

Referring to the Face: Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* in the History of Physiognomy¹

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When I talk about Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, I make it a rule to refer to it as the world's greatest novel on love at first sight. Just think of what happens on the first day of the novel: Prince Myshkin spends only a few hours with the Epanchins, but that was enough to decide the fate of their youngest daughter, Aglaya. Characters in this novel are fascinated by, even obsessed with, each other's faces. The second of the Epanchin sisters, Adelaida, calls the prince "an expert in faces"—he replies that he is very attentive to faces now.² *The Idiot* is above all a novel about faces and it poses the question: What is the meaning of the human face?

Consider Myshkin's first encounter with the heroine's face. When he sees the photographic portrait of Nastasya Filippovna, Ganya asks whether he likes such a woman. Myshkin replies:

"An astonishing face!" replied the prince. "And I'm convinced that her fate is no ordinary one. It's a gay face, but she has suffered terribly, eh? It speaks in her eyes, these two little bones, the two points under her eyes where the cheeks begin. It's a proud face, terribly proud, and I don't know whether she's kind or not. Ah, if only she were kind! Everything would be saved!"³

His reply is, however, confusing in some respects. First, we are not sure about the referent. It is slightly vague what Myshkin means by "the two points under her eyes"—are they moles, or spots? Can we fully imagine the shape of those "two little bones?" Second, the reader might be a little embarrassed by the rashness of Myshkin's judgment. Would it not be impolite to judge a woman so hastily in the presence of her potential fiancé? What are the conditions of such mode of communication about faces, which seems to us today too frank and candid?

Tatyana Kasatkina suggests that in these descriptions we should recognize the icon of Our Lady of the Sign, which is known as Weeping Icon at Novgorod.⁴ I would rather get a more secular perspective and situate these questions in the context of the history of physiognomy—i.e., the discursive practices of interpreting human faces.

The rise and fall of physiognomy in Western civilization is well-known.⁵ The modern revival of this traditional subject is attributed to the Swiss pastor, Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801), and the enthusiasm he aroused in people all over Europe, including leading novelists such as Honoré de Balzac and Charles Dickens. Dostoevsky was no exception. Konstantin Barsht, in his pathbreaking studies of drawings and calligraphy in Dostoevsky's notebooks, insists that the physiognomic laboratory developed by the writer during his work on

The Idiot could not have been created without knowledge of Lavaterian physiognomy.⁶ However, there is little evidence to show that Dostoevsky knew Lavater. There exists only the memoir of Dr. Yanovsky, which suggests that young Dostoevsky was familiar with Lavater's ideas through the medical books he borrowed from Yanovsky, which were written "according to the old system of Gall."⁷

But we need only glance at his notebooks for *The Idiot*, in which Dostoevsky often drew human faces, to be convinced of the importance of the physiognomic imagination for him. In his notebook of 1867, there is an image of his protagonist (Fig. 1). Barsht comments that the drawing was apparently done on a clean sheet of paper and completed earlier than Dostoevsky's notations, which form something like a frame for the image.⁸ Characters referring to each other's faces in *The Idiot*, thus, turn out to be the results of physiognomic practices by the writer. Bakhtin remarked that Dostoevsky began not with ideas, but with idea-heroes of a dialogue, i.e., with voices.⁹ We might add, after Bakhtin, that Dostoevsky began his work not only with idea-voices but also with idea-faces.

Furthermore, I would like to propose a comparison with a game which will, I believe, lead us to a greater understanding of Dostoevsky's physiognomic imagination. The game, which has not attracted much attention of Dostoevsky scholars, is called the portrait game.¹⁰ The portrait game was invented by Ivan Turgenev and was first played with Madame Viardot and her guests at Courtavenel in 1856. It was a kind of parlor game which consisted of sketching portraits and interpreting them. It went like this: first Turgenev, a talented artist, would sketch a portrait from his imagination, usually in profile. He would then pass the paper to another person in the room, who would be required to study it. This study would consist of discerning the idiosyncrasies, traits, habits, occupation, and tastes of the person drawn. This second person would then write down the result of their examination



Fig. 1. From the Notebook of 1867. Barsht, *The Drawings and Calligraphy of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, 180.

