

BRIEF MENTIONS

ROBIN FEUER MILLER

Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981. Pp. 296. \$20.00.

Robin Feuer Miller's study of the narrative structure of *The Idiot* reflects the increasing attention that Dostoevsky's narrative technique has received in the last few decades. It would seem that there are few students of Dostoevsky who still regard him as an inspired genius careless about technique, if not above it. In fact, Dostoevsky's letters and notebooks show that he was as acutely conscious of narrative technique as was Henry James. Some of his novels show that he was perhaps even more sophisticated in the handling of narration than the American master. *The Idiot*, however, presents a special problem, for in it Dostoevsky seems to be far less in control of narration than in the other great fiction of the sixties and seventies. Part of this problem becomes clear with an examination of the novel's creative history.

In early December of 1867, after having worked several months on the plans for a new novel, Dostoevsky discarded all he had written and began, in effect, to compose a new novel. Then the form was not one long in maturation, as can be shown, for example, in *A Raw Youth*, but more or less came to Dostoevsky while writing. Furthermore, as Dostoevsky's notes for Parts Two through Four of the novel show, after having finished the first part of the work, he did not really have a clear idea of the plot and characterization, not to speak of narration, for the remaining parts. Indeed, there are many critics who see great differences in theme, characterization, and point of view between Part One and the rest of the novel. With regard to Dostoevsky's narrative technique, a good case can be made for singling out Part Four, as Miller herself does in her close analysis of the text.

Miller has no easy task when she attempts to define and examine the specific function of the narrator in the novel. If

there is any system at all, it certainly is a complex one, and to describe it one needs a far more complicated theory than is needed for any of Dostoevsky's later fictions. Miller has managed this task with a good deal of success. Using the conceptual framework fashioned by Wayne Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* and some of the latest work on reader-response, Miller describes the narrative structure of the novel essentially in terms of the complex and varied relationship between the implied author and the narrator. Like Booth, Miller distinguishes between the historical author, the implied author, and the narrator—and their corresponding readers—the real reader, the implied reader, and the narrator's reader—the last being Miller's own construct, although it is implicit in Booth's formulations. Miller argues that the narrator, who assumes different guises in the novel, is used by the implied author to perform a number of varied and seemingly contradictory functions: to entertain; to mystify; to present essential facts; to transcribe dialogue and consciousness, and even to sow the seeds of doubt in the reader about the reliability of the narrative itself. She shows that the narrator, with some notable exceptions, is reliable in the first two parts of the novel but becomes increasing less so in the last two parts, emerging so unreliable in the fourth part that he forces the reader to decide for himself the intentions or point of view of the implied author. In Miller's terms, the implied reader in the real reader must overcome the limitations of the narrator's reader, who, in contrast to the implied reader, is interested essentially in being entertained, not enlightened. Miller's theoretical concepts are clearly presented and are far less complex than my description may have made them seem; they help rather than impede our understanding of the narrative structure of the novel. Miller has interesting things to say about the use in the novel of the narrative techniques of the confession, the Gothic tale, the feuilleton, and the novel of manners. She also makes useful observations on the structural similarities of Part One and Part Three; characters as tellers of their own tales; and the theme of time in Ippolit's confession.

I must confess, however, that I have some reservations about the assumption upon which Miller's thesis about the nar-

rative structure rests, namely, that *The Idiot* is an organic whole whose parts have an assignable relationship and function in the system that is the novel. The very complexity of her solution to the narrative puzzle of *The Idiot*, as well as our knowledge of the genesis of the novel, leads me to conclude that Dostoevsky was more or less groping his way through the work, especially with regard to narration, and that it is this tentativeness which to a large extent explains what the critics have considered inconsistencies in narration. The narrator of Part Four bears little resemblance to the narrator of Part One, and, to me at least, Miller has not demonstrated that they are organically linked. The evidence of the notebooks for *The Idiot*, which Miller treats in great detail, are singularly unhelpful here, for, as Miller implies, they are perhaps as close to the final version of *The Possessed* and *A Raw Youth* as they are to the final version of *The Idiot* itself; moreover, they have relatively few notes on narration, many fewer than we find, for example, in the notebooks for *Crime and Punishment*, *The Possessed*, and *A Raw Youth*. At times, the final version of *The Idiot* strikes one as though it were a sort of preliminary study for the narrative structure of *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Dostoevsky alternates chronicler and omniscient narrators; and in fact, Miller does state that the narrative techniques of *The Idiot* look forward to the more perfect systems of these later novels.

My major reservation with Miller's thesis however concerns not so much the presentation of the narrator as what I think is probably more important, particularly for *The Idiot*: the point of view of the implied author. For it is the implied author's point of view that has been the main matter both of concern and contention in the last few decades, with fewer and fewer critics seeing Myshkin as that "wholly beautiful man," as Dostoevsky described him in a letter written a day after he had sent Part One of the novel to the publisher. Miller does not confront the issue of the possible ambiguity of the implied author's point of view and the differing nature of that ambiguity in the various parts of the novel. While admitting some of the negative "practical" consequences of Myshkin's behavior, she generally assumes his essential goodness to be the unqualified view and ideal not only of the historical Dostoevsky but also of the implied author, and she interprets the role of the narrator totally in terms of that assumption. But one would think that in a study of the

narrative structure of *The Idiot*, where the narrator is presented as being an instrument of the implied author, the narrator would be examined primarily to elucidate the point of view of the implied author. But since that is not done, we (the real readers) learn a good deal about the techniques of the narrator, but comparatively little about theme and characterization. Perhaps this would not constitute in itself a significant criticism if Miller herself had not explicitly stated that one of the main functions of the narrator is to make the reader work out for himself the point of view of the implied author.

I also wonder why, given the sophistication of Miller's analysis, no attempt was made to utilize the extensive critical literature in French, German, Russian, and English—some of it dating back to the end of the First World War—on the techniques of transcribing consciousness in which the narrator's point of view plays so important a role, such as *erlebte Rede*, *erlebter Eindruck* (narrated monologue and consciousness in English, *nesobstvenno priamaia rech'* in Russian) and internal or interior analysis. It is even possible that an examination of the narrator's use of such techniques could have provided the basis for demonstrating a more integral relationship between the various narrative masks.

Despite these reservations, Miller's book remains an important contribution to the study of Dostoevsky's narrative technique and will be of considerable interest to anyone concerned with the problem of unreliable narrators in the modern novel.

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MICHAEL UGARTE

Trilogy of Treason: An Intertextual Study of Juan Goytisolo.

Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982, Pp. 171. \$18.00.

Through the years Juan Goytisolo concerned himself with the problems of writing in general, theories about the novel, and literary criticism. In his essays, as well as in his fiction, Goytisolo dedicated himself to destroying Spanish myths and castigating the constrictive effect of Catholicism and censorship on Spanish creativity. About 1965 he disavowed his early