

The Utopian Dilemma in the Western Political Imagination

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Chapter 9

Fyodor Dostoevsky and the Ungrateful Biped

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Throughout his career, Fyodor Dostoevsky was intensely concerned with the idea of utopia as a response to the ills of the world. He grieved deeply over the injustices of Russian society, and his decision to join the radical movement in the 1840s was particularly motivated by his hatred for the institution of serfdom. The account of his subsequent imprisonment in *Notes from the House of the Dead* shows Dostoevsky discovering a new, non-utopian source of hope, based not upon Western social ideals but upon the moral and spiritual strength of Russian folk on Russian soil. Despite this conversion away from radical politics, Dostoevsky recognized that the secular utopian impulse to remedy the inequities of society was much in accord with the message of the Gospel and that his own social attitudes had been permanently shaped by French Utopian Socialists who advertised their debts to Christianity. Still more important to Dostoevsky as social critics were novelists like Balzac, Hugo, Dickens, and George Sand. Though recognizing, for example, that Sand was a deist, Dostoevsky, marking her death near the end of his own career, still expressed reverence for this “woman of almost unprecedented intelligence and talent,” calling her “one of the most thoroughgoing confessors of Christ even while unaware of being so.”¹ He went on to say that “She based her socialism, her convictions, her hopes, and her ideals on the human moral sense, on humanity’s spiritual thirst, on its striving toward perfection and purity, and not on the ‘necessity’ of the ant heap” (513). It was the “‘necessity’ of the ant heap,” the anti-Christian philosophy of later generations, not their social ideals, that disturbed Dostoevsky. The atheism and materialism of the West were the “demons” that corrupted the characters explored in his major novels—Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov, Stavrogin. *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky’s brilliant inner dialogue, was a prologue to those intensely disturbing moral and psychological investigations.

Notes from Underground is in part a response to Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s novel *What Is to Be Done?*, one of the most influential books of nineteenth-century Russia and an inspiration to the makers of the Russian Revolution. That book was in turn a reaction to Ivan Turgenev’s portrait of the new generation of radicals in the person of Bazarov, the

self-proclaimed “nihilist” hero of the novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862). A “nihilist,” in Turgenev’s coinage, accepts nothing upon authority but discovers everything for himself, on a firm, empirical basis. Bazarov, a medical doctor and a scientist, is a harsh debunker of ideals, abstractions, “romanticisms,” and social pretensions. He has little interest in manners or feelings and considers art and music a waste of time. This is not a charming portrait of nihilism, but despite his brusque manner and grudging outlook, Bazarov has the common touch, and his brutal honesty is truly without pretense. He suffers from the bleakness of his own philosophy, and his negligence toward his own emotional needs leaves him vulnerable to amorous disappointment. After a painfully abortive encounter with a woman aristocrat of high intelligence who rejects his declaration of love, Bazarov dies of an infection incurred, tellingly, while performing an autopsy.

Turgenev was shocked by the angry response to his portrayal of Bazarov, which was widely taken to be a hostile or satiric portrait of the younger generation, whereas Turgenev believed he was trying to “make a tragic figure” out of Bazarov.² (He was grateful to Dostoevsky for being one of the few to recognize his admiration for Bazarov’s character.³) In *What Is to Be Done?* Chernyshevsky seeks to rectify Turgenev’s dour image of enlightened youth and the radical movement they represent. His novel contains three utopian elements. The first is a detailed account of how the heroine, Vera Pavlova, sets up a democratically run women’s cooperative for seamstresses, offering a blueprint for a future socialist society. The second is Vera’s sequence of prophetic dreams, especially the fourth of them, a pastoral vision of the future in which a feminine goddess, a late version of Lady Philosophy, instructs Vera on the gradual humanization of the species which has been brought about by ideal figures of feminine beauty and power like Astarte, Aphrodite, and Aspasia.⁴ Vera’s vision also dwells upon the futuristic image of the glass and cast-iron Crystal Palace in London, originally built for the Great Exhibition of 1851, which has been provided, in Vera’s imagination, with furnishings made of the splendid new material aluminum (370). It is the symbol of a new world built of new materials, both physical and human.

