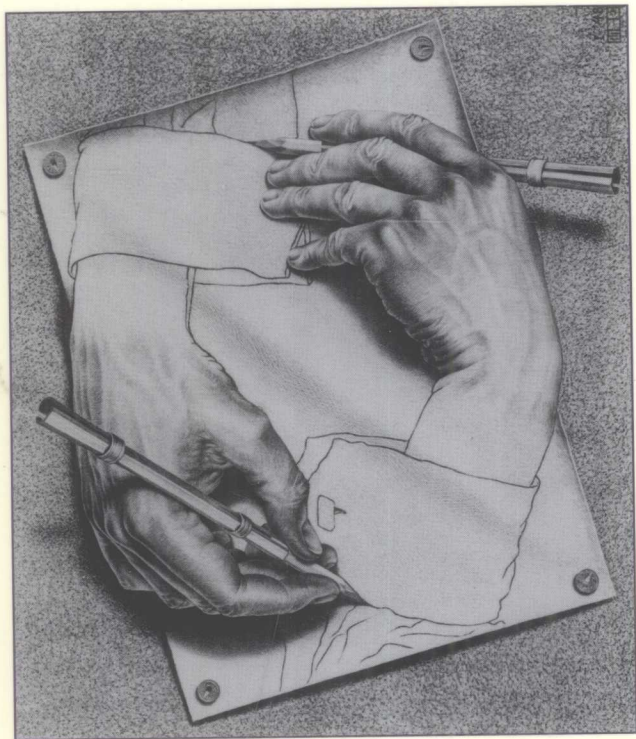


NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY



TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
MICHAEL R. KATZ

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION
SECOND EDITION

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Fyodor Dostoevsky
NOTES FROM
UNDERGROUND



AN AUTHORITATIVE TRANSLATION
BACKGROUNDS AND SOURCES
RESPONSES
CRITICISM

SECOND EDITION

Translated and Edited by
MICHAEL R. KATZ

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

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Preface to the Second Edition

In this new edition I have made several minor revisions to the translation. I am grateful to my colleagues Alexei Pavlenko and Rachel May and to my student Toby Dougherty for their helpful corrections.

I have also added a brief note on the translation, selections from Odoevsky and Turgenev to "Backgrounds and Sources," and from Zamyatin and Sartre to "Responses"; I replaced the selection from Morson in "Criticism" and added one from Todorov; and I added several titles to the selected bibliography. I am grateful to the following colleagues for their valuable suggestions: Caryl Emerson, Joseph Frank, Sidney Monas, Gary Saul Morson, and Richard Peace.

MICHAEL R. KATZ
Middlebury College

Preface to the First Edition

There have been numerous translations of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, a fact that bears witness to its extraordinary place in world literature. I have included a list of what I take to be the eight "principal" translations of the work—some of which are quite decent, and others of which are positively indecent. Only two of these are accompanied by any annotations; only one includes a selection of letters and background material; and only one contains a small selection of critical essays.

It has been my intention to produce what I hope is at least another decent translation of an extremely convoluted piece of mid-nineteenth-century Russian prose; in addition, I have attempted to provide comprehensive annotations and an extensive critical apparatus.

The first section, "Backgrounds and Sources," includes relevant passages from Dostoevsky's letters to his brother written between 1859 and 1864; an excerpt on "Socialism and Christianity" from one of the author's notebooks; selections from his account of a formative visit to the West; and an extended part of Chernyshevsky's revolutionary novel *What Is to Be Done?* with which Dostoevsky polemicized in his *Notes from Underground*.

"Responses," the second section, contains two parodies of Dostoevsky's work, one by the author's contemporary, M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, and the other by our contemporary, Woody Allen. In addition, there are several works that seem to me to have been inspired by *Notes from Underground*: a short story by the German-Swiss author Robert Walser, the introduction to his classic novel by the American writer Ralph Ellison, and a song by two lads from Liverpool, John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

The third section, "Criticism," contains essays dating from 1882 to 1986—over one hundred years of writing about *Notes from Underground*. It includes excerpts from distinguished Russian critics, as well as examples of the best of recent Anglo-American scholarship on the work. A selected bibliography has been included to provide suggestions for further reading and study.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my reader, Walter Arndt, and to my former teachers at Williams College, Doris de Keyserlingk and Nicholas Fersen, for their perceptive comments on my draft trans-

lation; to my colleagues Robert Belknap, George Gibian, Robert Louis Jackson, Sidney Monas, Victor Terras, William Mills Todd, and Edward Wasiolek for their encouragement and suggestions of works to be included in the critical apparatus; to my students at the University of Texas at Austin, Timothy Mark Taylor for the initial inspiration to undertake the project, Glenn Randall Mack for his research on the annotations, Joshua Larson and Samuel Peter Smith for their assistance in typing the manuscript, and Julie Swann for her help with proofreading. My work is dedicated to these students and to others like them.

