A Dostoevskii Companion

Texts and Contexts

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Ol’ga Umetskaia and *The Idiot* (2017)*

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In September 1867 Dostoevskii began to plan the novel that would eventually become *The Idiot* (1869). Before the final version was published Dostoevskii drafted a number of different plans in three different notebooks as he worked on finding the precise configuration of characters, setting, and plot that would enable him to convey the idea he wanted to articulate.\(^1\) Dostoevskii did not finalize his outline for *The Idiot* until he had begun the final version of the novel, and even after Part I was published (serially), he continued to adjust his overall plan.

The news was a significant influence on him while he was working on the novel. As Jacques Catteau notes, “Dostoevskii could not live without the Press, especially abroad, where he needed to keep in touch with his native country… he found true ‘happiness’ in reading the Russian Press from cover to cover.”\(^2\) Dostoevskii often referred to newspaper stories in his correspondence, and his wife, Anna Grigor’evna, regularly mentions the couple’s discussion of the daily news in her diaries. Elements recently in the news also inform the writer’s working notebooks, as does, for example, the story of Ol’ga Umetskaia.

In late September 1867 fifteen-year old Umetskaia was on trial for arson in the town of Kashira, near Moscow; in response to her parents’ abuse (beatings and starvation), she had set fire to the family estate four times, and at least twice attempted suicide. The press reported on the sensationalistic details

\(^*\) This piece was written for the present volume.


that emerged in the course of the trial, painting a picture of monstrous parents who tormented and abused their children. The story was widely reported in the Russian press, and Dostoevskii was able to follow the trial from Geneva: in the issues of *Moscow* (Moskva), dated 23 and 24 September (nos. 136 and 137), and *The Voice* (Golos), dated 26, 27, and 28 September (nos. 266–68).  

Umetskaia did not deny the arson charge, but was acquitted by the jury, who sympathized with her story and judged her crime to be a result of the abuse she had suffered. This outcome does not seem odd today, but in 1867 jury trials were a relatively recent development in Russia; they had been introduced in the Judicial Reform of 1864. Widely reported in the press, trials were a source of fascination for the late nineteenth-century Russian public, and critique of them came to inform many of Dostoevskii’s later works, from the prose experiments in *A Writer’s Diary* to the famous courtroom scenes in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the case of *The Idiot*, the integration of the Umetskii trial details into the text provides insight into Dostoevskii’s writing process.

Before he read Ol’ga Umetskaia’s story, Dostoevskii had begun to plan a novel centered on the Russian family. One of the character types he had included in the first plan is “Mignon,” taken from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–96). Goethe’s Mignon is a mysterious heroine, kidnapped as a child, forced to work for a nefarious circus master, rescued from an abusive environment, and characterized by a romantic longing for freedom and love. While Dostoevskii’s Mignon also longs for love and freedom, she resents her situation and hates her abusive foster family. At some point, the writer connected Mignon and Ol’ga Umetskaia. In the margins of the first plan, Dostoevskii jotted “Ol′ga Umetskaia” next to the sentence, “The main family also includes an adopted child, the stepdaughter of the mother’s sister—the wrathful Mignon, a Cleopatra.” Later he wrote directly into the plan:

Mignon is terribly downtrodden and terribly timid, but inwardly she is dreadfully spiteful, insolent, and vindictive; she hates the handsome youth’s fiancée. Mignon’s history is altogether like that of Ol’ga Umetskaia.

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3 These are the Russian old-style calendar dates of the issues; Dostoevskii would have read them in early to mid October. See Catteau, 180. By the 1860s Moscow and St. Petersburg newspapers reached Western Europe in only a few days thanks to the rail network.


6 The Notebooks for The Idiot, 32.
As the notebooks progress, Dostoevskii begins to refer to the character simply as “Umetskaia.” Troubled by the Umetskii case, Dostoevskii incorporated its details into his working model for the novel, embellishing or changing them as he built his narrative. In various plans, Umetskaia becomes a rape victim, a victim of incest, or both. The Idiot character is her abuser in some, but her accomplice in others. In every case, however, the Umetskaia character loves the Idiot character and shows him compassion, even for his cruelest acts. She struggles with indecision; she is vengeful, but seeks redemption. Her mental anguish becomes madness in some versions. In several she becomes a Holy Fool. In others she marries, but the fate of her soul remains unknown.