The third utopian element of *What Is to Be Done?*, and by far the most important, is the revolutionary and heroic nature of its young, radical characters. They are free of Bazarov’s melancholy but also of his sober, practical skepticism toward grand ideals. In addition to Vera Pavlova, the chief protagonists are two high-minded young men, like Bazarov both doctors and aspiring scientists; one of them is even named Kirsanov after Bazarov’s friend in *Fathers and Sons*. Both are men of the highest social ideals but they differ from Bazarov in being possessed of exquisite moral sensitivity and self-understanding. They are examples of a new type—energetic helpers of women in adverse circumstances, eager rescuers of girls from prostitution and daughters from forced marriages. They employ

astonishing psychological clairvoyance and elaborate subterfuge in plotting their noble deeds, very much in the manner of Rousseau's *M. de Wolmar*.

What is most remarkable about these reformers, eager as they are to reeducate society for the good of all, is that they consider themselves motivated entirely by self-interest. Indeed, this is necessarily so, they believe, because "man is governed exclusively by the calculation of his own advantage" (115). Because human beings are utterly predictable, these young people possess "an infallible means for analyzing the movements of the human heart" (251). The wisdom they provide is simple. "Be honorable, that is, calculate carefully," as Kirsanov puts it. That is "the whole code of laws needed for a happy life" (246). Such advice is barely necessary, though, because "People are powerless against their own natures" (315). And since the happiness of others is what their natures most desire, it is inevitable that, guided by rational egoism, there soon will come "a time when all the needs of every man's nature will be entirely satisfied" (256). The completion of feminism and the abolition of conventional sexual morality will be the first steps. Here we see Marx's heroism of revolt and the utopian overcoming of the division between individual and society being melded together and dramatized in fiction. And Chernyshevsky gives the heroism of revolution a further turn. Alongside the story of Vera and her clairvoyant friends, he also adds the biography of the superman Rakhmetov, a nobleman whose devotion to the "common cause" (code for the revolution) has become the governing necessity of his life. The converted aristocrat sleeps on a bed of nails; he travels the world investigating the condition of all classes in anticipation of the coming change (271-93). Rakhmetov represents in individualized form the utopian heroism of the modern age already envisioned by Marx.

The narrator of Chernyshevsky's novel provides a running metacommentary mocking the bourgeois expectations about plot and character which the novel neglects at every turn. But despite these willful disappointments, and the unmistakable tumidity of the work, its influence was prodigious. As the memoirist and critic Alexander Skabichevsky remembered, people at the time read the novel "practically on bended knee, with the kind of piety that does not permit the slightest smile on the lips, the kind with which sacred books are read."⁵ The banning of the book led to a holy vocation of scribal copying. As Irene Paperno relates, all of its features became objects of imitation.

Producers' and consumers' associations, sewing, shoemaking and bookbinding workshops, laundries, residential communes, and family apartments with neutral rooms [for celibate married couples] began to be founded everywhere. Fictitious marriages in order to liberate the daughters of generals and merchants from familial despotism in imitation of Lopukhov and Vera Pavlova became normal phenomena. It was, in addition, quite rare if a woman liberated in this way did not

open a sewing workshop and did not relate vatic dreams in order to resemble the novel's heroine exactly. (29)

What Is to Be Done? inspired several generations and launched a political revolution. Its most famous acolyte was Lenin, who said that his life was "ploughed over" by it (30), and who borrowed the work's title for a revolutionary book of his own.

In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky's primary line of response was not to the politics of *What Is to Be Done?* but to Chernyshevsky's belief that egoism, even of the most rational sort, could produce the subtle, sublime, and generous behavior displayed by its characters and, further, that the denial of human freedom could be the basis of social hope. *Notes from Underground*, however, is not a mere satire nor is its approach entirely negative. What Dostoevsky offers, as he says in a separately signed introductory note, is the depiction of a social type which "must exist in our society, taking into consideration the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed." He goes on to say that "In this fragment [Part One], entitled 'Underground', this person introduces himself, his outlook, and seeks, as it were, to elucidate the reasons why he appeared and had to appear among us."⁶ In describing the work as a social introduction, Dostoevsky emphasizes one of its key features. It is a dialogue between a character and an imaginary audience whose existence and relevance the speaker constantly denies yet whose influence he cannot escape. This speaker has gone "underground," where revolutions are hatched, but his underground turns out to be not the launching place for a change of life but a perennial retreat into an interminable philosophical entanglement with the utopian dilemma. At the end of the story, when the speaker declares that he will write no more, Dostoevsky completes his framing of the speaker's address with another note saying that his character in fact "could not help himself and went on" (130).

