

Title: Transcendence and the Novel: The Problem of Representation in *The Idiot*

Author: Tom Roberts, Stanford University

Episodes of visionary experience, or transcendence, challenge the representational parameters of the novel, with its traditional commitment to mimetic realism, and focus on conventional social reality (Clayton 1987: 1-2). Yet Dostoevsky's novels, and particularly *The Idiot*, often exceed such normative features of the genre, leading Georg Lukács to famously declare that Dostoevsky, in straining toward potential, rather than existing realities, did not even write novels (Lukács 1978: 152-3).

Short of following Lukács to this extreme conclusion, I explore in this paper how Dostoevsky both addresses and thematizes the challenge of representing transcendence in *The Idiot*. Among the passages discussed, I focus on Prince Myshkin's experience of the epileptic "aura" in Part II, Chapter 5 as the locus of his visionary experience. Dostoevsky apparently conceived of transcendence and representation as a conjoined problem, as notebook references to this issue increase amidst the planning of this section of the novel. Building on Robin Feuer Miller's analysis of the integral function of the narrator in the work (Miller 1981), the paper details Dostoevsky's narrative strategies for conveying Myshkin's visionary experience. As the timeless, ideal quality of Myshkin's experience challenges the diachronic, finite dimensions of the novelistic world, it transcends direct, discursive presentation. Rather, the content of visionary experience is "performed" by the narrative, which approximates the experience via aesthetic equivalents based in narrative technique. Meanwhile, this formal tension, between transcendent experience and novelistic reality, finds dramatic expression in Myshkin's growing alienation from his personal social reality, and even the Dostoevskian narrator (Murav 1992: 84-8). Ultimately, just as Myshkin's visionary experience, and profound faith, stand in opposition to social convention, and even empirical reality, *The Idiot* issues an analogous, formal challenge to the conventional scope and structure of the novel.

References

- Clayton, Jay. *Romantic Vision and the Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978.
- Miller, Robin Feuer. *Dostoevsky and 'The Idiot': Author, Narrator, and Reader*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Murav, Harriet. *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992.