Consciousness and Its Discontents in *Notes from Underground*

At once a tragedy of excess consciousness and a satire of rationalist utopianism, *Notes from Underground* by Dostoevsky presents the truth of the underground: the paralysis of a consciousness so radically opposed to rationality and its tyranny that it eventually consumes its own foundations. Its fictional author, the Underground Man, insists on the fundamental irrationality of human beings; he enacts the absurd confrontation between an unyielding will and a world governed by necessity that no act of consciousness can alter through his monologue of anguished self-contradiction and the performance of his own suffering before imaginary interlocutors. His theory of radical freedom not only fails to endow him with any dignity, as Sartre proclaims self-constitution would, but also renders it impossible for him to be in a way that allows him to occupy his own space and place in the world (Sartre 41). The Underground Man's revolt is devoid of equanimity because he loses faith in constituting truth through his choices and engagement with the world; he denies the truth of his own actions yet desperately longs for such a belief. His particular case presents a striking picture of consciousness paralysed in the world — a divided, disfigured consciousness tragically striving for an ideal it cannot reach, in urgent need of a faith it cannot sustain.

Once recognised, absurdity "becomes passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can live with one's passions [...] that is the whole question" (Camus 17). The Underground Man no doubt constantly wrestles with this question. His absurd is similar in structure to the existentialist absurd (the understanding of an indifferent, meaningless world where no metaphysical ground explains human existence) but with a particular inflection: it concerns specifically the tension between the prescriptions of reason and the fundamental irrationality of the will that refuses them. In either case, the efforts are futile in front of an unresponsive world. To the Underground Man, "impossibility is a stone wall": it is twice two is four, the rationality and unshakable facts he so despises (Dostoevsky 12). While being conscious of all impossibilities, and precisely because of this, he refuses to capitulate before any one of them — he will not cease confrontation simply because he lacks the power to break through, even if all is proved against him by mathematics and science. While Camus does note that scientific explanations can catalogue phenomena but cannot bring one closer to the world and its elusiveness, the Underground Man's attitude is an even more intense one: he finds the stone wall not merely an obstacle but an affront. The absurdity is never lost on him; even he himself exclaims "absurdity of absurdities!" (Dostoevsky 12). Yet his defiance is adamant because the right to live according to his own free will is the most dear, the most advantageous thing he knows. His is a position of constant confrontation without resolution; he refuses to accept the stone wall's verdict as the final word.

Although sharing a similar situation of perpetual, hopeless labour, the Underground Man is not the absurd hero like Sisyphus. Sisyphus is "superior to his fate" because he is conscious of his futility yet continues regardless (Camus 89). The moment of consciousness is the moment in

which he acknowledges and affirms his task; the rock becomes his "personal fate", and the "higher destiny" of the absurd condition he is thrown into is one he concludes with scorn rather than despair. To restore life and mastery, it is as though the faith of saying yes alone is sufficient — "The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing". Lucidity was to "constitute his torture" but also "crown his victory"; scorn is enough to surmount fate (Camus 91). The Underground Man in his contradictions cannot say "yes". Instead of Sisyphean joy, he arrives at an anguished, almost pleasurable immobility, "voluptuously sinking into inertia" (12). His insistence on free will brings him only spiritual degradation and loss of dignity. Camus proposes: *we must imagine Sisyphus happy*. Here this belief, this imaginative act of affirmation, yields a kind of sufficiency, yet the Underground Man cannot perform this act and "cannot make himself anything" (Dostoevsky 5). In defense of personality, he ultimately loses it.

