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## Dostoevsky and the Disease of Rationalism

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## Dostoevsky and the Disease of Rationalism

Dostoevsky, who was born in 1821 and died in 1881, is acknowledged by many to be the chief prophet of modernity (which I take to begin in the 17th century, with the rise of scientific rationalism and to end in the mid-twentieth century with the numerous cultural changes which we see about us today.) In relation to modernity, we could say that he stands in the same position that Dante occupies in relation to the medieval era. The ideas and modes of feeling of his epoch are the very stuff of his artistry. Within his dramatic form (and both of these writers are essentially dramatic), these ideas are sifted and evaluated by the complex action of the work of art. And like Dante, Dostoevsky's vision is thoroughly Christian and hence thoroughly comic. It is not of course comic in the sense of being humorous or amusing, but comic in the deeper sense of viewing all the movements of life as constituting a journey toward salvation or damnation.

Like Dante, Dostoevsky's canvas is filled with a multiplicity of characters; and similarly these characters take on an almost allegorical significance: they are distorted, exaggerated, grotesque: they point to a meaning that can be deciphered, however, only through their poetic form. For despite the fact that Dostoevsky's work is highly intellectual -- concerned with ideas, with mental processes, with ideologies -- the form into which he casts his work is poetic, not philosophic. Thus, though Dostoevsky's writings have taught much to philosophers, theologians, psychologists, political scientists, and other thinkers, it is, as Ortega y Gasset maintains, his mastery of form that makes him a great novelist.

Because he has been read by numerous critics and scholars simply for his ideas, he has been many times misread; and has been thought to be a sadist, a neurotic, a morbid and unhealthy talent; a genius but not an artist, an impulsive writer "not in control of his material." Increasingly, however, during the last few decades he is being given more careful and more sympathetic attention. Readers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Joseph Frank, Robert Jackson, and others are pointing the way toward that complete and accurate reading of Dostoevsky that has been lacking until fairly recently.

For he writes of the profound alienation of modern man in an urban environment, of the destitution of the city, the disintegration of the family, the fragmentation of man, the triumph of system, the domination of money, the victimization of the feminine, the tendency to construct Utopias. He writes of fantasy and daydream, as opposed to what the underground man calls "real, living life"; of individualism played out against a polyphony of communal voices and unseen forces. His major symbols are earth, the city, the insulted and injured, the double, the underground man, the Golden Age ideal; his major theme, the failure of the life of conscious rationalism to replace the myth by which men live together in harmony and love.

In the 1873 issue of his *Diary of a Writer* Dostoevsky made this comment about the "hidden ideas" in a people's life:

There are ideas which remain unexpressed, unconscious, and are only strongly felt; there are many such ideas fused together, as it were, within the soul of man. They also exist in a whole people as well as in mankind taken as a whole. So long as these ideas are unconsciously embedded in the life of the people and are strong and properly felt, only so long can the people live a powerful living life. All the energy of its life is but a striving to make those hidden ideas clear to itself.

It is in his four great novels -- *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, and the *Brothers Karamazov* that Dostoevsky was able to get at these great communal ideas that constituted for him the Russian myth (and a genuine myth always has universal value). The works you have read for this evening are preliminary to these masterpieces; and though these earlier pieces are interesting in their own right and carefully wrought, they nonetheless bear the same relation to these later works that Dante's *Inferno* bears to his *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

For both the *Underground Man* and poor *Golyadkin* of the *Double* are lost souls. Both, stories therefore make for fairly uncomfortable, though brilliant, reading. The *Double* (written in 1846, before his arrest and exile to Siberia (in 1849); and rewritten in 1866 after his pardon (in 1859) has had a particularly painful critical history: Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* had just been discovered by Belinsky, the influential Petersburg

critic (the equivalent of one's being discovered in the 20th century by, say T. S. Eliot); and he wrote his second novel, *The Double*, with a heightened sense of anticipation. It was a critical failure. No one who read it liked it, and very few readers bothered to finish it. Dostoevsky himself, from having written of it with great anticipation in letters to his brother, denounced it as foolish and unreadable.

Even today scholars consider the work a failure. It is a Kafka-like piece; to say a Gogol<sup>a</sup>-like piece, of course, would be more accurate. For it came out of Gogol's short story *The Nose*, just as *Poor Folk* had descended from Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*. In *The Nose*, a poor government clerk rises to shave himself one morning and, looking in the mirror, finds his nose missing. He is hideously embarrassed, can hardly bear to go to the office, and on the way is accosted by an overbearing gentleman in a greatcoat whom he recognizes as his own nose. But Gogol is not hard to size up as grotesque, as weird fantasy. Dostoevsky, in contrast, even in this early work, writes in a more complex and troubling mode. One cannot tell whether his work is fantasy or not (somewhat like Toni Morrison's recent novel *Beloved*.)