MICHAEL R. KATZ

A Brief Note on the Translation

Of all the works of nineteenth-century Russian literature I have translated, without doubt Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* remains the most challenging. That will come as no surprise to anyone who has read it in Russian even once, and may not even surprise those who have read it in English translation (mine or someone else's). I do not plan to address here the many challenges the work presents to a conscientious translator; instead, I want to focus on one problem, the first of many that the translator confronts, namely, the first three sentences of the work.

In Russian transliteration, the lines are as follows:

Ya chelovék bol'nói. Ya zloi chelovék. Neprivlekátel'nyi ya chelovék.

A "literal" English translation preserving the word order of the original Russian reads as follows:

I [am a] man sick. I [am a] spiteful man. Unattractive [am]
I [a] man.

Three simple sentences, each comprised of three words. Two of the three words in each are repeated: *ya*—the first person nominative singular of the personal pronoun; and *chelovék*—a common noun in the nominative singular. The translation of these two words is not really problematic: *ya* = "I" and *chelovék* = "man," "person," or "human being." Since spoken Russian has no verb "to be" in the present tense and no articles at all (definite or indefinite), I have inserted verbs and articles in brackets to make the English grammatical.

The three adjectives are difficult to translate: each has several meanings that resonate in the text. The first, *bol'nói*, means "sick" or "ill" (in the physical sense). In the predicative position (i.e., following the noun), the word denotes inherent, permanent characteristics and takes on the meaning of "sickly" or "chronically ill," denoting a long-term condition, rather than a temporary problem. Thus the hero's very first utterance characterizes his health: we soon learn that his liver is diseased, but before very long we realize that the illness is not only physical

but also psychological. When the underground man says he is a "sick" man, it is clear that the word applies to his mind as well as to his body.

The second adjective, *zloi*, is even more problematical. The word has usually been translated in this sentence as "mean," "nasty," or "spiteful." That's appropriate, but omits another important meaning of the word, "evil" or "wicked," as opposed to "good" (*dóbryi*).¹ That other meaning is essential to recall in order to understand the hero's crisis in part 2, chapter 9, when the prostitute Liza finally understands how unhappy he is. Instead of replying to him with words, she offers the greatest gift she can, unconditional love. The underground man is severely conflicted: part of him wants to respond to her, but he cannot. In a burst of honesty and self-pity, he pleads with her: "They won't let me be . . . I can't be . . . good (*dóbryi*)." So from the second sentence of the work until this critical moment near the end of part 2, the underground man has been "evil" and will continue to be so because he can never escape his own nature.

The third adjective, *neprivlekátel'nyi*, is a compound word formed of the following elements: the verb *vlech'* = to pull or drag + the prefix *pri* = near, at + the negative prefix *ne* = not + a noun suffix of agency *tel'* + the adjectival ending *nyi*. The result is a literary word meaning "unattractive," "unpleasant," or "repellent." The word is used in its positive degree, that is, not comparative or superlative. Some translators have chosen to strengthen the attribute by qualifying it with an adverb such as "truly" or "most."

Not only are these three words difficult to translate, but Dostoevsky's word order is virtually impossible to render in English. To illustrate I will diagram the structure of the original Russian: let's represent the personal pronoun *ya* as "1," the common noun *chelovék* as "2," and the adjective in each sentence as "3." Thus the structure of the first three sentences looks like this:

1	2	3a
1	3b	2
3c	1	2

I would argue that this unusual word order exists in order to foreground the adjective, advancing it from the third (and last) to the second and then to the first position in the final sentence. In each of the three utterances we focus more and more on the highlighted characteristic

1. Richard Pevear's foreword to his translation refers to this problem (p. xxii) as a "tradition of mistranslation." I do not agree. I think the primary meaning of *zloi* in this context is best rendered as "mean," "nasty," "spiteful"; thus the ethical dimension functions as the secondary level of meaning, brought to the fore in the hero's crisis in part 2. I would note, however, that Pevear attempts to capture the Russian rhyme (*bol'nói/zloi*) in his "sick/wicked."

of the underground man: (a) "sickly" → (b) "spiteful/evil" → (c) "unattractive." Given that the other two words (pronoun and noun) in each sentence are identical, we gain new information only from the adjective.

