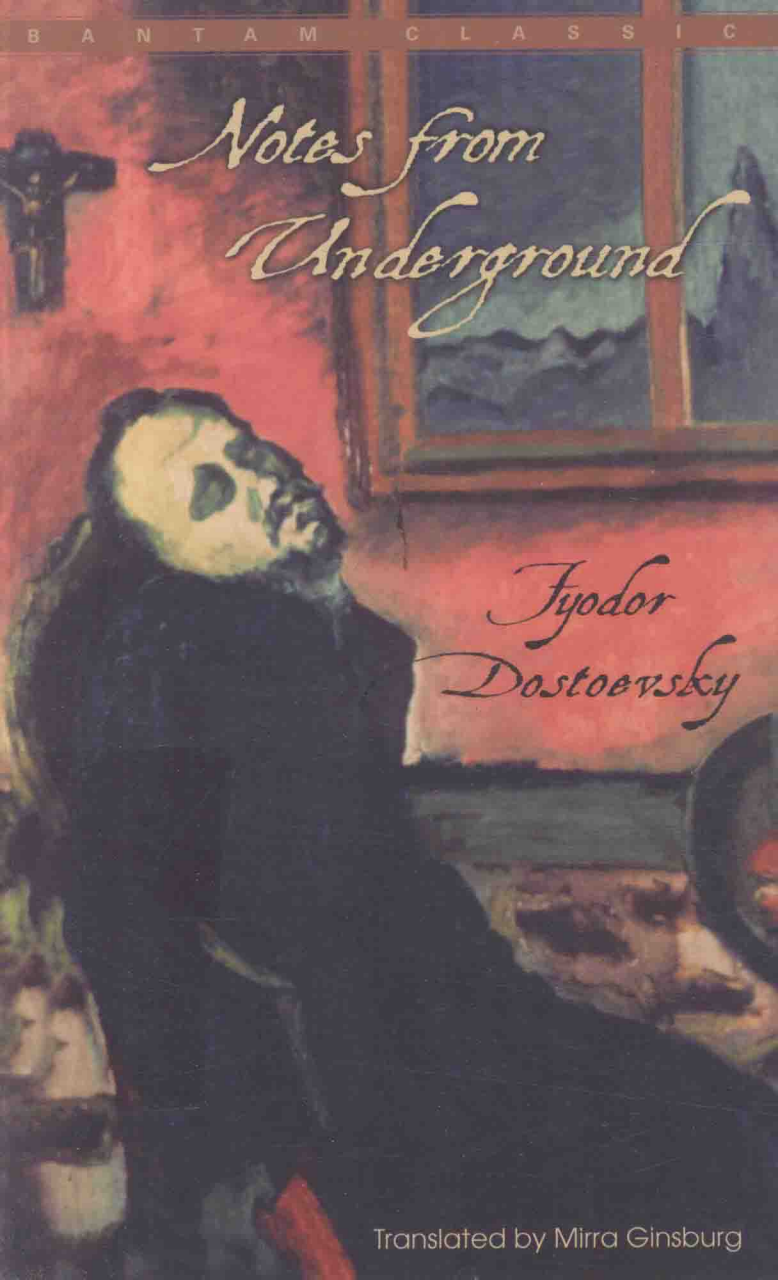
BANTAM CLASSIC

Notes from Underground



Fyodor Dostoevsky

Translated by Mirra Ginsburg

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With an Introduction by Donald Fanger

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A Bantam Book

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FYODOR MIKHAILOVICH DOSTOEVSKY's life was as dark and dramatic as the great novels he wrote. He was born in Moscow in 1821, the son of a former army surgeon whose drunken brutality led his own serfs to murder him by pouring vodka down his throat until he strangled. A short first novel, *Poor Folk* (1846), brought him instant success, but his writing career was cut short by his arrest for alleged subversion against Tsar Nicholas I in 1849. In prison he was given the "silent treatment" for eight months (guards even wore velvet-soled boots) before he was led in front of a firing squad. Dressed in a death shroud, he faced an open grave and awaited his execution when, suddenly, an order arrived commuting his sentence. He then spent four years at hard labor in a Siberian prison, where he began to suffer from epilepsy, and he only returned to St. Petersburg a full ten years after he had left in chains.

