
RECEPTIVE CONFLICT OF THE NOVEL ‘THE IDIOT’ BY F.M. DOSTOEVSKY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL ‘THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV’

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Abstract

In this article the dichotomy of perception of the novel ‘Idiot’ in the context of the last novel ‘Brothers Karamazov’ by F. M. Dostoyevsky is discussed. The researchers define its nature and origins of the ambiguous reception. The alternative perception of the novel ‘Idiot’ and its main hero are determined by the author. According to the perceptive point of view the writer’s text is the ‘space of freedom’ for a reader. This fact is also defined by the strategy of the author. Dostoyevsky uses the device of a reader’s ‘failed expectations’ associated with the miracle of Christ’s resurrection.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, reception, dichotomy, perception

1. Introduction

The current state of the study of the novel ‘The Idiot’ could be described as quite controversial. There are two polar tendencies of its understanding in domestic and foreign research. The first, traditional, supports and develops an idea of Prince Myshkin as an attempt to realize the image of the ‘positively beautiful man’ in the artistic reality. The second, which is expected to be revolutionary one, constantly aims to discredit the main character as the embodiment of a false ideal.

Alternative Myshkin’s image assessments, one way or another, have saved almost for the entire history of the understanding Dostoevsky’s work. A number of reviews prove this. These reviews reveal the evolution and dynamics of the hero’s image reception and the associated ‘inspection’ of the whole novel [1-5]. It is remarkable that modern researchers, who debunk ‘Prince Christ’ with the Orthodox position, and Marxist critics from 1950-60s made similar conclusions: “... ‘Positively beautiful man’ with his truly Christian character is absolutely incapable to fight against evil and achieve the victory of good” [6];

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“The Prince comes with a set of ‘medical’ items which are thought to be curative” [7].

2. Methodology

Vladimir Zakharov, president of the International Dostoevsky Society, fairly called these attacks “aesthetic obscuration” [8]. We can argue endlessly with similar concepts and statements, give a variety of counter-arguments following him, but the fact that this understanding already has its own history and tradition deserves attention. Maybe there is something in the novel that provokes the reader to form exactly the same opinion about the main character?

We are going to analyze the novel ‘The Idiot’ from this point of view. The Prince arrives in Russia having distinct tasks: “...I think I am a philosopher, perhaps, and who knows, perhaps I do wish to teach my views of things...” [9]. This point of view is revealed in the pre-materials for the novel: “PRINCE SAID ABOUT SINFUL PEOPLE: ‘THEY ARE ALL SICK, THEY NEED CARE’” (stressed by Dostoevsky) [9, p. 221]. But hero’s mission ends not with just a failure but with a disaster. ‘Sick people’ die, ‘the healer’ returns to his original state of madness without hope for a cure: “...Dr. Schneider frowns ever more and more and shakes his head; he hints that the brain is fatally injured; he does not as yet declare that his patient is incurable, but he allows himself to express the gravest fears” [9, p. 508].

Moral influence at those around the Prince is also weak and it is stated in the conclusion of the novel: “Lebedeff, Keller, Gania, Ptitsin, and many other friends of ours continue to live as before. There is scarcely any change in them, so that there is no need to tell of their subsequent doings.” [9, p. 508] It may seem that the final of the novel is not just tragic, but aimlessly tragic, because of a lack of catharsis. It is especially evident during the scene of Myshkin and Rogozhin’s ‘vigil’ over the body of Nastassya Filippovna.

“So we will not say anything about it, or let them take her away?”

“Not for anything!” cried the other; “no, no, no!” Then it is followed by a symbolic phrase of Rogozhin: “I’ve covered her with oil-cloth, best American oilcloth, and put the sheet over that, and four jars of disinfectant” [9, p. 504]. The attempt of Rogozhin to ‘stop the moment’ of death, to ‘preserve’ the dead body and the agreement to it by the prince – all these facts are statements of being stop. And here is an obvious connection between the last novel’s scene and the painting by Hans Holbein ‘The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb’, hanging in the house of Rogozhin. Myshkin’s phrase, which was said in the very beginning of the novel, obtains a very grim meaning in this context: “Why, a man’s faith might be ruined by looking at that picture!” [9, p. 182]

3. Prince Christ?

It is well known that the famous formula of the author ‘Prince Christ’ defined the direction of a traditional apologetic interpretation of the whole novel.

But the embodiment of Christ's story in the novel has not got the most important feature – the resurrection and Easter celebrations. Therefore, the lack of the Gospel catharsis in the story of the 'Christ like' man provokes its negative perception [10; 11]. That is, the reader of the novel 'The Idiot' does not have enough miracle. And this is curious and favourite trick of Dostoevsky – a violation of reader's expectations. This trick becomes the strongest stimulation of a receptive reaction. That is why the writer considered his best readers those who preferred the novel 'The Idiot' to all his other works [12].

