

THE DEFEAT OF GOODNESS

GOODNESS HAS not fared well in literature. Some heroes—*The Prince of Homburg*'s Frederick, Levin in *Anna Karenina*—are good 'as well', but they are first and foremost something else: Frederick is a great warrior and a king, Levin an honest man. Their goodness is an adjunct of their characters, not their mode of being. Some men of God are good, but they are always primarily godly. Secondary heroines—often older women or mothers—are often good, as if goodness were a lesser, private quality; although Stifter's Brigitta, archetype of the domestic heroine, is not especially good-hearted. Goodness does not have many icons. It is not one of the theological virtues—faith, hope or charity—even if it can be a begetter of charity; nor is it among the cardinal ones—strength, wisdom, prudence, temperance—that have produced so many literary characters. Often evoked ('Be good', 'He's no good'), it remains vaguely defined and scarcely represented.

On 31st December 1867, Fyodor Dostoevsky—aged forty six, and already the author of *The Insulted and Injured*, *House of the Dead*, *Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Gambler* and a forest of short stories—wrote to his friend, the poet Apollon Nikolaevich Maikov, that he had been tormented for some time by the idea of representing 'an absolutely good man' but was 'afraid to make a novel out of it, because the idea is too difficult', adding 'especially in our time'.¹ The following day he declared, in a letter to his beloved niece Sofia Aleksandrovna Ivanova, 'It is a measureless task . . . There's only one positively good person in the world—Christ, so that the appearance of this measurelessly, infinitely good person is in fact an infinite miracle'. He wrote:

All the writers—not just ours, but all the European ones too—who ever undertook the depiction of a positively good person, always had to pass . . . Of the good characters in Christian literature Don Quixote stands as the most complete—but only because he's ridiculous at the same time.

Dickens's *Pickwick* (an infinitely weaker creative idea than *Don Quixote*, but still an enormous one) is also ridiculous, and effective because of that.

Nevertheless, he was attempting to grapple with just such a disconcerting character: 'The novel is called *The Idiot*'.²

A few days earlier, he had sent the first of the novel's four sections—he originally had eight in mind—to press. The whole of 1868 was spent dictating the text of the rest to his wife and revising it. In October, he wrote again to Maikov: 'I won't finish the novel this year . . . I have become bitterly convinced that never before in my literary life have I had a single poetic idea better and richer than the one that has now become clear to me for the fourth part, in the most detailed plan'. In January 1869 he told his niece: 'It's now finally finished! I worked on the last chapters day and night, with anguish and terrible uneasiness . . . but I'm dissatisfied with the novel; it hasn't expressed a tenth part of what I wanted to express'. But he still loved his 'unsuccessful idea'.³

The evidence of his notebooks suggests that the idea had overtaken him by force. The temptation of a hero who would be absolutely, positively good first made itself felt in the autumn of 1867 when Dostoevsky was working on a tale in which an 'idiot'—a young man of unknown origin and strange behaviour—appeared, though as a minor character in the story. The novella did not turn on goodness but on guilt. The idea had been suggested by a newspaper crime report, the sort that always attracted him as a symptom of the diseased times. A young girl, Olga Umetskaia, had set fire to her parents' house but the court had acquitted her because of the horrible abuse she had suffered—in short, a necessary crime. In the early drafts the girl's character remained undefined; she soon became a secondary figure in a plot full of recognitions, violence and money, which still, however, included the idiot. Dostoevsky worked on the tale for three months.

The notebooks have a gap between 30th November and 30th December 1867. It was as if *The Idiot* liberated itself from the original plot during

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, ed. and trans. David Lowe, *The Complete Letters*, vol. 2, Ann Arbor 1989, p. 297; translation modified.

² *Complete Letters*, vol. 3, p. 17.

³ *Complete Letters*, vol. 3, pp. 103, 126–7.

this period, demolishing it in the process. The guilty girl and the supporting cast disappear altogether, and the idiot, as if emerging from his chrysalis, becomes the chief protagonist. He is no longer a mixture of conflicting passions; he is an absolutely good man. And he is not a marginal figure but a prince.

A man without precedents

Prince Myshkin, however, not only differs from the 'idiots' of the previous novel's drafts; he bears no resemblance to Don Quixote. He does not live in a fantasy world or fight windmills. He is not in love with something that does not exist. Instead, he submerges himself in reality, in the all-too-human. He is not ridiculous and nobody laughs at him, even if they judge his generosity excessive and the consistency of his behaviour embarrassing. Designated 'an idiot' out of spite, Myshkin finds that his openness to others unsettles their own half-heartedness. Everybody takes him seriously. Myshkin is not a comic character.

Nor is he is a Christ figure, despite the eager (by mystics) or outraged (by Marxists) avowals to that effect during the Soviet era. He has no messianic streak, no worldly mission—beyond that assigned by Dostoevsky to the good Russian people. He won't be crowned with thorns and mocked because he doesn't declare himself king; he performs no miracles; he knows uncertainty and fear. He is blemished, too, by an illness—albeit the quasi-divine *grand mal*, epilepsy, in which the sufferer rises through a crescendo of anxiety to attain a moment of extreme lucidity and then tumbles into the dark. He returns from the fit clear-headed but exhausted, and conscious that it will recur. Dostoevsky knew how it felt.

