible truth associated with the essence of religious feeling or the true character of the democrat, still the anecdote, the story, the narrative, is what in literature we have to go by. Its light is sufficient to make shadows visible, to show that something compelling is there which, at least at that moment, cannot be clearly seen or about which a comprehensive story cannot be told or a persuasive argument made. It allows us to pose the question but disallows a decision on whether this indiscernible thing is possible or impossible, true or false, or even good or bad. Thus Myshkin’s tragic end is ensured precisely by his best qualities, those which others can think to express only by the disapproving fondness contained in the epithet “democrat”—the surfeit of compassion; the inability to consider rank or class; the ability to elicit the trust of the common people (an exceedingly rare trait that Myshkin shares with Turgenev’s nihilist Bazarov and that Dostoevsky denied even to the most well-intentioned elite) and to elicit the truth from those who no longer recognize it; the refusal to stand in judgment; the absolute incapacity for lying.⁴³ The democrat is, in a radical sense, socially incompetent because he fails to observe the stratifications and distinctions from which the social fabric itself is constructed. This is partly why there can be no political program attached to the behavior of the democrat, which is scandalous and unpredictable, and thus the opposite of programmatic. That Dostoevsky was disenchanted with liberalism, socialism, nihilism, utopianism, materialism, and utilitarianism by the late 1860s is beyond question; his objections receive their fullest expression in his novel *The Demons* (1872). The conservative turn in a populism to which he had been committed since the mid-1840s is by the late 1860s unmistakable in his correspondence and would only intensify through the

remainder of his life.⁴⁴ But Dostoevsky's democracy remains a *ne to* in relation to these other, loosely allied political ideals and theories.

My aim in this book is to understand this *ne to* on its own terms by attending to its formation in the transitional period between his early work and the great novels of his maturity.⁴⁵ During this period, Dostoevsky confronted the problem of the Russian common people with particular urgency and immediacy. The consolations of the social theories which underlay his earlier political activism—and for which he suffered a decade of Siberian exile, spent partly in a hard-labor camp—withered in the face of actual, enforced contact with the common people there. Upon his return to the capital on the eve of peasant emancipation in 1861, Dostoevsky staked the resurrection of his authorial career on his insistence that an abyss divided common and elite cultures which would bedevil elite attempts to represent the Russian common people as objects of literary and journalistic inquiry. At a moment when intellectuals and other urban elites struggled to prepare bureaucratically and imaginatively for a liberated peasantry, estrangement became the cornerstone of Dostoevsky's aesthetic practice as well as his claims for the unique integrity of his authorial perspective as a noble ex-convict.⁴⁶ Instead of rendering a naturalistic portrait of the common people enhanced by the pathos of a firsthand knowledge bought dear, Dostoevsky traces in his fictionalized account of his prison experience, *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861), a peculiar dis-integration of the narrating consciousness (the focus of part 1) which allows the common people to emerge into cultural visibility (the focus of part 2). For Alexander Petrovich Gorianchikov, Dostoevsky's fictional autobiographer and would-be guide to the world of forced labor, estrangement is revealed to be the prerequisite for knowing the peasant-other, and for acknowledging and suffering the limitations of that knowledge. One of the central claims of this study, accordingly, is that the Dostoevskian narrator familiar to readers of the great novels who dismantles the very structure of knowing and telling makes his first appearance in *Notes from the House of the Dead*.⁴⁷ Another is that the dismantling of knowledge permits something else to emerge; here, the experience and representation of an unmasterable relationship between noble self and common other, collaboratively engendered, that permits *katorga*, the forced-labor camp, to become the unlikely *mise-en-scène* of emancipation.

With this novel, Dostoevsky initiates his literary exploration of the *ne to* which, in *The Idiot*, refers directly, as we have seen, to the elusive significance of the “democrat.” In *House of the Dead*, the *ne to* is elaborated in reference to the circumstances surrounding the noble narrator's first unmediated contact with the common people (*prostonarod'e*) with whom he must live on a footing of absolute, abject equality for the duration of his sentence. The entwined themes of the encounter with the people and

