

THE THESES OF THE PhD DISSERTATION

GERGELY SOLTI

DOSTOEVSKY: *THE IDIOT*

THE CHARACTER OF MYSHKIN IN LIGHT OF THE LITERARY NARRATION

BUDAPEST

2008

Research Topics and Preceding Scientific Results

Our fundamental examination in the dissertation focuses on the main character of *The Idiot*, on Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin, on the hero with whom Dostoevsky intended to formulate the “positive beauty”. The contemporary critics explained the ambivalence of the literary character as a conflict between the society and the idea described by the writer, while the following critical interpretations perceived it from different points of view, most primarily as an instrument of Dostoevsky’s poetical intention. In the dissertation we review the classical critical lines of the interpretation of *The Idiot* (M. M. Bakhtin, A. P. Skaftymov, G. M. Fridlender); based on the notes of the complete edition of Dostoevsky’s works we follow those scientific topics raised, which were appropriately continued in the present day examination of the novel.

We present the current tendencies of *The Idiot*’s interpretations through the written scientific forums which facilitated the Dostoevsky research to initiate a systematic and international dialogue within the framework of the research of Russian literature and literary science, see publications such as *Достоевский. Материалы и исследования* and its modern continuation, the periodical *Достоевский и мировая культура. Альманах*. On the one hand we review the further modern tendencies of the research history based on an international essay collection published in 2001, exploring the actual research fields and placing the traditional research topics in new perspectives (edited by T. A. Kasatkina). On the other hand, following the scholarly activities of The International Dostoevsky Society, we cover the lectures of its 13th international symposium, organized in the summer of 2007 under the title of *F. M. Dostoevsky in the Context of Cultural Dialogues*, and we present how the old, “classical” research topics can be put in new perspectives by enforcing different aspects.

Our objective is to establish such a “new perspective” in our research, hence we make an attempt to construe the hero’s poetical character definitely in the process of the formation of meaning in the literary text, and at the same time examine him in the context of literature. Consequently, we examine Myshkin not in connection with the genre of the novel or Dostoevsky’s hero type in general, we do not approach him on the basis of his psychological motivation, and we do not “compile” the history of his genesis. The main hero of the novel is the primary mediator of the poetic meaning, thus the different poetical lines organized in the thematic representation and the metaphorical exposition can be integrated into a system through his character.

Approach and Methodology

We connect the problem of creating the hero’s character to the question of *narration*, and we try to show this connection at several levels of the *shaping story*. In order to achieve this, we refer to and build on the relevant results of theoretical works which, within the framework of the poetic approach

of the work of art, offer a point of reference to consider the poetic mobilization of the literary character in the explanation of events and in a wider semantic space. In case of connecting the literary character with the question of *narration* at several levels (relying on the approaches of B. V. Tomashevsky, V. Y. Propp, O. M. Freidenberg and Y. M. Lotman), we consider the poetic phenomenon of the *hero* in a broader sense than the mere definition of the character and his function defined at the level of events. This extension can be produced as a result of specifying the concept of the *story* and differentiating its levels.

We regard the *story* as a chain of events which can relate to the specifically represented plot line; at the level of the presentation of the events Myshkin several times becomes a story teller. In this way, the character of the hero can be interpreted in connection with not only the story, but also its telling, thus the *story* itself will be combined with the category of *story telling* also at the level of the plot. However, the *story* can also be identified as a story connected to a mythological, symbolical or intertextual figure which is projected on Myshkin's character, thus it will be embedded in the interpretation of his plot story. These "stories" which are not introduced or not completely presented at the level of events are formulated in different poetical methods. This embedding into the "plot" results in the fact that the semantic boundaries of the story substantially exceed the range of meaning perceivable by the presentation of the events. In this context intermediality (in particular *visuality* in the novel) can also be examined. Connecting the symbolic level of the story (Cf. a "shift" in the story) to the intertextual or intermedial levels (applying the primary meaning of the event to other levels of meaning) and examining the relationship between them, we can consider the forms of *the narration of the novel's text*. On each level mentioned above we have to locate Myshkin's figure, the indicated literary character, consequently the interpretation reveals a metaphorical story behind the hero of the plot, and all this is deeply embedded in the history of literature.

