

to mean falls under erasure. These are also the signs of Jacques Derrida's radical subversion of logocentrism and Western metaphysics.

Despite the decentering of language and the self that marks the comic vision (its signs are parody and subversion), Olsen believes that the decline of postmodernism is the beginning of a new set of assumptions about language and experience. To confront death and finitude, he says, is to affirm the primacy of the self. Thus, *The White Hotel* and *How German Is It* illustrate a recent more conservative ontological turn because "one cannot live forever in the apolitical white hotel of postmodernity" (134). Although ultimately Olsen rejects "the odd linguistic trip, stutter and fall, the trope, the surface of signifiers that have no absolute signifieds—language doing its tricks" (111), his book is an elegant and informed analysis of postmodern fiction and the forms that are shaping its comic vision within the labyrinths of language and experience.

Olsen reminds us that our planet has shrunk to a global village and much of his concern (like Varsava's) about the relevance of postmodernism comes from television, "watching teenagers die in Vietnamese rice paddies" (102). I assume the word should be "paddies," and I sense an unconscious authorial and/or editorial slippage transforming death into gastronomy. It is surely this grotesque comedy of language that changes fact into fantasy and metafiction.

Victor Terras

*THE IDIOT: AN INTERPRETATION*

Boston: Twayne, 1990

Reviewed by Gary Cox

This "reader's companion" to Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, like Terras's recent volume on *The Brothers Karamazov*, is clearly the product of many years spent teaching the novel. It could be a useful teaching tool on virtually any level at which the novel is read, from honors high-school classes to graduate programs, from comparative literature courses, in which students and professor alike are working with translations, to courses taught by experienced Slavists. Indeed, the "companion" is self-explanatory enough to be useful to the general public, reading outside a course structure.

Twayne's format for this useful series contains several preliminary sections, designed to give the reader the necessary background information. Terras does not make as much of these sections as he might. The biographical chronology is good, and contains only one glaring mistake: the hiring of Dostoevsky's future wife Anna Grigorievna as a stenographer and the dictation of *The Gambler* took place not in 1865 but 1866, interrupting, not preceding, *Crime and Punishment*. The chapter on historical context is narrow in scope, covering only intellectual issues directly related to Terras's interpretation of *The Idiot*. A chapter on "The Importance of the Work" is included, presumably for the unconvinced.

A fourth preliminary section surveys the "Critical Reception," contemporary responses first, and then later ones, finally ending with a survey of stage and film adaptations. There are only a few glaring omissions; for instance, to say that this was D.H. Lawrence's "favorite novel by Dostoevsky" ignores the complexity of his attraction/revulsion response to Dostoevsky, and particularly to this novel. Terras is fair in mentioning several studies that disagree with his own Christian response to the work (Krieger, Dalton). Oddly, Bakhtin is not mentioned here, but is included in a sort of postscript, called "Various Novelistic Devices," in other words, things that didn't fit in anywhere else. To be sure, as Terras points out in the annotated bibliography, *The Idiot* is not a text central to Bakhtin's thinking on Dostoevsky.

The "reading" itself is genetic rather than formalist. Terras is interested in the way the work emerged from Dostoevsky's notebooks, correspondence, and personal life, albeit in a judicious and not particularly reductive way. A section called "The Literary Subtext" recites fairly mechanically a catalog of allusions to Russian and world literature. A section entitled "Composition" seems oddly named, as it is something of a catchall, but then, as Terras correctly points out, so is the novel. It is here that Terras begins to treat the novel's varied levels of meaning, viewing it as social novel, feuillitonistic commentary, allegory, etc., and to examine its discussion of contemporary issues (e.g., nihilism, feminism). The section on the narrator is serviceable, but might well have been placed earlier.

It is in the section called "The Psychological Backdrop" that Terras deals directly with the psychoanalytic interpretation, and it is in "The Metaphysical-Religious Level" that he presents his own Christian view. Consequently it is these two chapters that form the axis of his interpretation.

He is fair with the Freudians, but frank about his own sympathies. He seems to take umbrage at the idea that self-abnegating behavior could have a psychological motivation, particularly one tinged with pathology—such motivation would rob the act of its religious authenticity ("According to [this] line of reasoning," he laments, "Jesus Christ was a masochist"; 67). But the logical conclusion of this stance would be a Christian version of the underground man's irrationalist existentialism in which only gratuitous acts are authentic. He notes correctly that a psychoanalytic interpretation relies on, or at least includes, details which are "unsupported by the text as such" (68). Of course, so does a Christian interpretation, as Terras himself says elsewhere, "Myshkin's response to Ippolit's challenge has to be found in something other than the plot of the novel" (78). Once again polyphony triumphs and Dostoevsky's own Christian interpretation, which Terras shares, is only one of the possible interpretations of the text. Perhaps this is why *The Idiot* is a great novel, despite (or indeed, perhaps because of) its failure to present a successful Christ figure. The text makes sense only when the reader interprets it. Victor Terras has given us a frankly tendentious but fair-minded reader's companion to this vibrant, difficult work.