the radical, even violent, unsettling of social norms connects *Notes from the House of the Dead* and *The Idiot*. The two novels thus provide a chronological framework within which to trace the development of Dostoevsky's democracy, an idiosyncratic vision of the cultural power of commonness which, though unsusceptible to any programmatic realization, motivated the aesthetic experimentation, and most notably the narratological innovations, for which the later novels are celebrated. This idiosyncratic vision subtends what appear to be his wildly vacillating ideological allegiances which have baffled all efforts to place him convincingly in any political camp during the volatile period of Russia's transition into modernity. *Notes from the House of the Dead* sends us back to the writer's state of mind in the aftermath of his arrest as a political criminal who had contemplated the overthrow of serfdom under the influence of utopian socialist thought, and chronicles his sojourn in a world that would shatter his expectations and reveal his former views of the people he had wanted to free as "optical illusion, and nothing more" (PSS 4:199/309).⁴⁸ *The Idiot* takes us forward, to the aftermath of that trauma; here the people's simplicity continues to baffle the would-be theorists of their culture and its significance even as the success of Russia's struggle to enter modernity seems to hinge on the entrainment of its distinctive, still elusive power. The image of the common people's power hovers on the edge of visibility but is never actualized: the *ne to* of democracy remains, then, unconsummated, the last in a series of such images initiated in *Notes from the House of the Dead*. This book is devoted to identifying these figural predecessors in his fictional autobiography and, by tracing their textual permutations, eliciting the political, aesthetic, and spiritual contours of Dostoevsky's democracy.

In *House of the Dead*, the *ne to* refers most immediately to the peculiar state of suspense in which the noble narrator Gorianchikov finds himself. Having (like Dostoevsky) lost his class privileges and suffered exile and incarceration with common criminals, Gorianchikov is to all intents and purposes dead to his former life. But having entered into the new world of the camp, he finds himself unable to enter into its peculiar existence. An "abyss" (*bez dna*) of class difference, unexpectedly profound, separates him ineluctably from the common people despite the physical intimacy in which they are compelled to live and dooms his attempts to forge solidarity despite their common misfortune. In *katorga*, he lives in suspense for the duration of his sentence, dead to his former life, unable to enter a new one, and thus neither this nor that, neither a nobleman nor a common man (*prostoliudin*), but an embodied *ne to*. The abyss of class difference which sustains his suspense is revealed in the course of Gorianchikov's narrative as the matrix of other variants of the *ne to*, those manifestations of the life of the common convicts of *katorga* which baffle his attempts to make sense of and thus enter into the life around him. Foremost among

these is the phenomenon of crime which, along with the people's experience of and ability to endure pain, become for Gorianchikov the key signifiers of class difference, that which distinguishes him from the majority of those around him. Myshkin, in *The Idiot*, is able to discern something about the common people and their religiosity through the constellation of random encounters that punctuate his travels through Russia. But what Gorianchikov discerns through his own unpredictable and often uninterpretable encounters with the common convicts is less a clear apprehension of the people than of the abyss which precludes vision. Gorianchikov sees that what he had formerly seen in them had been an optical illusion of his own making: the people, too, are a *ne to*. This profound conceptual unsettling of both parties to the future reconstitution of a nation, the nobility and the people, their emergence into visibility for each other precisely as a "not that" which, though difficult to see, cannot be overlooked, occurs uniquely in *katorga* and is a prerequisite to the rebirth at issue in *House of the Dead*: not that of an individual (the narrator upon his release) but of the nation. This rebirth, too, because it lies in the future and is only uncertainly glimpsed, is the ultimate *ne to*, an image whose consummation will deliver a new Russia and a new word not yet spoken.

Part 1 of this study thus begins by de-situating the conversion hypothesis which has long dominated critical understanding of Dostoevsky's transitional decade, particularly his experience in the hard-labor camp. The conversion theory proposes that during the writer's incarceration he underwent a spiritual-ideological reversal of his former convictions which, alleviating his alienation from the peasant-convicts, revealed beneath their repellent appearance and behavior a Christian humility that he would later identify with Russianness itself. In this book, conversion remains un consummated, suspended, and rebirth deferred. In the purgatorial space of the hard-labor camp, Gorianchikov progresses not toward triumphant rebirth but instead experiences a deepening estrangement from his environment and its inhabitants. Beyond existential crisis, the noble-convict's estrangement ultimately entails an ontological ambiguity registered in the structure of autobiographical narration itself and which arises from the unresolved question of his crime. Part 1 analyzes the tripartite structure of this first-person narration through which the attenuation of the narrating voice—Gorianchikov's desubjectification, in effect—is accomplished.