So Myshkin is a character without precedents. Maybe what his story shares with the knight of La Mancha's is that both depict the defeat of an exceptional being. In his *Diary of a Writer* Dostoevsky would later say of Don Quixote: 'Man will not forget to take this saddest of all books with him to God's last judgement'. He wrote earlier that man might offer it as his only 'conclusion' about life. Myshkin, too, is left with nothing better. The irony—'the most bitter irony a human is capable of expressing'—lies in the defeat of goodness.⁴ A paradoxically anti-Christian message.

⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary, 1877–1881*, London 1995, vol. 2, p. 1129; *A Writer's Diary, 1873–76*, London 1994, vol. 1, p. 411.

Blond, with mild blue eyes, Prince Myshkin appears on a train pulling into St. Petersburg one gloomy dawn in November, all fog and thawing frost; an impure season. He is returning from the Swiss sanatorium where he had spent his childhood in the care of a gentle psychiatrist, living happily with the little girls and boys. He is talking to another young man, also twenty-six but dark haired and grim faced. Rogozhin, son of a rich merchant, is as sombre and suspicious as Myshkin is bright and open. In Petersburg that same day Myshkin will encounter all the other *dramatis personae*: firstly, Aglaia Epanchina, a lovely girl just starting out in life, a sister to Natasha Rostova and Kitty Shcherbatskaia; and then a woman whose proud and tragic look strikes him from a portrait. Before evening, he will find her opening a door to him: Nastasia Filippovna, an orphan, has been brought up by a family friend whom she had been expecting to marry. She has just discovered that he intends her as his exquisite courtesan instead, and she will forgive neither him nor herself. By the end of the day Myshkin has become involved in all their lives, pushing their destiny towards its fatal end.

Evil has already entered the story. Rogozhin, the burning-eyed travelling companion, is devoured by a passion for Nastasia in which frustration, need and arrogance are compounded. She, in turn, is obsessed by what she sees as her irredeemable fall. The ex-lover has given her a handsome sum so that someone else will marry her, thus discharging his obligations, and she has accepted the offer of an ambitious young man who needs her money but feels ashamed of her. For Nastasia, such degradation should not be kept secret, but just as she reveals what's going on, humiliating both herself and the two men, Rogozhin steps in with a larger sum: 'I will buy you'. For Myshkin, these divulgations are unbearable. He pleads with Nastasia to marry him instead. For an instant, Nastasia is flooded with light: she feels she has been given back the dignity to which she thought she had lost all right. But how can she drag down with her such a noble, innocent being? She turns to Rogozhin: 'Take me away. Sooner or later I will marry you'.

This is Myshkin's goodness; it is not a holy sacrifice. The prince cannot stand the symbolic death sentence, he is pierced by the suffering of the wronged and humiliated Nastasia. She, for her part, does not mistake him: she never calls him idiot, and will declare that he is the only man she knows. In refusing him she is, by her own lights, repaying good with good. But she will not bring herself to wed Rogozhin: she is

with him and yet somehow withdrawn, while he longs for the marriage bond that would make her wholly his. He is tortured by an insatiable need to possess, in order to be—a hunger that terrifies the prince as another source of sorrow.

Next winter, in Moscow—but we learn this only from afar, through what's said in Petersburg—the prince discovers he is a wealthy man (Aglaia's family speak about him often). Nastasia breaks with Rogozhin and runs to Myshkin, then goes off again. Rogozhin's eyes never leave Myshkin: he is broodingly jealous of the prince. The two are attracted like opposite magnetic poles—psychoanalytic criticism sees Rogozhin as a projection of Myshkin, and vice versa. When Myshkin goes back to St. Petersburg something compels him to look for Rogozhin's house. He recognizes it by its dismal appearance. In what is perhaps the most beautiful scene in the whole novel, Rogozhin, who has never confided in him, finally speaks, confessing all he can; and begs his old mother, described almost as an icon, to bless Myshkin. Later, standing before a copy of Holbein's Deposition of Christ, they talk of how He seems so exhausted as to make one doubt the Resurrection, the key concept of their religion. Christianity is love and hope—Russia, too, is simple and faithful but it is also a place of extremes, one that never fails to go too far. Rogozhin proposes that they give each other the crosses they wear round their necks, and stammers a renunciation of Nastasia. But as they part, he is gripped by fever and chases after the prince; he would have killed him had Myshkin not been seized by an epileptic fit beneath the knife.

