Levinas’s “Face” and “Other” in The Idiot: Embodiment and Betrayal

Famously known for returning ethics to the field of theory, Emmanuel Levinas often looks to great works of literature to illustrate his philosophies. One text Levinas uses consistently is The Brothers Karamazov, as he quotes it directly in Ethics and Infinity (98). The influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky (and Russian literature in general) on Levinas has been written about for years, and many scholars have expanded on this connection between Levinas’s theories and The Brothers Karamazov, particularly in regard to Levinas’s theory of the face. However, few articles have been written about Levinas’s face in The Idiot. This is surprising as Val Vinokurov argues, “almost every one of his [Dostoevsky’s] novels is really a series of face-to-face encounters” (23). If we accept Vinokurov’s claim of the “series of face-to-face encounters,” then The Idiot should display Levinas’s principles, as well. In fact, of Dostoevsky’s works, The Idiot may be the best representative of Levinas’s theory of the face. By reading The Idiot through Levinas’s theory of the face and the responsibility it entails, we see that not only does Prince Myshkin perfectly embody the execution of Levinas’s theory, but the continued violation of this theory drives the plot of the novel. Additionally, Myshkin becomes a victim of others violating the face, as he is placed in a position in which, no matter what he does, he violates the face, becoming a perpetrator himself.

In order to understand how Myshkin fulfills Levinas’s theory of the face, we must first understand the theory. Levinas describes the function of the face as, “it requires me. The face looks at me, calls out to me. It claims me. What does it ask for? . . . responsibility for the other” (Alterity and Transcendence 163). The “other” is “the right of the other man. A right with respect to which I am never released! Hence infinite responsibility for the other” (127). Furthermore, “The first word of the face is the ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ It is an order. There is a commandment in
the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all . . . I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call” (Ethics and Infinity 89). In its simplest terms, the face of another person, of an “other,” requires complete accountability, care, and concern for it. The face shows that we have an ethical responsibility for others, hence the “Thou shalt not kill.” The face is also a vehicle for vulnerability, in its “destitut[ion].” It is an undeniable responsibility for others and a requirement of morality; it is the epitome of putting others’ needs above your own. In the face we see the basic humanity of people and their fundamental rights as humans.

In an 1896 letter to his friend Maikov, Dostoevsky describes an idea he has up for an upcoming novel, which would become The Idiot; “This idea is—to portray a wholly beautiful individual” (Mochulsky 344). If we extend this idea to applying Levinas’s theory to Dostoevsky’s novel, this would mean Myshkin is the perfect embodiment or fulfillment of honoring Levinas’s face. Vinokurov argues that Myshkin’s “relationship to the face has more to do with emotion” than anything else, and as we move through The Idiot, we will see that Myshkin is always obligated to the other and it drives and controls his every action (24).

Dostoevsky immediately establishes Myshkin’s fascination and obligation to faces in Myshkin’s first encounter with the Epanchin women. In her article, “The Face of the Other in Idiot,” Leslie A. Johnson observes that Adelaida immediately senses within Myshkin an ability to “see” and that Myshkin can teach her to “see,” too (869). The direct line reads, “I don’t know how to look . . . The prince did learn to look abroad” (Dostoevsky 58). Mrs. Epanchin immediately bristles, wondering what Adelaida means by being unable to look, “What do you mean, you don’t know how to look? You have eyes, so look” (58). Mrs. Epanchin misses the intuition Adelaida feels in Myshkin and his ability to look beyond the physical and see within an
individual—to be called by and obligated to someone’s face. Johnson claims, “what the prince has come to teach is a way of seeing the human face” (869). His purpose in the novel is to exemplify what honoring someone’s otherness is—what the true honoring of the face is.

Furthermore, Adelaida is surprised when Myshkin suggests she paint a face, as “Had the prince suggested a landscape, a still life, even a portrait, then Adelaida, that artistic daughter of good family and amiable disposition, would have known how to see it. The genre would have specified the tropes by which she could thematize and appropriate her subject” (869). Myshkin brings an entirely new perspective to the Epanchins, one entirely different from what they are used to.

