

Title: Averted Execution and Trauma in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*  
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In Dostoevsky's letter to his brother Mikhail hours after his reprieve from execution, he asserts that this experience will lead to his regeneration, and that he has been "reborn in another form." His subsequent repeated fictional and non-fictional references to the ordeal, however, show that it had an unforeseen traumatic impact on him. In *The Idiot*, he undertakes his most detailed examination of this incident and the theme of execution in general, largely through Myshkin's anecdotes on the topic in Part I.

Analyses of these anecdotes, while acknowledging the importance of their autobiographical source, tend to interpret them primarily as a stepping-stone for larger themes, such as Dostoevsky's quest to overcome the boundaries of death (Liza Knapp), or his interest in the moral importance of observing even the most horrific incidents (Robert Louis Jackson). While not disagreeing with these interpretations, I will argue that, given the unsettlingly direct quality of these references, they also represent an effort on the author's part to overcome his disturbance from the averted execution, and more broadly to explore the phenomenon of trauma. Through Myshkin's accounts, Dostoevsky examines problems such as the challenge of living productively in the aftermath of trauma, secondary trauma involving identification with the victim, and using aesthetic means (painting, storytelling) to attempt to overcome a traumatic experience. As I will try to show, Dostoevsky's exploration of origins of and responses to trauma anticipates contemporary efforts to study trauma resulting from twentieth-century atrocities such as the Holocaust.