In the dissertation we separately examine the development of the plot level of the events, where the heroes are also given a role in detailing the plot, see the different stories about their earlier lives, Myshkin's figurative narrative style leading to the great ideas of the novel, or the thematic representation of narration on Nastasia Filippovna's evening. Narration can be realized from a special point of view which is not connected to the text of the heroes or the narrator. The figure of Jesus is systematically mobilized by the novel's text: the Holbein painting "Christ in the Tomb" is depicted twice in the plot; Nastasia Filippovna also imagines a painting about him. Holbein's painting can be inserted in the elements of the events since in some way it reflects upon Myshkin's ideas and his relationship with the heroes. Moreover, this insertion has its own history which can be specifically revealed through the poetical connection of the visual works of art with the story. We can declare the same about the possibility to interpret Myshkin as a *knight* figure offered at some points in the plot. Although this knightly quality cannot always be judged clearly at the level of the events, nevertheless it links to important elements of Myshkin's story, and Pushkin's poem entitled „Жил на свете..." refers to the way the hero becomes a knight figure in the sphere of the textual poetics.

Consequently, in the textual world of *The Idiot* the different ways of narration can be identified as follows: the detailing of the events represents the line of the hero's acts, while becoming the medium of presenting the idea it shifts the interpreter to the level of the metaphorical story. In the presentation of the metaphorical story visuality proves to be a crucial point, and it is presented at the same time as a *borrowed* story from other works of art (intertext). This level of narration is not only realized in the interpretation of the specific detail of the event but also in the exposition of a metaphorical story shaping in the world of the textual poetics and embedded in the history of literature, moreover, in the history of art.

The role of the heroes' narration can be described in a narratological examination which at the same time goes beyond the problem of the plot. Myshkin's narration – within the framework of the poetical narration – is a representation of the hero's destiny which becomes metaphorical, a demonstration of a universal human experience that can be transformed into a story.

Considering the poetical mode of the intertextual narration we complete the interpretation of Myshkin as a knight figure on the basis of Pushkin's poem recited by Aglaia. We examine the possibilities of intertextual narration with the help of Pushkin's *Egyptian Nights*. In this intertextual context the narration focuses on the different characters of the love triangle. The idea of *the essence of love* revealed in the triangle of Myshkin, Rogozhin and Nastasia Fillippovna, is one of the references that calls the Pushkin intertext based on the poem „Жил на свете...”.

Deploying the figure of Jesus on Myshkin's story we examine how narration is realized in the poetical context of visuality. On the one hand, the main hero thinks in pictures, on the other hand, Jesus becomes an object of visual representations in the novel. The "ability" of Holbein's painting that it can fill in the gaps in the presentation of the events becomes a part of Dostoevsky's narration realized also through visual products. The reflection of the Jesus figure on Myshkin – similarly to the knight figure – can be comprehended as a mode of intertextual narration.

In order to achieve this we consider – in three groups – the monographs and essays not only establishing but also supplementing the theoretical and interpretative questions in the dissertation. First we briefly introduce references discussing the main general narratological interpretations formulated within Russian poetics. Scholars interpreting Russian literary works (W. Schmid and M. Drozda) create their concept primarily relying on Pushkin's prose. This seems particularly important from our point of view because the whole problem of the narration of Dostoevsky's prose is obviously connected to specific features of Pushkin's poetics. After discussing the narratological questions concerning *The Idiot* interpreting the narratological aspects of Bakhtin's concept as well as the theoretical viewpoints of R. Feuer Miller and Árpád Kovács, in the second part of our literary survey we have a closer look on the problem of intertextual narration. At this point we differentiate between the intertexts relating to a cultural paradigm and those linked to specific textual traditions referring to the Jesus and the knight figure. In the third part of the survey we give an overview on essays

discussing the relationship of visual and narrative discourses. We also refer to essays examining the works of art appearing in the novel and acquiring a special meaning in the visual context of *The Idiot*.