However, as Adelaida cannot approach painting in this new manner Myshkin suggests, she asks several questions, “How should the face be portrayed? As just a face? What sort of face?” (Dostoevsky 63). Surprisingly, rather than describing the physical features of the face he proposes, Myshkin describes the emotions and thoughts of a man before his execution, quite different from what Adelaida was expecting (64–66). Myshkin’s description shows that, once again, he sees beyond the physical into the humanity of a person. Myshkin does not describe a detached, merely physical representation of a person, but rather the emotional, humane state of a person. Vinokurov supports this idea in his article “The End of Consciousness and the Ends of Consciousness: A Reading of Dostoevsky's the Idiot and Demons After Levinas” by saying, “Myshkin is someone who only truly loves persons as manifestations of an iconic meta-face and not as concrete and individual faces” (25). Vinokurov reemphasizes what we already know from Levinas, that Myshkin sees beyond a person’s physical face to the humanity that requires infinite respect and obligation from other humans. Myshkin does not focus on the physical but on the “meta,” what cannot be seen and what is beyond the physical face. Myshkin always sees and
feels obligation toward the other, and “holds himself responsible before it” (Johnson 869). Myshkin also states he knows the Epanchin girls’ faces, refusing to expound when asked for details (Dostoevsky 66). However, from his insights with Adelaida and our knowledge of Levinas, we can determine that Myshkin has already seen into the humanity and hearts of the Epanchins, seeing their “faces” and feeling obligated and called by all of them to put their needs above his own.

An ideal example of Myshkin’s devotion to the face and the other is his story with Marie. While no explicit references to the face appear in this section of the novel, Myshkin’s actions align with his later treatment of Nastasya Filippovna and fulfilling the role of honoring Levinas’s face and other. Myshkin begins his love of Marie with a kiss, telling her “that I had kissed her not because I was in love with her but because I felt very sorry for her, and that from the very start I had never regarded her as guilty but only as unfortunate” (70). Myshkin’s actions stem from his moral obligation and pity to the other he sees in Marie. This total obligation and answer to a call from Marie’s “face” cause Myshkin to speak with the children and change their attitude toward her. The children no longer tease and abuse Marie, instead they visit her while she’s sick “to embrace and kiss her” (71). Myshkin’s love and obligation to Marie, although it stems from pity, inspires the children and because of their kindness, Marie “died almost happy . . . [even though] till the very end she considered herself a great criminal” (73). Myshkin sees Marie’s true face and with the help of the children, fulfills the obligation her otherness deserves. In addition, after this story, Myshkin reveals that because of his experience with Marie and the children he’s “very attentive to faces now” and proceeds to describe each of the Epanchin daughters’ personalities through their faces, further demonstrating his perceptiveness of the other through the physical face (75).
However, the most significant and influential face relation in *The Idiot* is between Nastasya Filippovna and Myshkin’s strong reaction to her portrait. Of her portrait, Myshkin says, “‘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, those two little bones, the two points under her eyes where the cheeks begin’” (36). Myshkin’s assessment of Nastasya’s face is unique because he discerns her character and her life through it, unlike any of the other characters in the novel. Adelaida sees the power of Nastasya’s beauty and Totsky, General Epanchin, Rogozhin, and Ganya all see opportunity in Nastasya’s face, but Myshkin is the only one who sees who she is in her face (80). Later at a party that evening, Myshkin says to Nastasya, “I saw your portrait today, and it was as if I recognized a familiar face. It seemed to me at once as if you had already called me” (168).

Later in the novel, Myshkin again recounts his initial encounter with Nastasya’s face, “I was looking at her face! That morning, in her portrait, I already couldn’t bear it” (582). At the end of their conversation, Evgeny Pavlovich wonders, “what was the meaning of this face that he [Myshkin] was afraid of and that he loved so much” (583–4). In Nastasya Filippovna, Myshkin sees the violation of the face she’s endured by the men in her life (a topic we will discuss later) and feels the pull and obligation of Levinas’s theory to help her. Myshkin sees beyond the physical attributes of Nastasya to her right as human for proper treatment. In Levinas’s terms, Nastasya’s face calls Myshkin to his responsibility, and he responds by offering her a way out of depravity through marriage, when he does not know her besides her portrait, and he stays true to that promise, even as he acknowledges that he does not love her but only pities her (168; 589).

The final event that shows how Myshkin embodies Levinas’s theory of the face is Myshkin’s reaction to Nastasya’s murder by Rogozhin. Levinas says, “The first word of the face
is the ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me” (*Ethics and Infinity* 89). The first function of the face is to call us to humanity, to resist the taking of life. When this fundamental principle of the face is violated, Myshkin’s health relapses (613). In fact, immediately upon seeing Nastasya’s dead body, Myshkin begins “trembling” and Rogozhin asks if he’s likely to have a “fit” associated with his “disorder” (607). Being so closely associated with murder, with such a violent violation of the face, Myshkin cannot recover. Even while he’s with Rogozhin, Myshkin’s legs cease to function “from fear,” he says (608). The violation of the face literally makes Myshkin physically and mentally unwell.