His prison experiences coupled with his conversion to a conservative and profoundly religious philosophy formed the basis for his great novels. But it was his fortuitous marriage to Anna Snitkina, following a period of utter destitution brought about by his compulsive gambling, that gave Dostoevsky the emotional stability to complete *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868–69), *The Possessed* (1871–72), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80). When Dostoevsky died in 1881, he left a legacy of masterworks that influenced the great thinkers and writers of the Western world and immortalized him as a giant among writers of world literature.

INTRODUCTION

IN THE 110 years since its first publication, *Notes from Underground* has lost none of its power to fascinate—to provoke, worry, repel, baffle, and move. If anything, that power has grown with time. The paradoxes of the nameless narrator resonate for us as they could not have done for Dostoevsky's contemporaries, for the political cataclysms and cultural revolutions of our century compel us to recognize (if not embrace) the kinship on which he insists, to see something of ourselves in his caricature. Freud and the whole body of specifically "modern" literature—including Dostoevsky's own later novels—have furnished a set of contexts that make his terms intelligible, even familiar. They also confirm the status of *Notes from Underground* as one of the most sheerly astonishing and subversive creations of European fiction.

This is not simply a matter of "content," of the character's "painful and scornful conclusions," or even (the words are Thomas Mann's) of his corrosive "radical frankness." More important is the way Dostoevsky alters the rules of the literary game—and forces us to learn them as we go. "A novel requires a hero," his wily soliloquist acknowledges, "but here there's a *deliberate* collection of all the traits for an antihero.... All this will produce an extremely unpleasant impression." "And yet," he taunts his reader, "I may even be more 'alive' than you are. Do take a closer look!"

There is no avoiding the invitation. This "confession" (as Dostoevsky first entitled it) begins with "I," but it ends provocatively with "we"; in fact, the speaker has involved

the reader from the beginning, addressing him directly, anticipating his reactions, preempting his judgments, denying him the comfortable role of spectator. (Just so Baudelaire challenges the reader of his *Fleurs du mal: "Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable, mon frère..."* The underground man, in short, traps his reader into a relationship.

It is worth insisting on this fact because it can guard us against tempting simplifications. The *Notes* abound in propositions about questions that continue to concern our age: self-knowledge and self-definition, the loneliness of urban man, the nature (and value!) of happiness, the power of ideology, the intrications of spirit, and the obduracy of flesh. That is why Dostoevsky's text has proven so legitimately attractive to students of philosophy, psychology, intellectual and political history. But these propositions must not be taken as expressing Dostoevsky's views—or even, simply, those of his character.

Already with his first novel, *Poor People,* Dostoevsky complained about the way readers tended to confuse him with his hero. "They are used to seeing the writer's mug in everything," he wrote his brother, "but I haven't shown mine. It never occurred to them that it's Devushkin [his character] speaking, not I, and that Devushkin cannot speak in any other way." The point is crucial: Dostoevsky, a relatively undistinguished thinker outside his fiction, was a genius at dramatizing ideas, bringing them to incandescent life, setting them in confrontation with each other, and testing them in action. All his novels are a play, however serious, with ideas. The *responsibility* for any given view belongs to the character enunciating it, and—just as in life—we must take into account all that we know and suspect of that character if we are to understand what he says.

In *Notes from Underground,* for example, the underground man's monologue moves strikingly from what is most personal to what is most general. His views arise from experience, his experience corroborates the views;

each seems to authenticate the other. But which are we to take as primary? The question is important—and unanswerable. Is he really proving that modern urban man can neither do nor become anything? Or is he constructing a casuistical theory to excuse his own failures? We choose either answer at our peril because, after all, *he* has given us the choice. There is no other, because there is no other material than what he presents. Yet if we accept it as offered, we have entered his own endless dilemma.