Part 2 continues this inquiry into the representation of a dis-integrating autobiographical voice from the perspective of *katorga* as a specific milieu, a chronotope delimited temporally by the sentence (*srok*) and spatially by the stockade. It is filled with stories of violence perpetrated and suffered whose significance Gorianchikov struggles in vain to interpret. Within this milieu, class and ethnic differences have been forcibly neutralized by the disciplinary imposition of an abject equality. Here,

Giorgio Agamben's concepts of "the space of exception" and "homo sacer" offer a useful alternative to the paradigm of incarceration as the scene of religious-ideological conversion.⁴⁹ The chronotope of *katorga*, the house of the dead, literalizes—makes available to the material, sociological, and historical specificities of literary representation—Agamben's philosophical analysis of the space of exception. In so doing, it revises the meaning he attributes to the irreducibility of the bare and abandoned life lived therein. In contrast to Agamben, Dostoevsky portrays *katorga* as a vital medium in which everything is fungible, from the most apparently valueless material object to identities. The exchange and even merging of identities, processes of de- and resubjectification peculiar to the house of the dead, are both conveyed through and realized in the disintegrating consciousness of the autobiographical narrator. This ontology of crime presages that new philosophy of crime for which Gorianchikov calls by nullifying all ready-made points of view about it. At times this nullification of the given perspective suggests the revolutionary potential for a new community that fitfully asserts itself, revealing *katorga* as the unlikely *mise-en-scène* of emancipation. I examine this potential community or "corporation," as the peasant-convicts call it, with reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of "intercorporeity" and Claude Lefort's adaptation of this concept in his idea of "the flesh of the political." Ultimately, however, the novel registers the tenuousness of this new order, its stubborn indeterminacy, and the tentative nature of Gorianchikov's efforts to illuminate it from within its "flesh." Part 2 concludes with an account of Dostoevsky's subsequent attempt to translate his experience of the people—Dostoevsky's democracy—into a pedagogical program, on the one hand, and into the language of the novel, on the other. The conclusion examines the fate of these attempts.

In contrast to his jeremiadic condemnation of the Russian democrat in the 1880 reply to Gradovsky cited above, Dostoevsky predicted, in his *Diary of a Writer* for April 1876, that in the very near future, the power of Russia would exceed that of the great powers of Europe "for one simple reason: they will all be weakened and undermined by the unsatisfied democratic aspirations of a huge segment of their lower-class subjects, their proletariat and their poor. In Russia, however, this absolutely cannot happen: our *demos* [*demos*] is content, and will become even more satisfied insofar as everything is proceeding according to a general disposition or, better yet, according to common consent" (*PSS* 22:122/452). In the next issue of the *Diary*, he expounds his claim for those who are skeptical of its truth. Russia has few remaining "opponents of democratism," he writes, and "the honesty, disinterestedness, forthrightness, and sincerity of the democratism of the majority of Russian society does not admit of any doubt."⁵⁰ In distinction to Europe, "where democratism has up until now

universally declared itself only from below” because the “vanquished (it may be) upper classes are still mounting a terrible resistance,” in Russia “our upper class itself became democratic [*stal demokratischen*] or, rather, of the people [*narodem*], and—who in the world can deny it?” The faltering defensiveness at the end to which Dostoevsky’s readers are dialogically attuned suggests that problems remain; even so, “the temporary tribulations of the demos will certainly improve in the future under the tireless and continual influence of such enormous *principles* (for one cannot call them otherwise) *as the general democratic disposition and general consensus among all Russian people, starting at the very top*” (*PSS* 23:28/500–501; emphases in original). Fifteen years earlier, in 1861, in an article for his journal *Time*, at a moment of high expectation concerning the emancipation of the peasants, Dostoevsky would also write about the need for the upper class to “become democratic” by turning into the common people: “We must now earn the trust of the people; we must love them, we must suffer, we must transform ourselves into them completely [*nado preobrazit’sia v nego vpolne*].” Immediately doubts arise: “Do we know how to do that? Are we capable of doing that, are we up to it?” The answer is confidently affirmative: “we are up to it and we will be up to it. We are optimists, we have faith. Russian society must unite with its native soil and partake of the popular element. It is an absolute condition of its existence; and when something becomes an essential condition, well, it seems it would get done.” And then the return to doubt: “Yes, but how is it to get done?” (*PSS* 19:7–8). The purpose of this book is to discover in his fiction, anterior to the rhetoric of the correspondence and polemical writing, Dostoevsky’s own understanding of what the challenge of becoming democratic really involved.

Certainly Dostoevsky himself did not emerge from the dead house suffused with good will toward the peasant-convicts. In his first letter to his brother, written after his release in 1854, he described them memorably as “a crude, irritated, and embittered people” whose “hatred for the gentry exceeds all bounds”: “They would have devoured us if given the chance.” Dostoevsky recalls a mutual hostility that itself reinforced the prohibition, artistically elaborated in the novel, on reflecting upon one’s crime:

“You gentry, you iron beaks, have pecked us to death. You used to be a gentleman and torment the people, but now you’re the lowest of the low, you’ve become our brother”—that was the theme played over and over for four years. One hundred and fifty enemies who couldn’t stop persecuting us, it was their favorite, a diversion, a pastime, and we were saved from despair only through indifference, moral superiority, which they couldn’t fail to understand and respect, and by not bending to their will. They were always aware that we were above them. They had no conception of our crime. We ourselves kept

silent about it, and for that reason we didn't understand one another so that we had to endure every form of revenge and abuse of the gentry by which they live and breathe.