While Dostoevskii describes the Idiot character—the future Myshkin—in the notebooks as an “enigma” or a “Sphinx,” the Umetskaia character is the real mystery. She does not appear in the novel, but she appears in every plan. The notebooks do not provide an account of the character’s backstory, motivations for committing violence, or eventual fate, although some aspects linked to Umetskaia appear in *The Idiot.* This correspondence is most readily visible in Nastas’ia Filippovna’s gothic-inspired history, in which she is violently orphaned by a fire, isolated through misfortune, and exploited by an unscrupulous guardian. Like some versions of the Umetskaia character, Nastas’ia Filippovna is seduced by her guardian, then abandoned. Like Umetskaia, she feels violently angry, and her irrational and self-destructive tendencies stem from her humiliation, yet she remains blameless. This dual nature emerges in the description of her portrait in the novel:

> The face, extraordinary in its beauty and in something else, astonished him even more now. There was something like immeasurable pride and contempt, almost hatred, in that face, and at the same time something trusting, something wonderfully simple-hearted; these two contrasting elements aroused a feeling almost of compassion at the sight of these features. Her dazzling beauty was positively unbearable, the beauty of a pale face, almost sunken cheeks and glowing eyes; a strange beauty!7

In Nastas’ia Filippovna’s fiery gaze we see Ol’ga Umetskaia grown up as Dostoevskii might hope she would: a survivor of abuse, a product of suffering, but a woman with her soul intact, still capable of trust and love.

In addition to Ol’ga Umetskaia’s story, Dostoevskii incorporated other newspaper items into *The Idiot,* many of them accounts of murders. Perhaps most striking for the final novel’s conception is the way Dostoevskii

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incorporates the details of the notorious Mazurin murder. V. F. Mazurin, a merchant, killed a jeweller in his home. He then concealed the corpse in an oilcloth and surrounded it with Zhdanov fluid, a disinfectant and deodorizing compound that is also mentioned in *The Idiot*. Nastas’ia Filippovna has clearly read about the crime when she mentions her dream of a corpse under the floorboards of Rogozhin’s house surrounded by jars of Zhdanov fluid, and Rogozhin mimics these details in the murder that concludes the novel. Furthermore, as V. S. Dorovatovskaia-Liubimova observes, the beginning of the novel’s events in late November 1867 would have occurred just as Mazurin’s trial was reported in the press, so Nastas’ia Filippovna would have read about the crime perhaps even on the day she meets Rogozhin and Myshkin, associating them with Mazurin in her mind (a point not lost on contemporaneous readers, Dorovatovskaia-Liubimova argues).\(^8\)

In another news item, a man murdered an acquaintance in order to steal his silver watch; in the investigation, it emerged that the murderer had prayed for forgiveness as he was slitting his victim’s throat. Myshkin recounts the incident as an example of the paradoxical nature of the Russian people, who are deeply religious but simultaneously have the potential for extreme violence.\(^9\) Of this last crime, Myshkin later observes, “I know a genuine case of murder over a watch—it’s in the newspapers now. Let some author invent that—pundits of the national way of life and critics would have cried out at once that it was improbable; but when you read it in the newspapers as a fact, you feel that it is just through such facts that you learn Russian reality.”\(^10\) Indeed, for Dostoevskii, incorporating these sensationalistic news items, printed in the press and pored over by the masses, enabled him to achieve realism “in a higher sense” by allowing him to turn the glass on Russia and reflect the best and worst facets of society.

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\(^8\) V. S. Dorovatovskaia-Liubimova, “*Idiot* Dostoevskogo i ugolovnaia khronika ego vremenii,” *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia* 3 (1928), 31–53.

\(^9\) This passage appears in Chapter 10 of the present volume.

\(^10\) Dostoevskii, *The Idiot*, 538.