In *The Double*, Dostoevsky depicts a titular councillor, Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, who awakens one morning, not knowing whether he is still asleep or awake, rises, pleased with himself, obviously anticipating something of importance, (Read p. 127.) He looks in the mirror to see if the face that's there looks all right, counts his money, feels pleased with himself, puts on new boots, rents an expensive horse and carriage, readying himself for some sort of debut. Riding to town in his carriage, he encounters his superior, who stares at him with surprise. He is taken aback and utters one of the most comically ridiculous phrases in the story. Shall I just, he thinks, pretend it's not me but someone who looks just like me? Should I bow to him and say, "It's all right. It's not me." (a line worthy of Chaplin or Beckett) He stops off at his doctor's office and in the ensuing conversation gives us a prologue of what's to come: the doctor advises him to live a more normal life, to go out more, not to be an enemy to the bottle - in other words not to be so solitary and solemn. Golyadkin takes a bit of offense, defends himself with the phrase that he is to use through the story: "I go my own way -- I'm a man apart, and as far as I can see, I don't depend on anybody." Then,

as the doctor is about to dismiss him, he becomes tearful and obviously wishes to bare his soul: people have conspired against him, they tell all sorts of lies about him, they have created a scandal, they say he was already engaged to a disreputable German lady, that he promised her his hand just for room and board; how is he to vanquish his enemies? The doctor of course is considerably perplexed at this outburst, is unable to offer any concrete advice, and Golyadkin finally takes his leave. When he looks back, he sees the doctor's troubled face in the window.

He spends the afternoon shopping (though he doesn't actually purchase anything) and finally, in the evening, goes to the home of his superior and presents himself at the door. The footman says he has orders not to let Golyadkin in. Golyadkin is amazed. How could this be so? He has been invited. Olsufi Ivanovich -- Clara's father -- is almost a father to him. He tries to push himself inside, but is prevented from doing so. The door is slammed in his face. As he leaves, he feels that everyone in the house is looking at him through the windows. He pays off the coachman, instructs his servant to go home, goes to a tavern, orders dinner, and tries to decide something of very grave importance. When we next see him, he is in a strange position. (Read some of p. 156) He waits three hours in a cold, uncomfortable position, trying to find a way to make an inconspicuous entrance to the party. Finally he steps inside, but he is far from inconspicuous. People surround him; he tries to be pleasant and casual, ends by causing consternation by trying to dance with the young lady whose engagement ball this is, and is bodily ousted, thrown out into the street.

More dead than alive, he wanders. He is crushed, unable to feel anything, (page 165) loses one of his galoshes in the snow: goes to the bridge, stares into the black water -- sees his double for the first time. The man follows him home, goes up his stair, precedes him into his own room, looks up at him from his bed. He falls insensible with horror.

The next morning when he goes to the office, they introduce to him the new clerk. It is of course his double -- with not only the same face and mien, but the same name. The man at first is friendly to Golyadkin senior, as the author now calls him, goes home with him, listens to his troubles, pledges loyalty and friendship. The next

day at the office, however, Golyadkin junior takes over his work, seems not to respect him -- and as time passes, the newcomer jeers at him, elicits sympathy from all the others in the department by his satirical wit. As things go on, the real Golyadkin alienates himself even more with everyone he knows; Perushka his manservant decides not to work for him anymore. His friends write him letters accusing him of dishonorable conduct; he cannot clear himself at the office, despite trying desperately to talk to his superiors. He has a letter from Clara Olsufya, the young woman whose birthday had been celebrated before and whose engagement was announced. In it she asks him to elope with her, to take her away from this enforced marriage. He rents a carriage, waits outside her door. He is invited inside, and the scene of the other festivity seems to be repeated -- except that this time everyone is friendly; all are trying to suppress tears. He is hastened out a door into the waiting presence of a tall huge man in black coat - Dr. Rutenspitz (his psychiatrist). He gets in a carriage and is driven away (see page 287).

What is the meaning of this strange and troubling story? Why do we not simply say it's about a schizophrenic? Or it's like some of the twilight zone stories on TV -- puzzling, titillating, inexplicable.