Here is a central feature of that special *kind* of fiction Dostoevsky created in the great novels beginning with *Crime and Punishment*: the tendency to parcel out to his characters portions of his own beliefs and doubts, mixing truths and half-truths, qualifying a statement through the tone of voice in which it is uttered, having the utterer himself call it into question elsewhere—and all in the absence of any such authoritative author's voice as might provide some ultimate point of view in more conventional novels.

Notes from Underground, published in 1864, is Dostoevsky's first essay in this new kind of fiction, and it broaches a new set of concerns. It shows him on the threshold of his major period, discovering the enabling device that would produce, over the next decade and a half, *Crime and Punishment, The Idiot, The Possessed, A Raw Youth,* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. But it does more than open the way to these great works; for it grows directly out of his earlier writings and constitutes an implicit critique of them. Few careers show such clear turning points. So it may be well to approach the *Notes* by way of their Dostoevskian ancestry.

I. BEGINNINGS: 1846–1863

Dostoevsky (1821–1881) was nineteenth-century Russia's only great novelist of the city—in his own words, the poet

of the "accidental tribe," by which he meant all those who were rootless, divorced from tradition and traditional assurance. His first novel was *Poor People*; his second, *The Double,* was subtitled "A Petersburg Poem." Virtually all his work through *Notes from Underground* fits under these rubrics, dealing (to invoke yet another of his titles) with "the insulted and injured." He was to pursue the theme of alienation throughout his career, but he saw it at first largely in the forms of poverty and failure.

Dostoevsky's city was Petersburg (now Leningrad)—"the most abstract and intentional city on earth," as the underground man calls it. Unlike the other capitals of Europe, Petersburg had no long history as a settled place. The site, indeed, seemed almost uninhabitable—a low-lying swamp on the Gulf of Finland—when Peter the Great brought it into being by imperial fiat at the beginning of the eighteenth century and made it the seat of government. The tsar himself laid out the symmetrical streets; Italian and French architects produced magnificent palaces; and the place was populated by edict. Petersburg was literally born of an idea, against nature, more sheerly man-made than any comparable city in Europe. By Dostoevsky's time, it was beginning to share the problems of the modern metropolis in general, but its almost metaphysical distinctiveness could never be forgotten. Thus it enjoyed a double existence, as fact and as symbol, the fantastic locus of a life removed from nature, community, and historical continuity.

Poor People was published in January 1846, and was immediately recognized as a major event in Russian literature. Dostoevsky later recalled how, as a twenty-four-year-old novice, he had been summoned to meet Belinsky, the most influential critic of his time: " 'But do you, you yourself, understand,' he repeated to me several times, screaming as was his habit, 'what you have written?!' He always screamed when he spoke in a state of great agitation. 'You

may have written, guided by instinct, as an artist, but have you yourself grasped this dreadful truth which you have pointed out to us? It is impossible that at the age of twenty [*sic*] you could have understood it.' "

The "dreadful truth" concerned the hopeless lives of the Petersburg poor; Dostoevsky had produced Russia's first social novel. And he had done it by an astonishing act of creative empathy—not by commenting as narrator, but by doing without a narrator altogether. *Poor People* is a novel in letters; two fully individual human voices body forth the drama. The man in question, Makar Devushkin, is an aging civil servant, one of that hitherto faceless crowd of copying clerks which constituted a large part of the city's population in Dostoevsky's time. Earlier writers had treated them more or less ironically as a class or a problem. Now Dostoevsky approached them as self-conscious subjects. He even has Devushkin read the greatest of earlier stories about his own type (Gogol's "The Overcoat"), only to reject it indignantly, partly for its wounding accuracy but also for its larger inaccuracy in denying the poor clerk's humanity, his doomed quest for recognition and dignity. "I have no polish or style," Devushkin himself admits; "all the same, I am a man, in heart and mind a man!" "The poor man looks at God's world differently," he proclaims elsewhere, and the book exists to explain how.