Dostoevsky's bitterness was by no means unmixed—he also remarks in this letter, in an echo of his 1849 letter to his brother Mikhail, that “people are people everywhere” and how “in prison among the thugs I, in four years, finally discerned human beings” (*otlichil liudei*). He remarks on the surprising variety of popular types, and adds, “What a wonderful people”—a people whom he suggests he “knows pretty well,” and perhaps better than most (*PSS* 28 [I]: 169–70, 172, 173).⁵¹

Nevertheless, Dostoevsky insisted that the common people whom he encountered in *katorga* were unassimilable to any prefabricated sociopolitical vision and unamenable to any totalizing scheme no matter how ostensibly sympathetic to the peasants' plight. The resistance of this figure to assimilation or instrumentalization in the name of any overarching theory or project marks a foundational stage in the literary and philosophical conceptualization of Russian democratic subjectivity. In 1861, in a series of articles warning against the error of cultivating a “theoretical” or “arm-chair” love of the people, whose emancipation was formalized that year, Dostoevsky amplified on the stubbornness of estrangement, experienced as the failure to see and comprehend. “Even our best ‘scholars’ of the life of the people,” he wrote,

still do not fully understand how *wide* and deep the gulf dividing us from the people has become, and they don't understand for the most simple reason: they have never lived with the people, but have lived their own separate life. They will say to us that it's ridiculous to propose such reasons, that everyone knows them. Yes, we'll say, everyone knows; but they know abstractly. They know, for example, that they have lived a separate life; but if they had really known to what degree this life was separate, they wouldn't have believed it. They don't believe it even now. (*PSS* 19:7, emphasis in original)

Dostoevsky goes on to explain that even those observers who have lived with the people, even those who lived with them in their huts, eating their food, wearing their clothes, and performing their labor—those like Dostoevsky, one is compelled to conclude—had only “*looked upon*” them without seeing them, without understanding their “genuine life, the essence of the life, its heart.” This abyss, this yawning gap which remains unbridged and which precludes epistemological certainty and ideological closure alike, is the primary object of aesthetic inquiry in *Notes from the House of the Dead*. It is the source of its complex investigation of the psychological, epistemological, political, and spiritual problem of estrangement, and the matrix of all unconsummated images (*PSS* 19:7; emphasis

in original).⁵² As such, it both enables and delimits Dostoevsky's portrait of Russian democratic subjectivity—in terms of literary practice and history, the development of a national political culture, and aesthetic ideology—with which this book is primarily concerned.

The conversion hypothesis, in denying Dostoevsky's estrangement, disregards both the aesthetic experimentation to which it drove him and the full story of the development of his ideological beliefs. In so doing, it has cast the 1850s—the pivotal decade of exile and vocational recovery—as a dramatic but ideologically moribund one, an era of high emotion met with foregone conclusions.⁵³ But Dostoevsky's estrangement—rendered in his literary and polemical writings of 1861 by a resolutely defamiliarized narrating self who struggles to see the common people—is worth honoring with sustained critical attention for several reasons. Acknowledging both the experience and the artistic representation of Dostoevsky's estrangement opens the possibility of recovering a more nuanced and accurate picture of the writer's ideological development. It is equally crucial to our understanding of his vocational trajectory, as well as the relationship of that trajectory to the preeminent political event of his time, peasant emancipation. Finally, his estrangement frames the central aesthetic challenge he faced from this point forward: the representation of peasant culture as that which could not be fully seen because it had not yet become culturally visible to a reform-minded elite. The exigencies of forging a representational practice which necessarily preceded its own object constituted both the formal and polemical ground for his artistic experimentation. The epistemological and aesthetic challenge of the people's commonness itself drove Dostoevsky to transcend the well-established paradigm of its sentimental celebration in literature from Karamzin to Turgenev. In the context of discussing the "simple people," Dostoevsky wrote to his brother upon his release from prison that experience had taught him to be "more afraid of a simple man than a complex one" (*PSS* 28 [I]: 172). He continued to define simplicity unsentimentally, as "the enemy of analysis" (*vrag analiza*), the ultimate estrangement, but the harbinger of emancipation nonetheless (*PSS* 23:143).