

Many people can, and do, of course, get through their entire lives without feeling that they must confront and try to understand Dostoevsky's novel "The Idiot." But when one does confront it, one must perforce attempt to understand it or be harmed a great deal by the refusal. (Dante lets us know in our reading of "The Divine Comedy" that we are likely to be made much the worse for embarking on the journey unless we keep on once we have begun. "Pensa lettero," he warns; the Medusa, that hardening of heart that shuts us up in our own confines, can turn us to stone if we do not engage ourselves with the spiritual meaning of his allegory and not remain content with the letter.)

Dostoevsky too is an allegorist -- and as complicated one as Dante. ("Why do you speak in parables, the Pharisees asked Christ. "So that those whose hearts are hardened may not understand and be saved," He replied. -- a difficult and uncompromising answer.\*, but one that we no doubt ought to take to heart.)

Of course Christ's message was unique. But there have been messages given by human prophets that it is dangerous to hear and ignore. Dostoevsky's major novels are among those, perhaps, as I tend to think, foremost among them.

And what he is struggling with in "The Idiot" is a concern that he worked with all his life; we shall see it continued from a different angle in "The Possessed" and we shall see it triumphantly and clearly delineated in "The Brothers Karamazov". "The Idiot," however, even more than these other two can become a mirror for examining the deepest recesses of ourselves -- for coming to understand the mistakes we make when we try to follow our own ideas of the good without ourselves being humbled and broken by suffering and love.

So what we have to avoid in our interpretation of the novel is a mere simplistic confirmation of what we already know. We all know that someone like the Prince is good; he longs to help other people; he is unselfish; he tries to give good advice and to be understanding; he forgives everything, even when people do not ask forgiveness. Why, then, is his effect on others generally destructive? Why does this novel end in apparent defeat? Why is a record of what Michael Holquist, in a famous study of D. has characterized as "an inspired moment that nevertheless changes nothing"?

I don't know that I agree entirely with that statement. But I do know that we all have to detach ourselves from our own preferences and attempt to read this novel looking for every clue to its meaning, not simply decided whether we like or do not like its main character.