Is this, perhaps, a consequence of his extreme insistence on irrationality? Camus writes that in the absurd "the world is neither so rational nor so irrational. It is unreasonable and only that" (Camus 36). The world simply cannot be reasoned with; to grasp it entirely by reason is beyond reason's limits. This distinction between rational and irrational illuminates the way the Underground Man's resistance is defined by its opposition. Without the support of faith, it finds its existence only in relation to the science and rationalism it is perpetually at war with. Noting reason's limits fuels his direct confrontation against rationality; the project is so complete that he falls into a state of pervasive uncertainty and anguish produced by a collapse of moral and spiritual foundations: "that no object can be found and perhaps never will be; that it's all deception" (Dostoevsky 12). Despite his revolt, the Underground Man is still in despair. The world appears to him without possibility of salvation, least of all from himself.

Being excessively conscious is the Underground Man's "disease" that has led to his estrangement from pre-reflective, absorbed engagement with the world (Dostoevsky 6). In Husserlian terms, the Underground Man's consciousness is not the naive Ego absorbed in its objects. Rather, every encounter appears hyper-intentional to him: his consciousness folds back on itself, directs itself at its own acts, and in doing so distorts the smooth constitution of meaning. His experience of anything has the quality of *watching himself experience it* superimposed on top. He is excessively aware of the gap between impulse and act, intention and outcome, performance and being — an urge to trace back to the most primary cause and foundations for himself *ad infinitum*, finding none and thus undermining every position as he takes it. Everything appears to the Underground Man, to his reflected consciousness (that is, in writing), with a bracketed "as if", as if the feature of consciously performing contemptible actions is not within him by accident, as if it were "his normal condition", but he never truly believes (Dostoevsky 7). To him, his actions always appear to lack an authentic reason; therefore, when he takes offence he is only "putting it on" with no reason other than just for the sake of it (Dostoevsky 15). It makes "immersing himself straightforwardly in the world" impossible; everything is engulfed in reflection (Husserl 34). Unable to be lost in the world, with no diversions from the anxiety of his own superfluous existence and no will toward constituting

a livable self, the Underground Man exemplifies what Camus, in his reading of Heidegger, identifies as the condition in which "fear becomes conscious of itself, it becomes anguish, the perpetual climate of the lucid man 'in whom existence is concentrated'" (Camus 18). In phenomenological analyses of consciousness, absorbed engagement with the world is often regarded as the primary mode (readiness-to-hand, the unreflective directedness toward objects), where consciousness constitutes meaning through intentional acts directed at the world and encounters with entities in it. The Underground Man fails at genuine, pre-reflective engagement with the world, or rather, *believes* that he fails to, which amounts to the same thing.

Then, given his struggles to access this naive inhabitation, how does the Underground Man perceive his experience and arrive at the meaning of things? We will see that he achieves a kind of ironic distance from his own acts that is superficially similar to the phenomenologist's bracketing, but eventually leads to a rather different end. The transcendental experience, for Husserl, consists in "our *looking at* and describing the particular transcendentally reduced *cogito*, but without participating [...] in the natural existence-positing that the originally straightforward perception [...] contains" (Husserl 34). Consider the Underground Man's account of the toothache. He begins with the naive subjective process, such as pain and groaning, and turns his reflective attention toward it, examining what can be found in the experience of groaning. He finds the groans to be "malicious" rather than "sincere", that there is pleasure to be found in groaning. To him, pain is pointless and humiliating to the consciousness; it is "the legitimacy of nature", something indifferent and beyond our control — but suffering is undeniable. Such are the properties of his toothache, that merely bodily pain. One may groan performatively, with "flourishes and affectation", offering "ignoble groans" conscious of their futility and disgrace (Dostoevsky 13–14). The Underground Man is certainly not naive in the sense that he only passively experiences the pain and as a result cannot help but groan. The groaning, however unavoidable, as a sign of suffering is transparent to him as already a performance, already aestheticised, and already addressed to an audience. He is convinced that the groaning in such a style is his consciousness retaliating against its humiliation. Whether or not the groaning was sincere to begin with no longer matters: once consciousness has interpreted it as performance, performance is what it becomes.