"Underground," then, as it is framed here, is a place where thought goes on in retreat from all social engagement or conversation, sustained only by raw human need, but unable to escape from the presence of internal interlocutors. As Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out, every word in the story is part of a dialogue, which goes on like an "inescapable *perpetuum mobile*."⁷ In contrast to Chernyshevsky's characters, who act in perfect conformity with their rational schemes and offer themselves as models of the age, the Underground Man is internally riven by his own process of rationality and cannot escape from it even in isolation from human contact. Instead of offering a model for the future, the Underground Man is another example of the Russian type of the "superfluous man," separated from the currents of Russian life by western influence. Dostoevsky's character, however, is unlike his predecessors (in Pushkin, Gogol, Goncharov, and Turgenev) in that he has decisively embraced his irrelevance with an act of withdrawal,

even though, in the space of this withdrawal, he cannot actually cease the conversation he has fled. That conversation goes unstoppably on inside his head in a manner looking forward to Beckett's paralytic monologues.

Having been framed by the author as a social type and the symptom of a decadent era, the Underground Man portrays himself as a recluse, a misanthrope, a "sick" and "wicked" man who, when he was part of society, behaved like an utter scoundrel. Dostoevsky himself, in his concluding note, calls his character a "paradoxalist." This would make him a strange spokesperson for any author, yet the arguments he poses against the modern utopian point of view are Dostoevsky's own.⁸ The original title of the work was *Confession* and, in the planning, Dostoevsky told his brother that all his "heart and soul" would go into it. "I conceived it in prison," he writes, "lying on my plank bed, at a moment of sorrow and demoralization."⁹ Writing *Notes*, Dostoevsky was thinking back to a period of his life when he was closer to the utopian point of view he perennially wrestled with, and the work is a product of that wrestling. His starting point is that Chernyshevsky does not understand the implications of his own rational egoism. He does not understand that if rational egoism could truly be occupied as an intellectual and psychological position, it would lead not to utopia but to the kind of intellectual suicide or self-immolation which has buried the Underground Man. Furthermore, if rational egoism could actually be implemented as a practical system, it would turn human beings into mere insects swarming on an anthill.

No summary can convey the power of the Underground Man's tormented and endlessly self-disclaiming confession, in which so many later nihilists have recognized themselves. The essential dilemma, developed in the first six sections of Part One, is one of ontology and belief. In the grip of total skepticism, the Underground Man is incapable of believing or *being* anything. It is not only that he is incapable of becoming the kind of person people generally aspire to be or to which Enlightenment ideals would lead—an "*homme de la vertu et la vérité*," as he puts it. Rather, he is not even capable of ordinary nastiness. As debased and humiliated as he often feels, he cannot even become an insect. "Only fools become something," he says, whereas "an intelligent man of the nineteenth century must be and is morally obliged to be primarily a characterless being" (6). He is what Robert Musil would later call a "man without qualities." Capable of being "neither a hero nor an insect," his need for dignity strives at a level far beneath heroic standards. Yet it plagues him nonetheless. "I'll tell you solemnly," he says, "that I wanted many times to become an insect. But I was not deemed worthy even of that. I swear to you, gentlemen, that to be overly conscious is a sickness, a real, thorough sickness" (6).

The intelligence and "heightened consciousness" which make the Underground Man incapable of rising to the level of an insect still fuel his vanity. He claims to envy the stupid people who understand their lives in conventional terms and, when offended, can take their revenge and believe

in it (13). But with his "heightened consciousness," he has no object to blame but the laws of nature. "Where are the primary causes on which I can rest, where are my bases?" he asks. "For me every primary cause immediately drags with it yet another, still more primary one, and so on ad infinitum. Such is precisely the essence of all consciousness and thought" (17). In the infinite regress of causes, there are simply no moral agents either to commit an action or to be the object of blame. The Underground Man's only respite is in the perverse joy that comes from playacting at feelings he doesn't believe in. He comes to "a voluptuous standstill in inertia" (14). His final pleasure is in merely fancied humiliations which are his only relief from boredom.