Analyses

In the chapter *Myshkin and "The Poor Knight"* at first we examine the original context of Pushkin's poem *Жил на свете...*, the text of the drama *Сцены из рыцарских времен*, which recalls the age of chivalry. In our opinion, the main hero, Franz at the end of the drama creates the *chivalrous mode of existence*. Consequently, the semantic history of the hero in Pushkin's drama can be described as the evolution of the meaning of *act, service*, as their articulation in his personal genre. Hence we examine in detail the situation at the end of the drama appointing the context and revealing the sense of *poetic service*. Franz's song points out the end of a semantic transformation in the poetics of Pushkin's text: the hero removes the *shame* from himself with this artistic act, and deserves his own *glory*.

Reinterpreting L. Dällenbach's theory of "myse en abyme" from our perspective, we discuss the question of the possibilities of a character's interpretation through another literary character, and we try to clarify the elaboration in the text of the semantic status of the "myse en abyme". Franz's song functions as a "myse en abyme" in *The Idiot*, and on the basis of the *service* it gives a semantic motivation for the following connection: Myshkin voluntarily removes the *shame* from Nastasia, which can be regarded as Myshkin's *glory*.

The *Covetous Knight* as an intertext is primarily linked to Rogozhin's character, however, this other "knightly" intertext does not appear as a "myse en abyme" in the novel. Thus Dostoevsky's work can play an interpreting function. Rogozhin, however, as a "covetous knight" has the chance to become a "poor knight", to gain the *glory*, but still he can not be interpreted as a "poor knight" figure. The "poor knight" intertext is exclusively linked to Myshkin. During the evolution of this intertext the possibility of not being able to remove the *shame* is present though it is not realized extensively in the plot. A reason for this, among others, is that it is not the comical modality of the character's role, pointed out by the *Don Quixote* intertext that turns into a story.

In the chapter *Egyptian Nights* the question of *fragmentary structure* is connected to the examination of the *completeness* of poetic meaning in Pushkin's texts. The "Cleopatra feature" of Nastasia Filippovna takes part in the evolution of the semantic story. On the one hand it indicates the heroine as a *victim*, while on the other hand her character connects the problem of the experience of *love* with its re-composition. Nastasia Filipovna is the "catalyst" of situations in which the textual world reveals again that Myshkin and Rogozhin are one: their figures represent two components, the two ways towards the same completeness.

The poetics of the text links the idea of completeness to fragmentariness on different levels. Contemplation about such a *moment* of life frequently appears in Mishkin's thoughts which can reflect its completeness. The narrator's text about him also becomes "fragmentary" after the Prince leaves for Moscow for half a year. When Nastasia Filippovna is interpreted through the intertextual figure of Pushkin's Cleopatra character, we can interpret Myshkin's story from a new, therefore a more complete point of view. The Prince's *love* for this woman, which is the *service* of the "poor knight", can also be regarded as *compassion* (compare: *сострадание*). On the birthday evening referring to the symbolic meaning of a Cleopatrian "feast", Nastasia Filippovna – similarly to Cleopatra – lets her love for sale naming the price for it.

On the basis of the intertextual relationship Myshkin's character can also be connected to the problem of *completeness–fragmentariness*. In the case of the heroine it is Myshkin who "helps" her out transforming the semantic content of a situation (equivalently to that: a character's role) so as she could complete her *part* in the *destiny* through his *compassion*.

