May 2005

The Idiot

Russian novels should come with little paper dolls of all the characters. Readers could use these dolls to connect faces with the multitude of names and in that way keep the various characters straight. Without some kind of device such as this, it is virtually impossible to make sense of the average Russian novel (at least in its nineteenth-century instantiation).

I'm reading Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* now. There are, according to a list I found on the web site for Middlebury College, fifteen main characters and ten secondary, or minor characters, in the novel. But with names such as Nikoay Andreevitch Pavlishchev and Vera Lukyanova Lebedev, it is difficult for someone who is not himself of Slavic extraction, to keep all the names straight. Characters are often introduced by names that will rarely be used again and the reader is left to figure out, by an elaborate process of deduction, who is who. The "idiot" is the novel's protagonist, Prince Myshkin, who is also sometimes referred to as Lev Nikolayevitch. The further I have gotten into the novel though, the more I have begun to suspect that the title may actually have been intended to refer to the reader. Prince Myshkin, after all, does not appear particularly stupid, but my own intellectual self-esteem has been progressively eroded the further I have gotten into the work.

Scene after scene takes place in my imagination with only the faintest semblance of coherence. Characters enter and exit, make dramatic declarations, quarrel, lie, dissemble, plot, attempt suicide and even homicide, yet I'm unable to make sense of most of these events because I'm almost always in a state of confusion about who these people are. I believe I have finally figured out that General Yepanchin also goes by the name of Ivan Fyordorovitch and that Totsky is also referred to as Afanassy Ivanovitch, but I did not figure this out until at least a third of the way into this six hundred page book and I fear that my earlier confusion may have caused me to miss some important plot twists.

I debated starting over, once I felt I had gotten most of the main characters straight, but quickly abandoned the idea. I feel like a drunken person threading his way through a crowd of acquaintances he should recognize but can't because of his inebriated state. A face will become familiar in hindsight, but I feel so fortunate to have made it this far that I am reluctant to retrace any of my steps. I continue thus to stumble forward over people I feel guiltily I should know.

Like the drunk who becomes aware that he is seeing double, I have also begun to fear that I may have overpopulated my novel—i.e., that I may have included in my imagination a set of extraneous characters who are in fact the same person simply referred to periodically by different names. This at least is what I take to have happened with Keller, who seems to me to have sprung spontaneously into existence on page 321, but who I can tell from the nature of his exchange with the novel's protagonist, that I, the reader, am supposed to know.

Ganya, I know, is the same character as both Gavril Ardalionovitch and Gavril Ivolgin (i.e., his full name is Gavril Ardalionovitch Ivolgin), and Kolya, is the same character as Nikolai Ardalionich (whom, I assume, could also have "Ivolgin" appended to his name, since Nikolai is Gavril's brother, at least I think he is Gavril's brother). Ptitsyn's full name is Ivan Petrovich Ptitsyn, so though he is usually referred to simply as Ptitsyn, he is sometimes also called Ivan Petrovich.

But who the hell is Keller? Prince S is easy enough to keep straight when he is referred to as "Prince S." It seems to me, however, that there is something sadistic in placing him in dialogue with Prince Myshkin in scenes where each is referred to in turn simply as "the prince."

A reviewer of a recent biography of Isaiah Berlin marveled at the genius of a man who, he learned, had read *War and Peace* when he was only ten years old. That didn't seem any great accomplishment to me though as I quickly calculated that I also had read *War and Peace* when I was ten years old. I had forgotten, however, when I mentally disparaged Berlin's accomplishment, that I had done this only after having watched the entire *Masterpiece Theater* dramatization and that I thus had faces to connect with the names before I ever picked up the book. It takes such an extraordinary level of mental acuity to keep the characters in Russian novels straight, that until I remembered this fact, I feared my difficulties with *The Idiot* might indicate I was the victim of some kind of degenerative brain disease.

Reading Russian novels requires skills similar to those required to play blindfold chess. Since I have neither the patience nor the mental discipline to learn regular chess, you can imagine how I am struggling now. It seems to me that there were fewer characters in both *Anna Karenina* and *Crime and Punishment*, but then I suppose being an adulteress and a murderer respectively has the effect of shrinking one's social circles. I had what is from one perspective the good fortune and from another perspective the misfortune, to read those works immediately after *War and Peace*. I was fortunate in that they are great literary works that helped to shape my views of human nature and aided in the development of my intellect more generally. Unfortunately reading these works led me to believe that I loved Russian novels, which must have seemed the height of intellectual affectation to anyone to whom I declared it. Now I understand, finally, why that declaration was always such a conversation stopper. People who knew me well enough to have some grasp of the limits of my cognitive abilities must simply have assumed I was lying, and those who didn't know me so well must have thought me a snob.

I think it would be easier if the characters had names like "Heather Smith" and "Frank Jones." "It doesn't help that to a native English speaker, names like Aglaya Yepanchin and Gavril Ardalionovitch are bound to seem strange no matter how many times they appear in a particular text. Still, hardly anyone, I think, even a Russian, is up to the challenge of the Russian novel. It is the literary equivalent of the Chinese box. If

Isaiah Berlin really was able to read *War and Peace* without the benefit of any sort of visual aid, then he probably was a transcendent genius!

Dickens, they say, was paid by the word. I'll bet you anything that Russian novelists were paid by the character and that when they absolutely could not cram any more characters into a particular story, they hit upon the device of referring to the same person by a variety of names in the hope that this would so confuse their editors that the latter would be forced to rely on the author for a character count. Now *that's* creative!

Given the mental effort required to read a Russian novel, you might wonder why I, or for that matter anyone else, would ever pick up one of these notoriously impenetrable works. Some things are worth the effort though and anyone who has ever experienced them understands this. I may not know whether I am an idiot, but I know that humility is good for the soul.

--M..G. Piety