The first six sections of *Notes from Underground* deal with this problem of the speaker's alienation from his own heightened consciousness, which leaves him without adequate objects for his feelings. The succeeding sections turn to the question of whether the utopian world of the Crystal Palace can solve the problems of the hyper-self-conscious man. Is the utopia envisioned by radicals of the Chernyshevsky type truly the object of human desire, as they believe? The Underground Man admits that it seems like madness to reject the good things utopia offers—"prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace"—but there is one form of "profit" the advocates of utopia leave out, "a profit to go against all laws, that is, against reason, honor, peace, prosperity" (21). That profit is freedom, a form of profit which is inherently destructive of order. Freedom is "remarkable precisely because it destroys all our classifications and constantly shatters all the systems elaborated by lovers of mankind for the happiness of mankind" (22). Even if "all human actions will be calculated mathematically, like a table of logarithms" (24), so that the coming of the Crystal Palace is inevitable, human beings will reject such necessary happiness just to prove their freedom—just to go on "living once more according to our own stupid will!" (23). Human beings prefer a chaos of their own making to a happiness dictated by reason and the laws of nature, a conclusion the Underground Man supports by noting the continuing violence of civilized countries, where "blood is flowing in rivers, and in such a jolly way, like champagne" (23). About world history "only one thing cannot be said," he observes, "that it is sensible" (29–30). The fantastical and perverse preference for stupid but independent living over rationally planned happiness leads the Underground Man to a striking definition of the human species: "a being that goes on two legs and is ungrateful" (29). Ingratitude is precisely the human inability to accept the conventional ingredients of happiness when they are not a testimony to one's own freedom and will. In such a situation, the most pampered man, "out of sheer ingratitude, out of sheer lampoonery, will do something nasty." He has to his mix in "his own pernicious, fantastical element" (30).

The definition of the ungrateful biped is formulated from the point of view of human beings as recipients of happiness. But from the point of view of human beings as agents, as creators, the love of disruption has

another source, which is that nothing is more instinctively repugnant than the completion of a task, even the task of achieving human fulfillment. “Can it be that [man] has such a love of destruction and chaos ... because he is instinctively afraid of achieving the goal and completing the edifice he is creating?” the Underground Man asks. “Maybe he likes the edifice only from far off, and by no means up close; maybe he only likes creating it, and not living in it, leaving it afterwards *aux animaux domestiques*, such as ants, sheep, and so on” (33). Again the Underground Man has a Frenchified contempt for servile happiness. He is striking Pascal’s note that the achievement of goals can bring only melancholy—that for our fallen nature, distraction is the only means of avoiding the recognition of our emptiness, so that “we prefer the hunt to the capture.”¹⁰ For Pascal, as for Dostoevsky, Christ was the only remedy, but the Underground Man finds in this flaw of our nature only a “terribly funny” joke (30).

Dostoevsky, however, did intend to offer his character, after forty years in the desert of the underground, an alternative to the indestructible Crystal Palace and to any other edifice that would bring the human process of creation and destruction to an end, thus taking away the freedom to stick out one’s tongue “on the sly.” “Seduce me with something else,” the Underground Man urges his imagined audience, “give me a different ideal” (35–36). But here, perhaps prophetically, the Russian censors seem to have intervened, and the note of Christian hopefulness Dostoevsky intended does not appear. “The swinish censors,” he complained to his brother Mikhail, “where I mocked everything and sometimes blasphemed *for the sake of effect*—it was permitted, and where I deduced from all of that the need for faith and Christ—it was prohibited.”¹¹