We can't settle for either of these explanations because the very tone of the narration makes them inadequate as an account of its haunting power. Golyadkin may be, no doubt is, insane. But this is no real interpretation of the power of the story. It is not a case history of a lunatic, but a parable about mankind. As Svidrigailov says to Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment: "What if only a sick man can see ghosts? That does not mean that ghosts do not exist, but that only sick people can see them." There is a weird nightmarish quality to the Double that gives it universality, that makes it familiar to the reader in the depths of his soul. And this is the key to it: it is a depiction of the terrain of the soul: the soul locked in isolation, unable to communicate to others, feeling itself alien, unloved, unwanted, trying courageously to get by in social situations but cut off, ridiculed, rejected -- having to see finally even one's own body, one's name, one's self appropriated by another. It portrays the soul that cannot exist in love, but must make its way in constant competition with others in a world where

injure or be injured is the immutable law.

It is a picture, then, we could say, of mythless man, who tries to be reasonable in a wildly irrational world. I tried a few years back to describe the action of myth in relating the individual person to the whole of society: For myth is all-important to our civil life, the life we share in society. As a container for the diverse aspects of existence, a pattern of design based not on fact but on value, it has the virtue of enlisting participation in a communal order that transcends yet includes and dignifies the lives of individual human beings. Myth enables us to place ourselves within a destiny larger than our own small and relatively insignificant circle of success or failure. It empowers us to face disappointment, defeat, and death without self-pity or bitterness. And, rather than imposing a rigid uniformity on society and thus stifling individual passion and creativity, such a vision of order -- in which people agree about the meaning of life--supports and enhances diversity and endows ordinary acts with purpose and grace. Myth is rooted in the land and its ordering, to which a people give their allegiance and into which they welcome and initiate others. Indeed, social codes of honor, hospitality, courtesy, heroism find their support not in reasoned principles, practicality, or even convention, but in a mythic consciousness of what is fitting and right. ("Myth and the Modern World," in Texas Myths)

This story gave Dostoevsky one of the recurring figures for his later fiction: and after his conversion to Christianity he understood the apparition far better: the soul isolates itself in pride and egotism, cuts itself off increasingly, and looks at others with detachment and revulsion, and, if it does not turn to God in its despair, projects its own motives on other people; ultimately sees in them only a double of itself. Raskolnikov-Svidrigailov; Myshkin-Rogozhin; Ivan-Smerdyakov -- and finally his devil.

The second work of Dostoevsky's we are considering this evening is the famous "Notes from Underground," or, as some would translate it more literally, "Notes from under the floor," or, according to Nabokov, "Memoirs from a Mousehole."

(I think we'll keep the better known title!)  
Dostoevsky himself described what he called "the tragedy of the underground," made up of suffering, self-torture, the consciousness of what is best and the impossibility of attaining it, and above all the firm belief of these unhappy creatures that everybody else is the same and that consequently it is not worth while trying to reform." (p. 10)

Not long before Dostoevsky wrote the underground piece, Chernyshevsky had published his novel *What Is to Be Done?* In it he proposes a future Utopia, in which all the laws of nature governing society will have been discovered. The triumph of this Crystal Palace, as Joseph Frank writes in his essay "Nihilism and Notes from Underground," "presupposes that science will have taught man that his free will, in addition to being a regrettable speculative error, was also a positive hindrance to his welfare." (Read on pp. 10-11 of your text)

Chernyshevsky thus posed the alternative: either moral freedom or "reason" with all its material advantages. Dostoevsky's answer in *Notes from Underground* is that man's need to feel himself free and morally autonomous is precisely the "one most valuable good" for which he is ready to sacrifice all the others . . . For however stupid and unreasonable this "good" may be, "it preserves what is most precious and most important to us, namely our personality and our individuality."

[See note from author at the beginning of *Notes from Underground*]

Chapter One, p. 15: "I am a sick man . . . . I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man. I think there is something wrong with my liver." (continue)  
He informs us that he is forty, that he has been living "underground" for twenty years, that he formerly worked in the government service and was a bad civil servant.--rude, clever, cynical. (16) "I was always conscious of many elements showing the directly opposite tendency. I felt them positively swarming inside me, these elements."

"Not only couldn't I make myself malevolent, I couldn't make myself anything: neither good nor bad, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect. . . ." "To go on living after forty is unseemly, disgusting, immoral!" (A relative left him six thousand rubles in his will and enabled him to retire. "I settled down in my little corner . . . the climate of St. Petersburg is bad for me [but it doesn't matter]. What can a decent, respectable man talk about with the



greatest pleasure? Answer: himself."

He assumes an audience of "informed" people who challenge him, disagree with him, jeer at him, scorn him. He tricks them, refutes, triumphs over them with his wit and his agility. It is this audience that keeps his hysterical self-examination going.

p. 17: "I swear to you that to think too much is a disease, a real actual disease." A quarter of the intellectual activity that one does in St. Petersburg would be sufficient for the ordinary man -- "the most abstract and [premeditated] city in the whole round world."

