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Ippolit's 'Necessary Explanation': Success or Failure?

The narrators of Dostoevsky's fiction written in the first person often have a problematic relationship with the practice of writing, whether this be a compulsive urge to write, a sceptical or cynical attitude to the value of written style, or a difficulty in managing chronology. In this paper I will begin by establishing the trope of the 'unsuccessful writer' ('neudavshiisia literator'), a trope which characterises such narrators as Ivan Petrovich of "The Insulted and the Injured" and Ivan Ivnich of 'Bobok'. I will then consider what insights can be gained in relation to Ippolit Terent'ev's 'Necessary Explanation' in "The Idiot" when analysed in the context of this trope.

I will examine Ippolit's 'Necessary Explanation' not in terms of its content but in terms of its narratological features. I will take account of such features as embedded narratives, the use of quotation, Ippolit's ill health and his awareness of imminent death, and his relationship with his addressees. I will discuss these features in relation to Dostoevsky's reflections on successful writing, comparing them with other narratives by 'unsuccessful writers'. I will argue that in these texts Dostoevsky problematises the criteria for 'successful' narration. Thereby, I aim to offer new insights into Dostoevsky's preoccupation with artistic form, and more broadly, into our understanding of first-person narrative.