The knife and Rogozhin's eyes haunt Myshkin through the brilliant June he spends, attracted to Aglaia Epanchina, in a gossipy holiday village where Nastasia sometimes puts in a provocative appearance. The prince's love for Aglaia is timorous and human, tinged with tenderness for her troubled youth. But Nastasia is ill with sorrow—and had Rogozhin not told him, 'Your compassion is stronger than my love'? Aglaia cannot bear Nastasia taking precedence. She comes to find her and cruelly tells her to stop playing the martyr and burdening others with her tragedy: she should get herself a job, marry a decent fellow and be done with it. Nastasia, cut to the quick, rebels: 'If I were to ask him', she screams at Aglaia, 'the prince would choose me'. Myshkin hesitates for a moment, distraught at the hatred between the two women, and

when Nastasia appears to faint he rushes to catch her. Aglaia leaves, deadened by the blow.

But still Nastasia will not allow him to marry her—and flees in her wedding dress, towards Rogozhin and death. The prince searches for her through the white night of St. Petersburg, his mind full of confusion, premonitions and anxiety, as on the eve of an attack. He makes out Rogozhin and they walk together, in darkness and silence, till they reach the studio. Barely touched by moonlight, Nastasia's body lies cold; she had met Rogozhin's knife with open eyes. They exchange a few broken words: it's hot now, there'll soon be a smell, we could cover her with flowers . . . Their speech exhausted, Myshkin and Rogozhin spend the night in each other's arms by the curtain that conceals the dead girl's body. The prince gently strokes Rogozhin's hair—until dawn comes, and with it more people and the police. One of them will end up in Siberia, and the other back in the sanatorium in Switzerland.

Prince Myshkin's epiphany lasted from November to June, against the background of a Russia lost under the illusion of progress and technical advance, democracy and socialism—a fantasm represented by the consumptive student Ippolit, torn between suicide and death, between hatred and love for Myshkin. There is a tragic dialogue between their two great conflicting positions that transcends the trivial preoccupations of the rich, the toils of the downtrodden, the greed of the money-lenders, a directionless epoch where crime has become a banal means of escape. Hubris drags Nastasia, Rogozhin and Ippolit to their fate, and suffering with them leads Myshkin to insanity. Only Aglaia will have a mediocre destiny—the one character who never went to extremes, who was untouched by evil and therefore incapable of understanding; who went through life without tragedy but without happiness.

Uselessness and horror

So what is goodness? To give oneself totally to the other. To put the other first. The prince always listens, always understands. Not because he shares the other's motives—he almost never does. He thinks Nastasia is ill, Aglaia frequently wrong, Rogozhin blinded by passion—and he's right. But he can enter into the soul as no one else can, and suspend his judgement before the human condition—that vertiginous struggle

between good and evil. He feels an infinite compassion, in the etymological sense of 'suffering together'. Myshkin never turns his back, never abandons anybody, always does the little that humans can—that is: not leaving one another alone; forgiving. The condition of such openness is simplicity. As if only someone who, like the prince, has grown up far from the din of the world, in communion with nature and children, would be able to listen to the person next to him—a Christian *naturaliter*, in a position to understand the gropings of the heart and intellect, the toil of thought and hope that constitutes the essence of every living being.

Goodness is not a thing to do or to give—although the prince is generous and in no way foolish—but to be. To be with the other on the cross. But who wants to see themselves in such a mirror? Myshkin is quite frightening to most of those around him, with the exception of Aglaia's mother, 'good' in her own confused way. Only the wretched feel close to him: Nastasia, crucified by her fall, Rogozhin, by his need; Aglaia, as an impossible companion for a normal life.

Goodness is defenceless. Myshkin considers himself feeble, unable to keep afloat on the troubled waters of his times—he is, in that sense, an 'idiot'. But who does keep afloat? Not his own social class, who fall far short of their obligations; not those who seek change by chasing dreams of progress. To the noble and bourgeois intellectuals, as to Ippolit—himself carrying a cross, albeit a wrong one, Myshkin believes—the prince opposes his warm and lucid reasoning; he is not delirious. But he won't succeed in preventing anything; and the more he understands, the less he will be able to change. The world is evil. Sin is the proof of that.

Goodness is useless. At least, it doesn't belong in the universe of utility; not even Christ belongs there. Salvation remains a mystery. After his brief passage through St. Petersburg and Moscow, the prince doesn't stay in Russia—Dostoevsky dispatches him back to Switzerland. Goodness is terrible. Rogozhin is right. It's more than just Christian, it's Orthodox—Catholicism has been corrupted by the world. Goodness dwells in the Old Russia of the extremist heart, its sword raised against the devastations of modernity, liberalism, democracy, socialism, the woman question; against all corruptions of original good, all idolatries, in the proper sense of the word.

In the end, one might think that goodness was only imaginary, an exaggerated western virtue. In making his 1951 film *Idiot*, Akira Kurosawa transported the story to a cold post-war Japan, stripping it of its steamy nineteenth-century Russian background, its socialism and Christianity. It is a masterpiece. Dostoevsky would recognize the splendid Nastasia (Setsuko Hara), Aglaia (Yoshiko Kuga) and Rogozhin (Toshiro Mifune); but he would not recognize Myshkin in the sweet and dumbstruck Masayuki Mori. It is as if love, jealousy, despair and violence were universal but absolute goodness were not.