In the chapter '*The Holbein painting. The role of The Dead Christ in The Idiot*' we focus on the question of how the process of semantic evolution is realised in the poetical context of intermediality (particularly: the visual forms of representation). The interpretation of the Holbein-painting puts an emphasis on the concept of *beauty*, which correlates with Dostoevsky's basic concept (compare: the presentation of *beauty* through the character of Christ) that can be realised with the experience of *non-beauty* (*doubt, temptation*). The Dostoevsky text "loses" the concept of *beauty* from time to time and remarks it again, therefore there is no static concept of *beauty* in the text. We can also interpret the method of this concept's formation as fragmentary considering that the novel's text has to "repeat" (to reconstruct) the motif, shedding light on the sense of its earlier presentations, too. In this context the reconstructions take part in the creation of the semantic history of the evolution of the poetic meaning. The poetic line of the representation of "fragmentary" situations can be identified as a chain transforming Myskin's ideas expressed in the stories into visual images (compare: expositions linked to the semantic sphere of *beauty, compassion, service*). Holbein's painting – and Nastasia Filippovna's picture connected to it – becomes the stressed mediator of these motifs in the novel.

The presentation of *beauty* in a non-canonical way is connected with the non-canonical reception through the character of the main hero. We can approach Myshkin's storytelling in such a way that the main hero gives the other characters a share in those experiences which are not given to them by their own destiny. Consequently, the examples of the poetic narration of the novel's text examined by us in connection with the plot serve as facilitators giving the recipients a share in destinies through stories which they otherwise would not be able to experience. The acquisition of an

unknown destiny is also an interpretative act since it can be linked to a story, or leads to narration based on visual experience, and simultaneously, it places Myshkin's character in the frame of the metaphorical story of the *master-follower's* relationship developing on the basis of the destiny of Jesus and the ekphrasis of Ippolit. This is the common context of the problem of *beauty-visuality-narration* in our interpretation.

In the chapter *Narration – Interpretation of the Story* revealing the relationship between the roles of Myshkin's character we fix how the novel *The Idiot* interprets its own main hero, namely through what kind of *comprehensive, integrative* story it points out for him.

We examine the creation of *unity* in the novel as such a story. In the development of this metaphorical story we can also consider Pushkin's figure "Poor Knight" appearing through the novel's "knightly" intertext. The idea of *unity* linked to Myshkin's character includes the aspect of meaning that the *service* of the main hero (on the other level of representation: knightly) connects with the poetic representation of *taking part in other's destiny*: the main hero's desire to create *unity* (compare: *completeness*) should be interpreted in the sphere of motifs *service* and *compassion-taking part*. Thus the role of the Jesus character turns into a story in a way that preserves Myshkin's independence from the symbolic figure – the character of Myshkin's personage will be "separated" from "Prince Christ" of the notes, i. e. from the "positively beautiful man". The idea of Christ's *unity* (compare: *redemption*) is interpreted by Myshkin's motif *completeness* also in Dostoevsky's poetics.

Examining the plot situation of the love triangle between Myshkin, Rogozhin and Nastasia Filippovna on the conceptual basis *unity / completeness*, we can reveal the interpretation of the novel's text in connection with the characters. The substitution of the three heroes in the plot – and through this the transmission of motifs one into another – is emphasized by the love triangle. Through the split motifs linked to characters (compare: *sacrificial role, service, doubt*) the heroes become the doubles of one another, thus at the end of the novel the characters (according to M. M. Bakhtin) reach their "other selves", they become one, they come into unity. The vertexes of the triangle outlined on the symbolic level are constituted by Jesus, the Devil and the object of temptation (the *hero*). Consequently, the act of the hero reveals who and where is on the way to salvation / to the demonic.

The characters' roles become interchangeable, the heroes become the projections of each other not only by the brokenness of the motifs but also depending on that (cf. P. Torop's theory) on whom the Jesus figure is projected at the given moment – in *The Idiot* already depending on whether the hero with his act steps closer to *salvation* or the *demonic*. Jesus appearing as an element of this triangle is not an incarnation: he is a representation which cannot be identified with Myshkin's character, nor with the Jesus of the Holbein-painting.