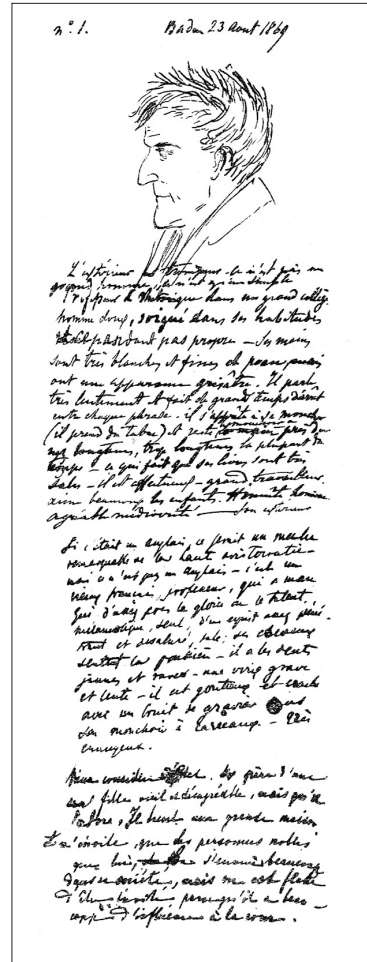


Fig. 2. A leaf of the portrait game. *Литературное наследство*, т. 73, кн. 1 (М.: Наука, 1964), 433.

beneath the portrait. The sheet is then folded over and passed on, so the next participant can do the same. When each person, Turgenev himself included, had written their characterization of the head underneath, the sheet was handed to Turgenev to be read aloud.¹¹ Later in Baden-Baden, an additional step was added: the stupidest, falsest interpretation, along with the wittiest and most convincing one, was decided by vote. The author of the worst, it is reported, was disclosed and mockingly awarded a medal (“*la grande médaille d’honneur*”) for their complete stupidity (“*la bêtise la plus complète*”).¹²

There is no evidence that Dostoevsky knew the game, but his drawings framed by texts and sheets of the portrait game have something in common. Moreover, though the game is indeed just a private pastime enjoyed in an intimate circle, it seems to me to encapsulate the semiotic traits of the physiognomic imagination at the time. A sign (i.e., face) is produced, interpretations are made, and the qualities of these interpretations are judged based on the referent (i.e., the person whose face is portrayed) which does not exist in reality. The sign is credited with referential power, and Turgenev does not doubt of the objectivity of the imaginary referent when he says that Madame Viardot is always truer (*вернее*) than others in the game.¹³ The typical nineteenth-century confidence in signification, which we find difficult to share today, is on full display in Turgenev’s remarks here. It should be the same mysterious confidence that the reader recognizes in Myshkin’s reading of the portrait of Nastasya Filippovna, his reference to “the two points under the eyes.”

And it is exactly this confidence in meaning, which is irrevocably undermined in the second half of *The Idiot*. While Prince Myshkin was such an eloquent physiognomist in the beginning of the novel, the reader finds him speechless at the sight of another’s face toward the end. *The Idiot* was written at the time when the “Lavaterian” phase in the history of Western physiognomy was coming to an end.¹⁴ Here, in this quote from Myshkin’s last conversation with Evgeny Pavlovich, the prince tries to defend himself by referring to the face of Nastasya Filippovna:

“ . . . but there was one thing you left out, because you don’t know it: I was looking at *her face!* That morning, in her portrait, I already couldn’t bear it [...] I . . . I’m afraid of her face!” he added with extreme fear.

“Afraid?”

“Yes; she’s—mad!” he whispered, turning pale.¹⁵

Leslie A. Johnson cites this passage and considers the ethical meaning of the face-to-face encounter in the novel from the Levinasian perspective.¹⁶ Andrew Wachtel suggests reading *The Idiot* as a novel-photograph which explores the impact of the medium on the human experience.¹⁷ Encouraged by their penetrating insights, I would like here to concentrate on some points.

First, on the devaluation of the face as meaningful sign. The prince has almost nothing to say about the face except for the nonsensical cry, “she’s mad!” It is no use delving into her

madness; his confidence in meaning is lost, and the face, formerly full of speech, seems to have turned into a mute surface deprived of signification.