This falls under the category of natural reflection as Husserl defines it — the turning of attention toward one's own subjective processes — but taken to a compulsive and self-consuming extreme. Natural reflection alters what it reflects on from its "original mode, 'straightforward', by the very fact that reflection makes an object out of what was previously a subjective process but not objective" (Husserl 34). In this example, the Underground Man makes the style of groaning an object, noting that it is insincere, that it could have happened in a more natural fashion (Dostoevsky 14). The naive experience of pain is transformed into something examined, but it remains within the natural attitude: it still participates in existence-positing. Transcendental phenomenological reflection, by contrast, requires the *epoché*, in which we suspend existence-positing to examine the pure intentional structure of cognition without

affirming or denying the real existence of its objects. The Underground Man still very much takes the pain as real, the consciousness as existing and humiliated, the degradation as actually occurring. Rather than being a "non-participant onlooker", he is a deeply, agonisingly participant subject whose reflection moves him deeper into existential entanglement. That is, his consciousness of the form of the groaning makes him more deeply implicated in the meaning of his suffering, more acutely aware of its degradation, and more tormented by what reflection reveals. Where Husserl's *epoché* moves toward the pure intentional structures underlying experience in order to achieve clarity and "absolute freedom from prejudice", the Underground Man's reflection absorbs and paralyses him (Husserl 35). This is the case for many of his actions: they are taken with extreme awareness of the consciousness' relation to them, with awareness of the pleasure, disgrace, and bad humour the act reaches towards. And ultimately, perhaps such an act is merely a replacement for something better, where he is conscious of its existence as well as the impossibility of achieving it. The Underground Man does not fail to make meaning, only that this meaning feels to him like a forever undignified one.

But how do *we*, as readers, come to know this? We receive the Underground Man's experience through his writing — a kind of confession. His *narrative* for himself presents his experience as one of hyperconsciousness, of the awareness preventing him from committing to any honest project because every project is immediately available for ironic inspection. He could never bring himself to say something because he is "too capable of saying it [...], as if deliberately" (Dostoevsky 15). The Underground Man is very aware of the freedom he has, knowing that he could deliberately do *anything*, and he is so conscious of this potential that it makes him incapable of committing to anything. Lost in this indeterminateness, he feels that he must "invent a life", which will allow him to "at least exist somehow" — an existence somewhat impoverished by its artificiality and by no means dignified. In this way, his writing is "a certain fantasy" he wishes to realise. The Underground Man is permanently in the reflective, present-at-hand mode in his writing, treating his own existence as a spectacle. This is nonetheless the nature of writing itself; it is a processed, reflective organisation of lived experience. Notably, one property of this confession, as claimed by the Underground Man, is that the notes are solely for himself, so that they can be free from restriction or editing, resistant to any order or system. To print and give to others would require "sufficient firmness of purpose", and he finds it unnecessary. Being unable to muster this firmness is again a symptom of his condition, where his consciousness fails to bring about the decisive self-assertion required by the act of committing his words to an audience. This stated privacy is, however, immediately complicated by the prominent feature of the text: the constant back-and-forth with an imaginary audience. The notes have the form of dialogue, and the Underground Man is no less aware of it than we are — it is "only an empty form", "purely for show, since it's easier to write like that" (Dostoevsky 35-36). So why does he engage so whole-heartedly in this imaginary dialogue? For what show, exactly?

The question is anticipated, as the Underground Man asks: "Why do I treat you as if you really were my readers?" (Dostoevsky 35) The text becomes quite frustrating at times like this,

when the phenomenological questions a reader might wish to pose are already addressed by the Underground Man himself. He interrogates himself about why exactly he wanted to write and imagined an audience, and the reasons he offers are multiple and undetermined: to conduct himself more fittingly; that writing is "grander on paper", provides "something inspirational", "makes for better style", and offers "relief"; or out of sheer boredom (Dostoevsky 37). All is conjecture, and the reader seems to be tasked with deciphering truth from his apparently tangled lies to both readers and himself. Perhaps there is none, or perhaps the absence of a stable truth is itself the truth of the underground.