Unfortunately, because Myshkin’s character is the attempt “to portray a wholly beautiful individual” and the embodiment of Levinas’s theory of the face, it means that every other character in the novel is not, and the other characters’ constant violation of other characters’ faces and otherness drives the plot of *The Idiot*, eventually placing Myshkin in a situation where he becomes a violator of the face himself. The first instance of this occurs with Totsky’s violation of Nastasya’s Filippovna’s face in her youth. Nastasya’s forced position as Totsky’s mistress sets up the plot for Totsky and General Epanchin wanting Ganya to marry Nastasya so Totsky can marry Alexandra. Nastasya is only seen as a problem to be solved, instead of an other that demands infinite responsibility and respect. Not only is Nastasya’s otherness violated by Totsky, but it is additionally violated by General Epanchin, Ganya, and Rogozhin through their endless deal-making and auctioning of her, as in the party scene at Nastasya’s (41; 49; 160–161). None of these men actually want Nastasya for who she truly is but for what they can gain from her. Rogozhin claims to love her, but it’s really only dangerous passion, as Myshkin comments,
“He’d marry her, and a week later he might well put a knife in her” (37). Nastasya is merely a bargaining commodity for them and a means to get what they want.

This shuffling of people in and out of marriage proposals creates a breeding ground for the violation of the face, as few of these people actually want to be married to their chosen partners. For example, Ganya entangles Myshkin in his desired relationship with Aglaya. As Aglaya observes to Myshkin, “he knows and yet hesitates; he knows and still asks for a guarantee. He’s unable to make a decision on faith . . . he wants me to give him hope in me” (84). Rather than wanting to be with Aglaya because he loves her, Ganya simply wants a way out of his engagement to Nastaya Filioppovna because he has come to despise Nastasya. By disrespecting his responsibility to Aglaya’s otherness, Ganya creates an environment in which Myshkin and Aglaya become friends, allowing Myshkin and Aglaya to form the bond that sets Myshkin up fail in upholding his perfect otherness to all. If Myshkin had not come to know and love Aglaya, he would not have to choose between Aglaya and Nastasya.

Furthermore, although Nastasya “did not consider herself guilty of anything,” the impact of Totsky violating her face when she was younger shows itself in her inability to follow through with Myshkin’s offer of marriage (49). Despite her assertions of innocence, Nastasya leaves Myshkin twice, once minutes before their wedding, and Rogozhin multiple times. Rogozhin tells Myshkin, “she thinks it’s impossible for her to marry you, because she’d supposedly disgrace you and ruin your whole life. ‘I’m you-know-what,’ she says. To this day she maintains it herself.” Rogozhin goes on to say, “She ran away from you then, because she suddenly realized how much she loves you. It was beyond her to be with you . . . So she wants to marry me out of spite” (215–216). Nastasya herself states, “I’m not worthy of him [Myshkin]” in her conflict with Aglaya (570). Despite her attempts to distance herself from her past, Nastasya cannot allow
herself happiness with Myshkin because she does not believe herself worthy enough to be with him, even though she is the victim of her otherness being violated. She is sincerely convinced of her unworthiness of Myshkin and cannot imagine someone honoring her personhood and humanity because all she has experienced is violation from the men in her life (remember the party scene earlier where the men basically auction her off). Nastasya’s inability to commit to Myshkin drives the plot because it dictates where Myshkin goes (he follows her all over Russia) and influences with whom he interacts, as seen with Nastasya’s correspondence with Aglaya.

Nastasya actively tries to destroy any possibility of her face receiving its proper respect by writing to Aglaya, urging Aglaya to marry Myshkin as an attempt to remove Nastasya’s opportunity for happiness (568). Nastasya’s inability to accept Myshkin because of Totsky violating her face as a young woman causes Nastasya to push Aglaya and Myshkin’s relationship, hoping that once Myshkin is married Nastasya can be free of the possibility of her own happiness. However, Myshkin’s obligation to Nastasya while being pushed toward Aglaya places Myshkin in a position where he must violate a face—either Nastasya or Aglaya’s.

The crucial moment comes when Aglaya, determined to assert herself in the situation, visits Nastasya Filippovna’s home. At the end of their confrontation, both women look to the Myshkin, expecting him to make his choice between the two. Myshkin, however, does not see a choice between two women who love him, but the never-ending call of one face in particular.