It is striking that Dostoevsky attributes this deduction of the “necessity” of a Christian alternative not to his fictional character but to himself, using the first-person pronoun, so it is natural to speculate about the missing passage with the help of his other writings. Just a couple of years earlier, in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, an account of his travels in Western Europe, Dostoevsky recorded in bolder, more explicit terms his fearful reaction to the utopian vision of the Crystal Palace. Standing before it, he cannot keep himself from feeling that “something has been achieved here, that here is victory and triumph.” And yet his reaction is fear. “Can this,” he asks, “in fact be the final accomplishment of an ideal state of things: Is this the end, by any chance? Perhaps we shall really have to accept this as the whole truth and cease from all movement thereafter?”¹² Seeing the millions of tourists from all over the world, “people who have come with only one thought, quietly, stubbornly and silently milling round in this colossal palace,” Dostoevsky experiences a revelation. “It is a biblical sight,” he says, “something to do with Babylon, some prophecy out of the Apocalypse being fulfilled before your very eyes.” To resist such a sight would require extraordinary resources. “A rich and ancient tradition of denial and protest” would be needed “in order not to yield, not to succumb

to impression, not to bow down in worship of fact, and not to idolize Baal, that is, not to take the actual fact for the ideal” (50-51).

Dostoevsky’s antidote to this terrifying vision of Baal is a brotherhood of human beings, not based upon the rational egoism and natural love of humanity described by Chernyshevsky, but rather a brotherhood that requires a total sacrifice of everyone for everyone. “What a Utopia this is, really! It is all based upon sentiment and upon nature, and not on reason. Surely this is humiliating for reason. What do you think? Is this Utopia or not?” (70). Yes is surely the answer, and Dostoevsky comes strangely close to Chernyshevsky’s view that such a spontaneous fusion with the interests of the collective is a human possibility. At the same time, and paradoxically, Dostoevsky’s conception of utopia is based on sacrifice—and not through a spontaneous impulse but “a voluntary, absolutely conscious, completely unforced sacrifice of oneself for the sake of all.” Such a sacrifice is not a denial of the “individual personality” but its “highest development ..., its highest power, highest self-possession and highest freedom of individual will.” Clearly, Christ is the model for this form of individual development. “Voluntarily to lay down one’s life for all, be crucified or burnt at the stake for all, is possible only at the point of the highest development of individual personality” (68). But the regeneration of society on this basis will not be easy; it will take thousands of years (67).

Thanks to the censor, this hopeful note does not sound in *Notes from Underground*, and given the daunting nature of the task of human regeneration as Dostoevsky conceives it, there is no reason to fear that the uncensored version of the story would have been weakened by too sunny a prospect of redemption. Reading *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* in the context of later writings, one is reminded how habitually Dostoevsky’s process of thought takes the form of paradox, inner drama, and dialectic. It is inconceivable that, in a work as contorted as *Notes from Underground*, he would have provided the Underground Man with anything more than a glimpse of that thousand-year-distant salvation mentioned in *Winter Notes*. Dostoevsky’s aversion to closure, to final answers and completed schemes, is a key principle not only of his psychology but also of his art. This is the author whose most Christlike character, Prince Myshkin, is his most tragically ineffectual, and whose most sympathetic hero, Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, was destined in the unwritten sequel to kill the czar.

It is not surprising, then, that the censor did not recognize Dostoevsky’s note of Christian redemption for what it was. But even after the censor’s intervention, and despite the Underground Man’s morbid state of mind and voluptuous inertia, there are hints that the suffering speaker’s illness is partially rooted in the repression of a goodness which is still part of his nature. Even in his attempts at wickedness, he tells us, he was

conscious every moment of so very many elements in myself most opposite to that ... I knew they had been swarming in me all my life,

asking to be let go out of me, but I would not let them ... They tormented me to the point of shame; they drove me to convulsions. (5)

And the Underground Man's reason for resisting a utopian frame of mind, a state of mind sustained only by reason, is hard to discount. "I, for example, quite naturally want to live so as to satisfy my whole capacity for living, and not so as to satisfy just my reasoning capacity alone, which is some twentieth part of my whole capacity for living" (28).

Despite this valuable reservation, at the end of the preamble which constitutes Part One the Underground Man is precisely where he began, in a "soap bubble and inertia" (18), envying and despising the ordinary, stupid people who take their own lives and feelings as given. In Part Two, he undertakes a confessional narrative of his life as a test, to find out if it is "possible to be perfectly candid with oneself" about one's past actions and "not be afraid of the whole truth" (39). Even though he is writing only for himself, with no audience, he believes that putting the shameful memories of past behavior that still haunt him onto paper may allow him to get free of them. Though this confession remains a private ritual, it does purport to deal with genuine events, so finally, we depart from the bracketed world of the Underground Man's interior conversation to the ethical realm of action.