Already in his first work, then, Dostoevsky is concerned with creating an inner world of experience, which refracts the outer world but is not determined by it—and is expressed by a character whose style may vie in importance with what he says. Here, as in his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov,* Dostoevsky uses literature to create literature. His people are readers and writers whose demonstrated tastes and skills not only help us understand them but constitute an oblique polemic with other Russian writers. Already, too, he invests the humblest detail with explosive psychological significance: Devushkin sees a loose button

as robbing him of the last shreds of his dignity in a tense interview, just as the underground man will later suffer agonies over a yellow spot on his trousers. Anything—the more ludicrous the better—can trigger pathos in Dostoevsky's world (compare the underground man's reference to "these dirtiest, most ludicrous, most terrible minutes of my entire life"). And scenes of scandal are forever threatening—to confirm and fuel the latent desperation of these characters.

The Double, Dostoevsky's second novel, appeared two weeks after *Poor People.* "It will be my masterpiece," he confided to his brother; it was "ten times better" than his first work. Few readers agreed, and the author himself later admitted that the tale was flawed. But he maintained to the end of his life that the idea had been a felicitous one, and he declared that he had never broached a more serious one in all his writing. That idea, in the words of one Russian critic, centers on the "ontological instability of personality."

The story, steeped in grotesquerie, traces the slip into madness of yet another poor Petersburg copying clerk. Like *Poor People,* it is a polemical reworking of motifs from the stories of Nikolai Gogol, Dostoevsky's great predecessor in Russian fiction. Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, the central character, is a pitiful nonentity—like Poprishchin, the protagonist of Gogol's "Diary of a Madman." Increasingly he seeks escape from an intolerable existence by nourishing dreams of grandeur, which soon take form in the imaginary person of his double, "Mr. Golyadkin, Junior." There is none of the Gogolian pathos at the end of this story, and Dostoevsky shows little overt sympathy with his hero, whose ideals as represented by his double turn out to be shabby, a desire for "success" at the office and romance with the boss's daughter. It is a shrewd and tough-minded view that Dostoevsky takes of his character. But already, here, we meet what was to become an-

other characteristic tendency of his writing: the creation of bizarre and distasteful characters whose common humanity we are forced to perceive in spite of our repugnance.

Golyadkin is the first in a long line of split personalities in Dostoevsky's work—but split in a special way, not between "good" and "bad," but between more and less authentic. *The Double* is rudimentary in this respect by comparison with Dostoevsky's mature works, for the latter show characters attempting to live out ideas, finding what is authentic in themselves by experience pro and contra. (So in *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov kills the old pawnbroker to prove that he is an "exceptional man," a Napoleon who need not be bound by the moral scruples of the herd; but his subsequent experience—his punishment—shows him unable to sustain this role, burdened with a sense of transgression which his reason had not foreseen.) In *The Double* we have simply pathological bravado. "You all know me, gentlemen," Mr. Golyadkin declares at one point, "but up to now you have only known one side of me." The other side, he hints (anticipating the underground man), is above worldly concerns—magnanimous, perhaps even heroic. "There are people," he remarks, "who don't say they're happy and enjoying life to the full just because their trousers fit well, for instance." His boldest resolutions expire comically. Shall he enter his chief's party (to which he has not been invited)? He ponders on the landing: "Shall I? . . . Yes, I will—why shouldn't I? The brave go where they please." "Thus reassuring himself," Dostoevsky comments, "our hero suddenly and quite unexpectedly withdrew behind the screen." (Compare the underground man at the excruciating dinner in the Hôtel de Paris: "Now's just the right moment to throw a bottle at them all, I thought, and, picking up a bottle, I . . . poured myself a full glass.") Dostoevsky's ironic comment about Golyadkin—that "he was neither dead nor

alive, but somewhere in between"—applies with even greater force to the underground man. Both are quintessential denizens—symbolic emanations—of the spectral capital of all the Russias.

