

Presenter: Maxwell Parlin

Title: Three Levs Nikolaevich: Tolstoy, Myshkin, Odoevtsev. Andrei Bitov's Pushkin House as Commentary to Dostoevsky's The Idiot

Abstract:

The connection between Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy and Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin has long been explored. George Steiner calls Myshkin's name and patronymic "the oddest allusion to Tolstoy in all of Dostoevskyan fiction" (327). He speculates whether Dostoevsky was prophetically criticizing a Tolstoyan conception of Christ before it existed, cautiously concluding: "we cannot tell, but this kind of an echo is rarely an accident" (327). What Steiner calls "a shadowy and perhaps unconscious process of dialectic in Dostoevsky's mind" (327), Donna Orwin elucidates, following D. L. Sorokina and Robin Feuer Miller, in an article on "Tolstoyan Echoes in The Idiot." Orwin shows that the dialectic is not always shadowy or unconscious: "In some cases [...] Dostoevsky is deliberately engaging Tolstoy or quoting him. In others, Dostoevsky's text cries out for comparison with Tolstoy, whether or not comparison was intended" (87). By now it has become commonplace to invoke Tolstoy for insight into the puzzling Prince Myshkin. Clearly, Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy sheds ample light upon his fictional namesake.

But there is third, more recent, Lev Nikolaevich: Lev "Lyova" Nikolaevich Odoevtsev, the protagonist of Andrei Bitov's Pushkin House. In this paper I will argue that Lyova provides further insight into Prince Myshkin and tightens the Myshkin-Tolstoy association. I hope to show that we can think of Tolstoy, Myshkin, and Odoevtsev as a mutually illuminating metafictional triangle and, more generally, that Pushkin House can be read (among myriad ways) as commentary to (among myriad works) Dostoevsky's The Idiot.

References

Orwin, Donna. "The Return to Nature: Tolstoyan Echoes in The Idiot." *The Russian Review* 58, no 1. (1999): 87-102.

Steiner, George. *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1996.