Second, on the peculiarity of the temporal structure of Myshkin's experience. Please note Myshkin's confession that he could not bear her face *even that first morning*. Japanese critic Hideo Kobayashi commented as early as 1935: "It is not Nastasya that bothers Myshkin but her face [...] What is at stake is the photograph of Nastasya that has become his *idée-fixe*, and she remains for him the same as she was in the photo until the end."¹⁸ The image of Nastasya Filippovna was such a shock to Myshkin in the first instance ("his *idée-fixe*") that he had to go back to it repeatedly ever afterward. Think of the climax of the duel between Nastasya Filippovna and Aglaya. The narrator, instead of describing the prince's reaction, refers to his past words concerning the face of Nastasya Filippovna. It reads: "He only saw before him the desperate, insane face, because of which, as he had once let slip to Aglaya, 'his heart was forever pierced.'"¹⁹

"He once said to Aglaya: 'My heart was forever pieced'"—that is all the narrator has to say about him. The face evades meaning in the present; one can only make out the meaning with reference to the past. Note that this is exactly the psychoanalytic definition of "trauma"—whatever experience "it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate fully into a meaningful context."²⁰ It can be assimilated only afterwards, by deferred action. *The Idiot* stands at the end of the age of physiognomy and predicts the age of psychoanalysis.

Third, on the shift from "referring" to "pointing." We have been talking so far about characters referring to each other, but now at the end of the novel we cannot—we can instead talk about "pointing." The narrator of *The Idiot* follows the above passage with this: "He could no longer bear it and with entreaty and reproach turned to Aglaya, *pointing* to Nastasya Filippovna: "It's not possible! She's . . . so unhappy!"²¹

Pointing to others is rude, to be sure, but it was the only gesture left to Myshkin; one which calls into question the concept of "reference" itself²². We might argue that one points to the face of the Other when one loses the confidence in the physiognomic potential for referentiality of the face. When Lizaveta Prokofyevna points with emotion to the sick prince in the last page of the novel, she epitomizes the whole problematic of the novel.

1 This is the revised version of the paper presented at XVII Symposium of the International Dostoevsky Society at Boston University on July 18, 2019.

2 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2003), 66, 75.

3 *The Idiot*, 36.

4 Татьяна Касаткина, *О творящей природе слова: Онтологичность слова в творчестве Ф. М. Достоевского как основа «реализма в высшей смысле»* (М.: ИМЛИ РАН, 2004), 253. And November 27, the first day of the novel and birthday of Nastasya Filippovna is, as Kasatkina points out, the day of commemoration of the Holy

Theotokos "Of the Sign."

- 5 See among others Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Norton, 1974) and Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982).
- 6 Konstantin Barsht, *The Drawings and Calligraphy of Fyodor Dostoevsky: From Image to Word*, trans. by Stephen Charles Frauzel (Bergamo: Lemma, 2016), 198.
- 7 Ф.М. Достоевский в воспоминаниях современников, т. 1 (М.: Художественная литература, 1990), 239.
- 8 Barsht, *The Drawings and Calligraphy*, 198.
- 9 М. М. Бахтин, "1961 год. Заметки", *Собр. соч.*, т. 5 (М.: Русские словари, 1996), 355.
- 10 Excerpt for the passing mention by James L. Rice in his *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History* (Ardis: Ann Arbor, 1984), 133.
- 11 Marion Mainwaring, "Introduction," Mainwaring, ed., *The Portrait Game* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 12–13.
- 12 *ibid.*, 18.
- 13 Letter to Botkin, 25 October/6 November 1856. Cited from Андре Мазон, "«Игра в портреты»", *Литературное наследово*, т. 73, кн. 1 (М.: Наука, 1964), 428.
- 14 Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, xiv.
- 15 *The Idiot*, 582.
- 16 Leslie A. Johnson, "The Face of the Other in *Idiot*," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 4 (Winter 1991), 867.
- 17 Andrew Wachtel, "Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*: The Novel as Photograph," *History of Photography*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Autumn 2002), 206.
- 18 Hideo Kobayashi, "Hakuchi ni tsuite, I (On *The Idiot*, I)," Shintei Kobayash Hideo Zenshu (*Complete Works of Hideo Kobayashi, new edition*), vol. 6 (Tokyo: Shincho-sha, 1978), 99. See also Zinaida Malenko and James J. Gebhard, "The Artistic Use of Portraits in Dostoevskij's *Idiot*," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1961), 245–246.
- 19 *The Idiot*, 571.
- 20 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 112.
- 21 *The Idiot*, 571. Italics added.
- 22 That reminds us of Roland Barthes' comment on the photographic experience: "Show your photographs to someone—he will immediately show you his: "Look, this is my brother; this is me as a child," etc.; the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of "Look," "See," "Here it is"; it points a finger at certain vis-a-vis, and cannot escape this pure deictic language." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London, Vintage, 2000), 5.