Joseph Frank has identified the subject of Part Two of *Notes from Underground* as the "dialectic of vanity."¹³ Indeed, that could be a fitting label for the entire work. Part One deals with the ontological affront to the dignity of the human personality posed by the radical utopian point of view. Part Two deals with the pathological condition of personal humiliation that led Dostoevsky's character to withdraw completely from social life into the underground, where his struggle for dignity continues inside his head. The Underground Man begins his second, social confession by going back to the time when he was twenty-four years old and living a "gloomy, disorderly" life, "solitary to the point of savagery." He narrates three episodes to illustrate the "boundless vanity" and the absurd "exactingness" toward himself which led to his eventual withdrawal. At the office, "afraid to the point of illness of being ridiculous," the Underground Man loved "falling into the common rut" (44), avoiding any eccentricity that would make him stand out while still being tormented by feelings of unacknowledged superiority. In the first episode, he agonizes over how to avenge himself for an accidental insult given to him by a six-foot-tall lieutenant. He fantasizes about challenging the lieutenant to a duel, which he imagines will eventually lead to a mutually elevating friendship, and he even writes out a challenge which he does not send. Eventually, he works up the nerve to bump into the lieutenant on the Nevsky Prospect. This doesn't even get the man's attention, yet the Underground Man feels he has "preserved [his] dignity, yielded not a step, and placed [him]self publicly on an equal social footing with" the lieutenant. He returns home

“perfectly avenged for everything. I was in ecstasy. I exulted and sang Italian arias” (55).

In the second, even more pitiful episode, the Underground Man horns in on a dinner party honoring an odious former schoolmate named Zverkov where he is obviously not wanted and is treated accordingly. Offended, he makes a scene and winds up challenging Zverkov to a duel. When that does not even lead to fisticuffs, he exacerbates his self-abasement by borrowing money from one of the group so he can follow them to a brothel. Again he has humiliated himself in front of people for whom he feels absolute contempt. His heroic fantasy life makes it impossible for him to be on a level with any other person. If he cannot rise to the level of absolute superiority, he falls into shame. “Either hero or mud,” he says, “there was no in between.” Yet even in the mud, his vanity survives. “In the mud I comforted myself with being a hero at other times, and the hero covered up the mud: for an ordinary man, say, it’s shameful to be muddied, but a hero is too lofty to be completely muddied” (57).

The Underground Man’s “boundless vanity” makes ordinary human relations impossible. In the one case where he had a friend, he behaved like “despot” toward him, demanding “unlimited power over his soul; I wanted to instill in him,” he says, “a contempt for his surrounding milieu; I demanded of him a haughty and final break with that milieu.” Once the project succeeded, and the friend, “a naive, self-giving soul,” was driven to tears and convulsions by this “passionate friendship,” the Underground Man immediately discarded him—“as if I had needed him only to gain a victory over him, only to bring him into subjection” (68). For the Underground Man, interpersonal relations are solely relations of vanity and power.

This same “dialectic of vanity” plays out, most painfully, in the final episode with the young prostitute, Liza. Having taken his pleasure with her, the Underground Man begins to amuse himself by depicting for her benefit, and with graphic vividness, the life she has ahead of her, enslaved to the brothel-keeper until physical decay makes her worthless to customers and she winds up in a shallow, watery grave, all this instead of the beautiful family life she could have led, which the Underground Man also describes in fulsome detail. But the seemingly defenseless young woman, before succumbing to this theatrical routine, makes a halting remark that takes the Underground Man by surprise and leaves him “twinged”: “It’s as if you ... as if it’s from a book” (98). This bookishness is something the Underground Man has been intensely aware of but he is embarrassed to have it pointed out—that the heroic fantasy life which has been fueling his degradations is something entirely borrowed from books. His private literary reveries have even inspired him with unironic moments of “positive ecstasy,” full of “faith, hope, and love,” in which he

blindly believed then that through some miracle ... a horizon of appropriate activity would present itself, beneficent, beautiful, and,

above all, quite ready-made (precisely what, I never knew, but above all *quite ready-made*), and thus I would suddenly step forth under God's heaven all but on a white horse and wreathed in laurels. (56–57)

The “ready-made” character of these heroic fantasies betrays their bookish and, indeed, properly quixotic nature. The Underground Man's “beautiful forms of being, quite ready-made,” have been “stolen from poets and novelists, and adapted to every possible service or demand” (58).