In his journalism of 1847 and in the stories of 1847–1848 ("The Landlady," "A Faint Heart," "White Nights"), Dostoevsky anatomizes a new Petersburg type. Hemmed in by a city in which Nature has no place, frustrated by the empty routines of the metropolis, thirsting for direct, spontaneous life, "a man becomes at length not a man but some strange creature of an intermediate sort—a *dreamer*." Such an individual, he says, "is always difficult because he is uneven to an extreme," "tending to settle for the most part in profound isolation, in inaccessible corners, as if hiding from people and from the light." There is a larger share of autobiography in the characterization of this type than in anything Dostoevsky had written previously. The dreamer is an educated man; if he talks like a book (as the underground man will do with Liza), it is because his dreams are literary. In books he finds a life incomparably richer, fuller, more colorful and harmonious than what actually exists around him, and into this fantasy world he rapturously withdraws, out of time and away from the world of contingency. Isolated like Dostoevsky's other early characters in the anonymity of the city, the dreamer differs from them in enjoying a *willed* isolation. The dreamer-narrator of "White Nights" knows that a time may come when he would be glad to trade all his years of fantasy for one day of real life—"but so far that threatening time has not arrived," and he desires nothing "because he is above desire, because he has everything, because he is satiated, because he is the artist of his own life."

Even when he was most alive to the seductions of such a state, however, Dostoevsky could see its destructive side. It was ultimately, he concluded, "a sin and a horror," "a caricature," "a Petersburg nightmare." The "Author's

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Note" at the beginning of *Notes from Underground* identifies the underground man precisely as a dreamer of the forties, revisited twenty years after. He can still recall his youthful dreams with emotion—though not without irony. His curse is now that he understands too much, too helplessly.

In the spring of 1849, Dostoevsky was arrested, tried, and sentenced to Siberian prison and exile for his association with the subversive Petrashevsky circle. The real extent of his involvement in revolutionary thought is unclear. So, for that matter, is much of the doctrine he is supposed to have shared—a pre-Marxian, non-"scientific" form of socialism commonly designated as "utopian." Fundamentally religious in nature, it envisaged a future regeneration of the world based on the moral teachings of Christianity. Divine revelation was left moot; the ideal society would in any case be holy. Socialism and Christianity would be merged in a perfect union, a new "religion of humanity." Such a program could accommodate Christian belief intact, but it required an exceedingly optimistic view of human nature. During his eight years in Siberia, Dostoevsky held fast to Christianity, even as he assimilated startlingly new evidence about the nature of man.

That experience, thinly disguised as fiction, is detailed in *Notes from the House of the Dead,* published two years after his return to Petersburg, in 1861. Exposure to types and classes of which he had scarcely been aware before—murderers and thieves, soldiers and peasants—shattered the writer's earlier notions. "Man," he concluded, "is a creature that can get accustomed to anything, and I think that is the best definition of him." A witness to sadism in others, he came to discover its complement in himself, "that malignant pleasure which at times is almost a craving to tear open one's wound on purpose, as though one

desired to revel in one's pain, as though the consciousness of one's misery was an actual enjoyment." Here is one of the central themes of the "underground." Such knowledge, of course, complicates any ready sympathy with victims of injustice and precludes any assumption that improving social conditions will automatically liberate the disadvantaged into positive and happy selfhood. Here, too, through personal suffering, Dostoevsky came to another of the major themes of his later fiction: freedom. The underground man's perverse insistence on whim and spite as exercises in personal freedom, more valuable as such than any rationally planned well-being, arises directly from Dostoevsky's psychological observations in prison. In the bizarre outbursts of hitherto docile convicts he saw "simply the poignant, hysterical craving for self-expression, the unconscious yearning for oneself, the desire to assert... one's crushed personality, a desire which suddenly takes hold of one and reaches the pitch of fury, of spite, of mental aberration, of fits and nervous convulsions. So perhaps a man buried alive and awakening in his coffin might beat upon its lid and struggle to fling it off, though of course reason might convince him that all his efforts would be useless; *but the trouble is that it is not a question of reason...*"