"The more I thought about the beautiful and the sublime, the more I sank back into my morass"; he reaches the point of feeling intense gratification when he returns to his corner after having committed some vile act. "I would gnaw, gnaw at myself for it, pestering and sucking the life out of myself until the bitterness eventually turned into some kind of shameful, damned sweetness and finally into a definite pleasure." He speaks of his "intensified consciousness," so that "you know you are a wretch, as if it were a consolation to a wretch that he himself already realizes that he actually is a wretch."

He is, he admits, terribly self-centered, touchy and quick to take offense, "like a hunchback or a dwarf. I am more intelligent than everybody around me." (he is sometimes embarrassed by it and has to turn his eyes away from other people.) Then he goes into an imaginary slap someone might have given him. He admits that he could not be forgiving, nor could he take revenge, "because, in all probability, I would not have been able to decide to do anything even if I could." And, he goes on, if you take the antithesis of the normal man, that is the intensely conscious man, who originated in a test tube, not in the loins of nature -- he honestly "considers himself to be a mouse, not a man. Granted, a mouse with intensified consciousness, but still a mouse." If the mouse is wronged, it denies it has anything to do with justice. But "in its miserable, stinking underground, our wronged, beaten-down, and ridiculed mouse immediately plunges into cold, venomous, and most important, everlasting spite." It will remember an insult for forty years, adding to it, increasing its shame, will "go over everything, dream up a lot of slander against itself under the pretext that this too might have happened, and will forgive nothing."

Then he goes into the malice of a toothache. The conscious man moans in malice; if he did not take pleasure in it, he would'nt bother to moan. His whole family listen to him with loathing, not believing him in the least bit, knowing that he could moan in another, simpler way, without tremolos and embellishments.

"But tell me, he writes, "who was the first to enunciate, who was the first to proclaim that man makes mischief only because he does not know his own true interests? O infant, O innocent child! In the first place, when, in all these millennia, did a man do something solely for his own advantage? What should we do with the millions of facts attesting to instances where people knowingly, that is, with a complete understanding of their true advantage, relegated it to second place, rushed headlong down a different road, ran a risk, took a gamble without anyone or anything compelling them to do it, as if the only thing they did not wish was precisely taking the indicated road, and stubbornly, willfully carved out another road, a difficult, absurd one that they had to seek out in almost complete darkness. This means, then, that the stubbornness and willfulness was in fact more enjoyable to them than any advantage."

"Civilization produces in man only a multiplicity of sensations and . . . and absolutely nothing more. And through the development of this multiplicity, man will, I dare say, eventually reach the point where he finds plesasure in the sight of blood. . . because of civilization man has become if not more bloodthirsty, then surely bloodthirsty in a worse, more repulsive way than before. In the old days he saw justice in the bloodshed and with a clear conscience he exterminated whomever he though fit; nowadays, although we consider bloodshed an abomination, we practice this abomination just the same, and even more than before." [Cleopatra and the slave girls] You will say science will completely reeducate human nature and turn it in the right way.

"Consequently, we have only to discover the laws of nature, and man will no longer be responsible for his actions, and life will be exceedingly easy for him. All human actions . . . will then be computed according to these laws . . . ."The Crystal Palace can then be built." "Let me tell you: reason, gentlemen, is a fine thing, no doubt about that, but reason is only reason and satisfies only the reasoning capacity of man, while wanting is the expression of all aspects of life, that of all life, including reason and all

the itches. . . REason knows only what it has managed to learn, while human nature acts as a whole, with everything it's got, consciously and unconsciously, and though it blunders, it lives." Man does not really desire material happiness: "Go ahead, shower him with all the blessings of the earth, plunge him in over his head in happiness so that only the bubbles pop up on the surface of the happiness as if on water; give him such economic affluence that there would be nothing left for him to do but sleep, eat gingerbrad, and attend to the non-cessation of world history; even then, even in that case, man would, out of sheer ingratitude, out of sheer perversity, do something loathsome."