In English it is impossible to replicate this word order and thus impossible to foreground the adjective. Versions of these lines by translators show various attempts to achieve something of the same effect, but all fail to do what the Russian does so effortlessly.

Lastly, these three seemingly simple sentences announce Dostoevsky's most important themes for the entire work. The pronoun *ya* indicates that man's individuality lies at the center of the author's attention. The underground man fights against powerful forces threatening to obliterate his individuality, his originality, his uniqueness. The noun *chelovék* reveals that the central problem concerns not just that one individual, but all people, humanity in general. Finally, all three adjectives begin the complicated process of characterizing the hero in the most profound and precise terms: his illness (physical and psychological), his personality ("mean, nasty, spiteful," as well as "evil, wicked"), and his impact on other people ("unattractive, unpleasant, repellent"). These three themes are what Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* are all about.

Translating all this into English isn't easy. Here is a list of ten versions published to date:

I am ill; I am full of spleen and repellent.

C. J. Hogarth (1913)

I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man.

Constance Garnett (1918)

I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unpleasant man.

Ralph Matlaw (1960)

I'm a sick man . . . a mean man. There's nothing attractive about me.

Andrew MacAndrew (1961)

I am a sick man. . . . I am a nasty man. A truly unattractive man.

Serge Shishkoff (1969)

I am a sick man. . . . I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man.

Jessie Coulson (1972)

I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. An unattractive man.

Mirra Ginsburg (1974)

I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. No, I am not a pleasant man at all.

David Magarshack (1979)

I am a sick man. . . . I'm a spiteful man. I'm an unattractive man.

Jane Kentish (1991)

I am a sick man. . . . I am a wicked man. An unattractive man.

R. Pevear and L. Volochonsky (1993)

I wish I had a brilliant solution to offer. The early rendition by the indefatigable and inimitable Constance Garnett strikes me as the simplest, and I have chosen to borrow it, in spite of the fact that neither the epithets nor the word order corresponds closely to the Russian. The challenge of rendering these three sentences stands as a reminder that no translation can ever really "replace" the original. The best we can do (and, unfortunately, we can't always do it) is to provide a close "equivalent." For the authentic experience the reader is advised and urged to learn the language.

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The Text of
NOTES FROM
UNDERGROUND



Notes from Underground

I Underground¹

I.

I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I think my liver is diseased. Then again, I don't know a thing about my illness; I'm not even sure what hurts. I'm not being treated and never have been, though I respect both medicine and doctors. Besides, I'm extremely superstitious—well at least enough to respect medicine. (I'm sufficiently educated not to be superstitious, but I am, anyway.) No, gentlemen, it's out of spite that I don't wish to be treated. Now then, that's something you probably won't understand. Well, I do. Of course, I won't really be able to explain to you precisely who will be hurt by my spite in this case; I know perfectly well that I can't possibly "get even" with doctors by refusing their treatment; I know better than anyone that all this is going to hurt me alone, and no one else. Even so, if I refuse to be treated, it's out of spite. My liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more!

I've been living this way for some time—about twenty years. I'm forty now. I used to be in the civil service. But no more. I was a nasty official. I was rude and took pleasure in it. After all, since I didn't accept bribes, at least I had to reward myself in some way. (That's a poor joke, but I won't cross it out. I wrote it thinking it would be very witty; but now, having realized that I merely wanted to show off disgracefully, I'll make a point of not crossing it out!) When petitioners used to approach my desk for information, I'd gnash my teeth and feel unending pleasure if I succeeded in causing someone distress. I almost always succeeded.

1. Both the author of these notes and the *Notes* themselves are fictitious, of course. Nevertheless, people like the author of these notes not only may, but actually must exist in our society, considering the general circumstances under which our society was formed. I wanted to bring before the public with more prominence than usual one of the characters of the recent past. He's a representative of the current generation. In the excerpt entitled "Underground" this person introduces himself and his views, and, as it were, wants to explain the reasons why he appeared and why he had to appear in our midst. The following excerpt ["Apropos of Wet Snow"] contains the actual "notes" of this person about several events in his life [Dostoevsky's note].