The character of Underground Man's quixotism is not special to him. It is, for Dostoevsky, the signature of an era. At the end of Part One, the Underground Man introduces his confession with reference to the image of the “wet snow” falling outside—the reader's only glimpse of the world above ground. As if marking the transition to a dream, this image provides the title of Part Two, “Apropos of the Wet Snow,” which takes the scene back to the 1840s when the action occurs and when the wet snow of St. Petersburg provided the atmosphere for the sentimental writings of that period when Dostoevsky made his own dramatic arrival as a young writer. It was a time when Dostoevsky experienced his own “dialectic of vanity,” his self-esteem having been so dramatically elevated by the enthusiastic reception given to *Poor Folk* by the circle surrounding the critic Vissarion Belinsky that he became unbearably proud and comically grandiose in his behavior toward his fellow writers. Two of his talented contemporaries, Turgenev and the poet Nikolay Nekrasov, wrote a mocking poem about him called “The Knight of the Rueful Countenance,” and Dostoevsky had to confront Nekrasov to stop him from reciting the poem everywhere he went.¹⁴

Part Two of *Notes from Underground* begins with a thirteen-line epigraph from a well-known, sentimental poem by this same Nekrasov narrating the charitable rescue of a prostitute. So when Liza tells the Underground Man that he sounds bookish, her remark is sharper than she knows. The Underground Man is playing out with her a sentimental fantasy of saving the lost woman, a fantasy that belonged to an entire generation and a version of which appears in *What Is to Be Done?* Dostoevsky is not merely parodying Chernyshevsky or Nekrasov with the story of Liza and the Underground Man. He is showing the true psychology of egoism and the falsely sentimental and literary heroism that motivated the radical culture of the time. This rescue fantasy is as feigning and trumped up as the aristocratic fantasies of dueling that animated the first two episodes of Part Two. Imagining his amorous reconciliation with Liza according to the script, the Underground Man fancies he would “let his tongue run away with [him] in some such European, George-Sandian, ineffably noble refinement” (111). As the Underground Man concludes this fatuous reverie, Dostoevsky interpolates the final two lines of Nekrasov's sentimental poem begun in the epigraph, driving in the point that the Underground Man's self-indulgent sentiments belonged to

a whole literary era. As we have seen, later in his life Dostoevsky took a more generous view at least toward George Sand and French Utopian Socialism than he does here, where he sees the “ineffably noble” stance of moral superiority it offered as an invitation to self-intoxicated cruelty. The more elaborate and ineffable the kindness, the more secret and insidious the cruelty.

It is with overt cruelty that the Underground Man reacts to Liza’s recognition that he sounds bookish. He exerts himself to break her spirit and succeeds, then reverts to the script of his rescue fantasy and tells her that she should visit him at home. Another humiliating form of determinism is gnawing at his ego here, a literary and cultural determinism that will prove as insidious as the physical determinism of Part One. Having put on the mantle of heroic rescuer, the Underground Man suffers several days of tortured inadequacy, knowing that, if Liza comes to him, she will see the pitiful conditions in which he lives. Worst of all, the entire spectacle will take place in the presence of his servant, Apollon, an old man of indestructible self-esteem whom the Underground Man is shamefully unable to cow. When Liza does come, wanting, of course, his help in escaping from prostitution, the Underground Man’s dignity breaks down into a complete and pitiful confession. “Power, power, that’s what I wanted then,” he tells her about his rescuer’s routine. “The game was what I wanted, I wanted to achieve your tears, your humiliation, your hysterics—that’s what I wanted!” He even admits the weakness behind his desire for power and the mechanical character of his behavior. “I couldn’t stand it myself, because I’m trash, I got all scared and, like a fool, gave you my address, devil knows why” (121). The Underground Man winds up in hysterics of his own.