"Why are you so perfectly convinced that not going against the true, normal advantages guaranteed by arguments of reason and arithmetic is always truly advantageous to man and is the law for all mankind? . . . Let's concede that it is a law of logic, but perhaps it is not at all a law of mankind. . . . Man is a predominantly creative animal, condemned to strive consciously toward a goal and to practice the art of engineering, that is, eternally and incessantly to hew a road to wherever it may lead. . . . Men want to struggle; if they had the Crystal Palace, they would want to change it or destroy it. The anthill is the only symbol of unchanging construction. "And why are you so firmly convinced that well-being alone is advantageous to man? Couldn't reason be mistaken about advantages? After all, perhaps well-being is not the only thing man likes? Perhaps he likes suffering just as much? Perhaps suffering is just as advantageous to him as well-being? Yet man sometimes likes suffering terribly, to the point of passion and that is a fact. There isn't even any need here to look at world history; ask yourself if only you're a man and have lived even a little. . . . It would be quite unthinkable in the Crystal Palace . . . And yet I am certain that man will never reject true suffering, that is destruction and chaos. Suffering--why after all it is the sole cause of consciousness."

In Section X there is a new note: As Frank points out in his essay, "we become aware of how literally unbearable the situation of the underground man really is. Torn between the convictions of his reason and the revolt of his conscience and feelings, the underground man cries out: 'Surely I have not been made for the sole purpose of drawing the conclusion that the way I am made is a piece of rank deceit! Can this be the

sole purpose? I don't believe it.'" He goes on to indicate that he would not stick his tongue out at the real crystal palace. But he will not call a hencoop a palace. Nor will he be satisfied with a housing project where tenants have a nine hundred and ninety-nine year lease. "The Crystal Palace may be just an idle dream, it may be against all the laws of nature, I may have invented it because of my own stupidity, because of certain old and irrational habits of my generation. But what do I care whether it is against the laws of nature? What does it matter so long as it exists in my desires, or rather exists while my desires exist?" As Frank points out, something is wrong here. "The Crystal Palace is the opposite of everything it has stood for through the rest of the text. This latter Crystal Palace is a structure that exists against the laws of nature instead of being their embodiment; it is an answer to man's desires and not their suppression." Frank supposes that Dostoevsky means here (in the mentioned irrational beliefs of my generation) something about the liberal socialists dream. But it rather seems that he means quite different. Dostoevsky wrote in a letter after the publication of Notes from Underground:

I am not at all happy about my article. There are terrible proofreading errors, and it would have been better not to publish the penultimate chapter (the most important, here the very idea of the whole article is expressed) rather than to publish it this way, that is, with twisted sentences and contradictions. But what can one do? What swine the censors are! Where I derided everything, and sometimes blasphemed "for appearance, they let it get by, but when from all this I deduced the necessity of belief in Christ, they cut it out. Why, are the censors perhaps conspiring against the government?

It seems clear from what Dostoevsky says that the real Crystal Palace is the ideal of the good and just city, the Christian society -- the way of life that leads to the New Jerusalem. And now we can go back and put together many of the topics about which the underground man speaks: the slap on the cheek and the possibility of forgiveness, man's love of freedom, at the expense of his own advantage; his recognition that man cannot be contained by "the laws of nature," and that reason unaided cannot provide his happiness; the sinfulness of human nature, even when man contemplates the sublime and the beautiful; his

desire to create at all costs, his love of suffering, which for some becomes a passion. What he has outlined for us, in his perversely ironic tone, is a sketch of what man really is -- despite all social philosophies, despite all "rational" systems to the contrary. And his hatred of the socialist Crystal Palace stems from its being a pretense at being the real Crystal Palace.

At the end of this first section he turns on his imaginary audience and says that he does not believe one thing he has said. "Then why in the world did you write all this? you ask me." "I just dreamed up all these words of yours (your responses), I answer. And are you so gullible that you think I might publish all this and give it to you to read?"

You say, "If you are not expecting readers, then why do you write all this down and make pacts with yourself etc. "Well you figure it out, I answer. But here's something else. Why do I want to write? Well, on paper it looks more impressive. Maybe it will enhance the style. And maybe I will get some relief from writing it down. For instance a certain recollection from the distant past keeps oppressing me. Maybe if I write it down it will leave me alone. And finally, I am bored. And then he tells a story from 16 years before, on account of the wet snow. And what we hear is a confession -- the confession of a tormented man who longs for something more than the underground: not normalcy, but not the underground, as he says, "something different, entirely different, something that I crave but that I just can't find. To hell with the underground!"

The second section of the Notes is a confession, like Stavrogin's in *The Possessed*, of harm done to "one of the little ones," a young prostitute. Cruelty to the vulnerable young woman is a theme that runs through Dostoevsky's mature novels -- Raskolnikov and Sonia; Totsky, Rogozhin and Nastasya, Stavrogin and Matreyosha, Marya. Old Karamazov and Alyosha's mother; the Pole and Grushenka. It is a confession that has stayed with the underground man, one that marks his downward path. Can we find in it any recognition of his wrongdoing -- or does he cover up his own dreadful guilt?