But he may not have understood all the force of this challenge, even certainly did not, one may say. 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.’ He could no longer bear it and with an entreaty and reproach turned to Aglaya, pointing to Nastasya Filippovna:
“It’s not possible! She’s . . . so unhappy!” (571)

Seeing his betrayal in choosing Nastasya’s face over Aglaya’s in Aglaya’s reaction as she “covered her face with her hands,” Myshkin immediately tries to comfort Aglaya, but he is stopped by Nastasya clutching him from behind (572). Nastasya then occupies all his attention in her hysteries, “stroking her dear head and face with both hands, like a little child” (572). However, Myshkin cannot endure his having to choose one face over another, and we see his turmoil in his conversation with Evgeny Pavlovich. In his conversation with Evgeny, we see, “The prince is simply profligate toward the face, and thus unable to live with the politics, the agony and violence of choosing between faces” (Vinokurov 28). Myshkin cannot live with his having to make a choice between two faces—his inability to honor both Nastasya and Aglaya at the same time. Myshkin consistently insists that Aglaya will “understand . . . She’ll understand that it’s all not that, but something completely, completely different!” (582). Myshkin again references his marrying Nastasya Filippovna because “she wants it” and how he “couldn’t bear Nastasya Filippovna’s face” when the two women demanded he choose between them (582). Furthermore, Myshkin claims he wants to love both of them, again insisting that Aglaya will “understand.” Asking, “Can she really still have the same face as when she ran out?” (583). Here we see Myshkin’s vain belief that other people respond to the face as he does, and Evgeny censures him by saying, “Aglaya Ivanovna loved as a woman, as a human being, not as . . . an abstract spirit” (583). Myshkin cannot understand Aglaya’s love because he does not love selfishly. He only loves in obligation and responsibility to the face, whereas those around him continually violate the face he honors consistently.

Myshkin also sees his betrayal in Nastasya’s face as he continues to meet, in an attempt to repair the damage after choosing Nastasya, with the Epanchins. “He noticed, however, that
Nastasya Filippovna knew and understood only too well what Aglaya meant to him. She did not say anything, but he saw her ‘face’ at those times when she occasionally caught him, in the beginning, on the point of going to the Epanchins’” (590). This section is particularly significant because Dostoevsky places quotations around “face,” indicating its significance. Myshkin is not just seeing Nastasya’s physical face here, but her deep unhappiness that he cannot fully honor her face while trying to honor Aglaya’s, as well. By trying to be fully responsible and honorable to both faces, Myshkin ends up unfulfilling both.

The last and ultimate violation of the face, as discussed earlier, is Rogozhin’s murder of Nastasya Filippovna. Referring to the Hans Holbein painting discussed in the novel, “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb,” Johnson claims this painting “prompts us to ponder not only the meaning of the mortal body, but the meaning of a violated face as well” (868). While Nastasya’s body does not physically resemble Christ in the brutality of the wounds, her face and otherness have been just as cruelly abused. This abuse drives the plot of the novel as Nastasya becomes the figure around whom all the characters’ lives center. Without the violation of her face by Totsky at the beginning of her life, much of the novel never would have happened.

Unfortunately, unlike Marie, Myshkin is unable to save Nastasya Filippovna through his ability to see past a seduced, abused, objectified girl to the humanity and goodness calling Myshkin from inside Nastasya. Myshkin’s failure to save Nastasya may even cause some readers to question whether Myshkin even embodies the honoring of the face through Levinas’s terms or if Dostoevsky succeeds in “portray[ing] a wholly beautiful individual” (Mochulsky 344). However, what Dostoevsky shows us through Nastasya’s death is that Myshkin is attentive to the needs of the face to the very end. Myshkin stays with Rogozhin, now a murderer, in order to keep Rogozhin calm throughout the night, “caressing and soothing” his face until they are discovered (Dostoevsky 611). Even after the tragedy of Nastasya’s death, Myshkin still answers
the call of the face and the other before him, Rogozhin. Rather than leaving Rogozhin and reporting him to the police, Myshkin stays with him all night to “quietly touch his head, his hair, stroke it and stroke his cheeks” (611). Myshkin even loves the murderer’s face. Through Myshkin and his acts in The Idiot, we see Dostoevsky inviting us to answer the same call of the face Levinas describes, as the supreme responsibility to humanity. Dostoevsky asks us to look continually outward and answer to the people surrounding us, just like Myshkin.
Works Cited