Besides, Dostoevsky, following the logic of lifelike narrative, does not allow the direct intervention into the course of events of the supernatural origin. Once Roman Nazirov wrote: "Basically, the realistic novel denies the existence of a miracle" [13]. In our opinion, the author of the great 'Pentateuch' could have used this denial to enhance the aesthetic and moral impact of his work on the readers. It seems that the writer was aware of its provocative manner, understanding perhaps that the conflict of the readers' perception would be inevitable.

Many important features of this conflict were included in the final Dostoevsky novel 'The Brothers Karamazov'. There are many of his own quotes and allusions in the novel 'The Idiot', but we are going to focus on the 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor'. The reason for discussion of this theme in our article is the criticism of a Christ like character.

Nowadays, Tatiana Kasatkina advanced the most clear and consistent 'claims' to the Prince Myshkin: "Prince Christ has turned to be a hell's hostage, less than wistful inmate, long before the end of the novel, when proponents of the idea of a beautiful man – Christ, finally agreed to treat him like this, who was broken by unworthy people who did not want to admit the fact that a man, trying to cope with the Christ's mission, is able to finish with the only way – in a madness and plunging others into it, making them to look into the 'empty skies'" [14].

The conflict and the desire to debate detected by Dostoevsky's characters appear in the tone of such statements. Alyosha, after hearing the poem of his brother, exclaims: "Your Inquisitor does not believe in God, that's his secret!" [15] It does not mean that he doubts about the existence of God, because the Grand Inquisitor knows who stands in front of him. It is about another thing: Inquisitor reproaches Christ blaming his non-participation in the historical social process. Moreover, the old man demands only supernatural involvement, confirmed by the authority of a miracle and a mystery. In fact, this requirement is a hidden desire of an immediate Kingdom of God. It was expressed by Ivan: "I want to see with my own eyes the hind lie down with the lion and the victim rise up and embrace his murderer" [15, p. 222]. The Inquisitor formula "Do not bother!" is an expression of the same tense desire of a miracle, which has just come down to its end, despair and denial.

In fact, Ivan and the character on his poem give voice to the pain shock of the tragedy observer, who did not see its solution and deprived cathartic experience. The unbelief of Inquisitor is a deception of the inner sight: the tragedy of a history shadows the mystery of faith for him.

Nature is a pointlessly tragic in its material term only (for example, the way of its perception by Hippolyte Terentiev), and pointlessly tragic human history, taken only in its socio-political aspect. Here is the phase of Ivan: "It's not that I don't accept God, it's the world created by Him I don't and cannot accept" [15, p. 222].

4. Conclusions

Of course, Dostoevsky did not aim to image Christ, who came to the people of the XIX century to save them. As it was often shown and proved, the object of his creative attention is a Christ like man. [16] However, if an external eventive plot is logically complete (if compare 'The Idiot' to other novels of the writer, it differs with remarkably consistent narrative), the mytho-ideological plot essentially devoid of completion. It stops where it must cross over the bound of logic or objective likelihood.

The Grand Inquisitor is not beyond the historical understanding of Christ and his mission. And from this point of view, it did not succeed, because the gospel miracle belongs to a different level. Diametrically opposed rating of Hans Holbein's painting in relation to the novel 'The Idiot' is a striking example of the receptive and axiological conflict [17, 18]. Some interpreters believe that the artist decided to image the dead body of Christ, he did it and could not add to his creation even a small sigh of his resurrection. On the other hand, according to Vladimir Zakharov: "Holbein painting testifies not to the death, but the resurrection of Christ", it shows "inner light" of his dead body, which "has already been struck by the first spark of the resurrection" [8, p. 297].

Dostoevsky did not image 'the resurrection' of the Prince Myshkin in the novel, because there are things, which could not be represented or expressed [19]. Moreover, they must not be expressed, assuming free reader's perception [20]. This is 'the gift of freedom', which was considered by the Inquisitor the main mistake of his 'opponent'.

The reader of the novel 'The Idiot' has this freedom of perception just because the mytho-ideological plot of the novel is not complete: it remains to the reader to believe Myshkin (or in Myshkin), or not to believe. Those who prefer not to believe 'the Christ Prince', willing or not identify themselves with the logic of the Grand Inquisitor. This is a choice and a deep difference between the two ways of understanding of the Dostoevsky's novel. Thus, the dichotomy of the perception of the novel 'The Idiot' is programmed by its text, which, as it was stated in one of the last works of Tatiana Kasatkina, remains "a space of freedom" [21].

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