The writer's lifelong desire "to find the human in a human being" begins here to work at a new depth, where social position and conventional notions of character threaten to become irrelevant. Man's impulses are contradictory, his behavior unpredictable. In *The Insulted and Injured,* which was published concurrently with *Notes from the House of the Dead,* Dostoevsky gently parodies his own preexile work, leading the good, the kind, the enthusiastic characters to inevitable defeat at the hands of a villain who—for the first time in his work—articulates and embodies a philosophical *idea.*

The later, better-known Dostoevsky is, above all, the

tragedian of ideas. His rootless characters are particularly vulnerable to them: they become possessed, to the point where an idea determines and distorts the consciousness and life of its bearer. This is most evident in *Notes from Underground,* which represents Dostoevsky's sudden mastery of what he called "the idea incarnate," the central feature of the novels that follow. Apart from the incarnation and the drama, which is to say apart from the artistry, Dostoevsky's ideas are interesting chiefly as so much raw material awaiting inspiration. Still, because the terms of his fiction do arise from his deepest concerns, a word about those concerns in the early 1860s may complete this contextual sketch.

In 1863 Dostoevsky published *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions,* a journalistic account of his first trip to Western Europe, undertaken the year before. "I did not see anything properly," he confesses on the opening page, "and what I did see I had no time to examine." This is no travelogue. Preoccupied now with the question of Russia's destiny, already certain that Europe could furnish only negative examples, he sought and found the latter exclusively. Western individualism was repulsive because materialistic; the Crystal Palace and International Exposition of London terrified him, seeming to herald the advent of a purely materialistic utopia: " 'Isn't this the achievement of perfection?' you think. 'Isn't this the ultimate?' ... Must you not accept this as the final truth and forever hold your peace?' " As for the promise of Western socialism, that is seen in kindred terms. Here the image of the anthill appears, where "everything runs so smoothly, everything is so well regulated, everyone is well fed and happy, and each one knows his task"—and all in return for "just one little drop" of each individual's liberty. Egotistical freedom and mechanistic collectives are both dead ends (as they will be in *Notes from Underground*): the qualifying adjectives do violence to man's spiritual essence. (Thus the writer's

scorn for the "scientific" utopia of the radical populist Chernyshevsky, with his belief that reason can rule man and society can be perfected through each man's pursuit of his enlightened self-interest.) *Real* individualism, Dostoevsky suggests in *Winter Notes,* involves self-transcendence, and offers the only free path to fraternal community. It is the way of Christ, "voluntary, fully conscious self-sacrifice . . . for the benefit of all."

With such questions uppermost in his mind and such a body of work behind him, Dostoevsky set about the masterpiece one could call liminal, in which he brings to the threshold of narrative consciousness "things [every man] is afraid to reveal even to himself" (*Notes,* I, xi). Viewed historically, this short novel stands as well at the threshold of the larger fictions which made Dostoevsky a world figure—and, through them, at the threshold of that modern literary art which still commands our serious, often uncomfortable attention.

II. NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

Notes from Underground has attracted many labels. Some have seen it as its author's defense of individualism, others as a case history of neurosis, a work of high comedy, or a specimen of modern tragedy. Dostoevsky's text makes each of these interpretations plausible, but finally escapes them all. The best approach may be to put aside the question of what it means in order to consider what it is and how it conveys meaning.

These "notes" are a performance, part tirade, part memoir, by a nameless personage who claims to be writing for himself alone but who consistently manipulates the reader—of whom he is morbidly aware—to the point where there seems to be no judgment the reader can make which the writer has not already made himself. In the ab-