In light of the connection between Y. M. Lotman's text theory and the representation of the literary hero, we link to Myshkin's character such an invariant meaning which we connect with the presentation of various stories relating to the literary character (i. e. with the "variants"). In the projection of the figures on each other appearing on the symbolic and mythological levels of the story, a specific meaning of the character develops which is offered by the novel's text to the reader. The static figure (see the invariant essence of meaning, by which the archetypal interpretation can be provided) is in connection with simultaneously appearing stories mobilized by the novel's text. Hence the textual world interpreting its main hero becomes a dynamic sphere where Myshkin's figure is continually being re-composed thus making any previous representation fragmentary.

Summary of Research Results

The dissertation presents the poetic formations of the main hero of *The Idiot* in the process of the constitution of the poetic meaning in the literary text; it connects the structuring of characters with the problem of *narration* on different levels. The thesis provides an overview on the criticism and references on Dostoevsky's novel regarding the problem of *narration*, thus placing the questions of narratology, the problem of intertextuality and the theoretical literature on the "visual storytelling" into a common interpretation domain. The scholarly work offering the simultaneous reading of the stories linked to Myshkin in the context of the novel's *poetic narration* connects *storytelling* to *story interpretation*. In the chapters containing analyses the dissertation presents Pushkin's poem *Жил на свете...* from a new point of view, analysing the interchangeability of the characters' roles; through Nastasia Filippovna's "Cleopatra" features it defines Myshkin's *compassion* for the heroine as a transformation of the semantic content of the character's role making it *complete*; it interprets Holbein's painting as an element of the narration in the poetic context of visibility, and connects it with the possibility to present the metaphorical story of the destiny of Jesus.

Formerly issued publications on the topic

1. Dosztojevszkij: A félkegyelmű. Miskin alakjának értelmezéséhez. In: Kroó Katalin (szerk.) *Első Század*. Budapest, 2002, 171–196.
2. A „kicsinyítő tükör” jelentésformáló szerepe Dosztojevszkij *A félkegyelmű* című regényében. A miskini szolgálat értelmezéséhez. In: Kroó Katalin (szerk.). *Párbeszéd-kötetek 1. Ösvények Turgenyev és Dosztojevszkij művészi világához*. Budapest, 2004, 217–250.

3. Христос Ганса Гольбейна – Мышкин Настасья Филипповны. Картина Гольбейна как объект и субъект интерпретации. In: Han Anna–Hetényi Zsuzsa (szerk.). *Studia Russica* XXI., Budapest, 2004, 42–48.
4. Jelrendszerek újraformálása F. M. Dosztojevszkij alkotásaiban (matematika). In: Balázs Géza–H. Varga Gyula–Veszelszki Ágnes (szerk.). *Semiotica Agriensis 1. A magyar szemiotika negyedfél évszázad után*. Budapest–Eger, 2005, 56–61. (A tanulmány második része: Szekeres Adrienn, Folklórelemek megjelenése a *Bűn és bűnhődésben*, 61–70.)
5. Puskin „Szegény lovagja” Dosztojevszkij *A félkegyelmű* című regényében. In: Kroó Katalin (alkotó szerk.). *Bevezetés a XIX. Századi orosz irodalom történetébe I–II*. Budapest, 2006, 473–478.
6. *A félkegyelmű* Kleopátrája. In: www.gyulakiraly.hu honlap. 1–5. (2008). Hermann Zoltán–Kalavszky Zsófia (szerk.). *Tanulmányok Király Gyula 80. születésnapjára*. Várható megjelenés: 2008. ősz.
7. Ivo Pospíšil (ed.) A. S. Puškin v evropských kulturních souvislostech. Litteraria Humanitas VII, Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2000, 322 c. (Recenzió.) *Studia Slavica Hung.* 2002, 47/ 1–2, 183–188. (Társszerző: Szekeres Adrienn, Trombitás Judit.)