After she comforts the Underground Man by making love with him, Liza can already tell he is too weak to accept her generosity. He is ashamed to look her in the eyes, feeling that “the roles were now finally reversed, that she was now the heroine, and I was the same crushed and humiliated creature as she had been before me that night” (124). For him, “to love meant to tyrannize and to preponderize morally” (125), and he has lost the power to do that. He responds by trying to put her back into her place with another supremely bookish gesture, giving her a five-ruble note in return for their love-making, which she tosses to the floor on her way out. He ends up with the absurd rationalization that perhaps he has done her a favor by insulting her because “the insult will elevate and purify her.” “Which is better,” he asks himself, “cheap happiness, or lofty suffering?” (128). This is the utopian dilemma in a nutshell, but the ungrateful biped is unable to admit that the happiness Liza offered him was not cheap at all.

As an expression of Dostoevsky’s response to the conflict between utopian aspirations and heroic human dignity, *Notes from Underground* is extremely complex. Behind the sentimental social idealism of the 1840s, of western and literary provenance, Dostoevsky sees hidden and quixotic vanity, a desire to help others that is itself a vain affront to their dignity, even while he

also recognizes that it can be sincerely meant and in accord with Christian charity. Social egotism does not lead to universal love, as Chernyshevsky assumed. Egotism can be overcome, but only by the spontaneous generosity of a soul like Liza's, which can never become the norm, at least not until the arrival of a distant Christian future. Dostoevsky's consciousness of the importance of social vanity is as intense as More's or Rousseau's and far more pessimistic than Smith's.

Further, in the utopian rationalism of the 1860s, Dostoevsky sees a grave affront to human dignity which he himself genuinely resents even while recognizing that his own resentment is deeply connected with the "stupidest," most irrational, "ungrateful," and destructive elements of human nature. Dostoevsky's major novels of the 1860s and 1870s would explore the dialectics of vanity and the hidden vainglory of materialism and social idealism taken to every extreme. But he never let go of his belief that the condition of the world required an enormous change. Though he can by no means embrace Ivan Karamazov's utopian vision, Dostoevsky is not willing to denounce as "cheap happiness" the bread and security offered by the Grand Inquisitor, for it is impossible to forget Ivan's complaint that, in the current order of things, even blameless little children have to suffer, and such a world can never be accepted.

It should not be forgotten, of course, that Dostoevsky also harbored political hopes of a different utopian sort. He dreamed of a Russian empire, centered in Constantinople, in which the universal character of Russian spirituality could lead the way to a better world. But his creative imagination did not lend itself to such futuristic visions. In one of his last and finest treatments of the utopian theme, "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," the title character, another superfluous man and antihero, is rescued from suicide by a vision of a better world full of love and generosity, but the dream ends with him mysteriously corrupting that world merely by his own unconscious human influence. The Ridiculous Man returns to the world to do good, but the sober ending of his glimpse of the ideal suggests how fragile were Dostoevsky's hopes that the world could be saved from suffering at any rate above one person at a time. The contagion of vanity in a single man has poisoned the utopian character of an entire planet, leaving the suspicion that utopia must always be elsewhere, beyond the touch of proud and weak human beings.

Notes

- 1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, vol. 1 (1873–76), trans. Kenneth Lantz with an introduction by Gary Saul Morson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 511.
- 2 Letter to K. K. Sluchevsky, April 14 (26), 1862. In Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: Norton, 1966), 185.
- 3 Letter to Dostoevsky of March 18 (30), 1862, in *Fathers and Sons*, 182–83.
- 4 Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Michael R. Katz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 365.

- 5 Quoted in Irene Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism: A Study in the Semiotics of Behavior* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 27.
- 6 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1993), 3.
- 7 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 230.
- 8 James P. Scanlan is persuasive on this point in *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), chapter two.
- 9 Letter to Mikhail Dostoevsky of October 9, 1859, in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, trans. David Lowe and Ronald Meyer, 5 vols. (Ardis: Ann Arbor, 1999), vol. 1, 393.
- 10 Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963), 517.
- 11 Letter to Mikhail Dostoevsky of March 26, 1864, in Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, vol. 2, 100.
- 12 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, trans. Kyril FitzLyon (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2008), 50.
- 13 Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 334.
- 14 Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 168.

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