For the most part they were all timid people: naturally, since they were petitioners. But among the dandies there was a certain officer whom I particularly couldn't bear. He simply refused to be humble, and he clanged his saber in a loathsome manner. I waged war with him over that saber for about a year and a half. At last I prevailed. He stopped clanging. All this, however, happened a long time ago, during my youth. But do you know, gentlemen, what the main component of my spite really was? Why, the whole point, the most disgusting thing, was the fact that I was shamefully aware at every moment, even at the moment of my greatest bitterness, that not only was I not a spiteful man, I was not even an embittered one, and that I was merely scaring sparrows to no effect and consoling myself by doing so. I was foaming at the mouth—but just bring me some trinket to play with, just serve me a nice cup of tea with sugar, and I'd probably have calmed down. My heart might even have been touched, although I'd probably have gnashed my teeth out of shame and then suffered from insomnia for several months afterward. That's just my usual way.

I was lying about myself just now when I said that I was a nasty official. I lied out of spite. I was merely having some fun at the expense of both the petitioners and that officer, but I could never really become spiteful. At all times I was aware of a great many elements in me that were just the opposite of that. I felt how they swarmed inside me, these contradictory elements. I knew that they had been swarming inside me my whole life and were begging to be let out; but I wouldn't let them out, I wouldn't, I deliberately wouldn't let them out. They tormented me to the point of shame; they drove me to convulsions and—and finally I got fed up with them, oh, how fed up! Perhaps it seems to you, gentlemen, that I'm repenting about something, that I'm asking your forgiveness for something? I'm sure that's how it seems to you. . . . But really, I can assure you, I don't care if that's how it seems. . . .

Not only couldn't I become spiteful, I couldn't become anything at all: neither spiteful nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect. Now I live out my days in my corner, taunting myself with the spiteful and entirely useless consolation that an intelligent man cannot seriously become anything and that only a fool can become something. Yes, sir, an intelligent man in the nineteenth century must be, is morally obliged to be, principally a characterless creature; a man possessing character, a man of action, is fundamentally a limited creature. That's my conviction at the age of forty. I'm forty now; and, after all, forty is an entire lifetime; why it's extreme old age. It's rude to live past forty, it's indecent, immoral! Who lives more than forty years? Answer sincerely, honestly. I'll tell you who: only fools and rascals. I'll tell that to those old men right to their faces, all those venerable old men, all those silver-haired and sweet-smelling old men! I'll say it to the whole world right to its face! I have a right

to say it because I myself will live to sixty. I'll make it to seventy! Even to eighty! . . . Wait! Let me catch my breath. . . .

You probably think, gentlemen, that I want to amuse you. You're wrong about that, too. I'm not at all the cheerful fellow I seem to be, or that I may seem to be; however, if you're irritated by all this talk (and I can already sense that you are irritated), and if you decide to ask me just who I really am, then I'll tell you: I'm a collegiate assessor.² I worked in order to have something to eat (but for that reason alone); and last year, when a distant relative of mine left me six thousand rubles in his will, I immediately retired and settled down in this corner. I used to live in this corner before, but now I've settled down in it. My room is nasty, squalid, on the outskirts of town. My servant is an old peasant woman, spiteful out of stupidity; besides, she always smells foul. I'm told that the Petersburg climate is becoming bad for my health, and that it's very expensive to live in Petersburg with my meager resources. I know all that; I know it better than all those wise and experienced advisers and admonishers. But I shall remain in Petersburg; I shall not leave Petersburg! I shall not leave here because . . . Oh, what difference does it really make whether I leave Petersburg or not?

Now, then, what can a decent man talk about with the greatest pleasure?

Answer: about himself.

Well, then, I, too, will talk about myself.

II.

Now I would like to tell you, gentlemen, whether or not you want to hear it, why it is that I couldn't even become an insect. I'll tell you solemnly that I wished to become an insect many times. But not even that wish was granted. I swear to you, gentlemen, that being overly conscious is a disease, a genuine, full-fledged disease. Ordinary human consciousness would be more than sufficient for everyday human needs—that is, even half or a quarter of the amount of consciousness that's available to a cultured man in our unfortunate nineteenth century, especially to one who has the particular misfortune of living in St. Petersburg, the most abstract and premeditated city in the whole world.³ (Cities can be either premeditated or unpremeditated.) It would have been entirely sufficient, for example, to have the consciousness with which all so-called spontaneous people and men of action are endowed. I'll bet that you think I'm writing all this to show off, to make fun of these men of action, that I'm clanging my saber just like that

2. The eighth rank in the Table of Ranks introduced for the civil service by Peter the Great in 1722.

3. Petersburg was conceived as an artificial city; plans called for regular streets, broad avenues, and spacious squares.