We may add to the answer that the audience's opposition gives his ideas shape. Sartre points out in his analysis that one is objectified through the other's gaze, becoming a thing for the other, fixed, defined; the Other "brings it about that 'there is' a being that is my being". The other holds the secret of my being, knows what I am, such that "the innermost meaning of my being is outside me, imprisoned in an absence; the Other has the advantage over me" (Sartre, Ch. 3.I). The imagined audience plays such a role for the Underground Man. To constitute an other who looks at him is to be given shape, and it is easier, in his paradoxical consciousness, to take shape through opposition than through any positive self-determination. But he cannot tolerate an actual other he does not control; for him to love is to tyrannise (Dostoevsky 114). Allowing some form of self-constitution through a gaze he himself invents, the imagined audience is at once a solution to and a symptom of this problem. Further, his invented audience is not friendly or cooperative; his mind constantly anticipates rebuttal. The audience criticises him for self-contradictory behaviour, that he is "pretentious", tells "lies and more lies", and "there is even truth in you, but no integrity" (Dostoevsky 35). These are surely his own diagnoses, projected outward and absorbed back in. To stage the other's look while controlling it is to attempt self-constitution through a gaze whose verdict one has written in advance. The Underground Man can only appear before a tribunal he has rigged, and the verdict is always guilty.

The Underground Man's project is essentially one of literary self-constitution and self-invention. His failure is a failure at becoming any "character" due to his awareness of his own self-contradiction (Dostoevsky 5). When he commits an act deliberately, it is reflected in such a way that it is "artificial, cerebral, deliberately contrived [and] bookish" (Dostoevsky 115). He writes this *tale*, frames it as "corrective punishment", and by doing so appears to choose the rules of literature as his mode of existence, reconciling his suffering as a form of literary merit. For him, without books people would not know "which side to take", "what to love and what to hate" — that is, how to make choices at all. People strive to become "some imaginary generalised human beings" and in doing so "become so unaccustomed to living that we sometimes feel a kind of loathing for the 'real life'" (Dostoevsky 117). This critique gestures toward the Enlightenment rationalist project, which substitutes abstract humanity for flesh-and-blood existence, the mental for the embodied, the ideal for the actual. But the critique applies equally to the Underground Man himself: he is aware that he too has invented a life, a literary existence. The "real life" is something he has lost touch with, something he cannot bear

to be reminded of, something he "[longs] for but cannot find!" (Dostoevsky 34). He mourns it and longs for the full, authentic consciousness that requires a pure heart that he does not believe he will ever be able to achieve.

Lastly, these are all understood under a fictional horizon — multiple ones. *Notes from Underground* is first a fiction the Underground Man creates for his nonexistent audience, as he emphasises time and again. Moreover, it is presented to us, the actual readers of these printed texts (that he ironically claimed would not get printed, now read by actual readers he never accounted for) as if they are "real notes", while also being the novella written by Dostoevsky. In his opening footnote, Dostoevsky states that "the author of these notes and the Notes themselves are, of course, fictitious", but that "such people as the writer of these notes not only can but even must in our society" (Dostoevsky 3). The Underground Man's existence is at once layered in fiction and posited to exist in society. As readers, we know he indeed has no existence outside the text he produces, really no "real life" prior to or beneath the writing; yet we are instructed by the author to interpret him as a social-philosophical ideal type characterised by a consciousness that underground conditions *necessarily* produce. Then, the Underground Man appears to us with the additional dimension as embodying a structure of consciousness Dostoevsky believes to exist in those alienated from the mass of people and spiritual life in 19th century Russia.

The tragedy of the Underground Man is that he not only disavows the inherent meaning of life but loses faith in life itself. He can only "invent" life but can never find truth in it. Denying the truth of one's own making and withholding faith from one's own decisions are what produce the degradation and disfiguration of soul we witness, instead of the glimpsed nobility in Sisyphus's resistance or the existentialist affirmation of human freedom. The Underground Man's tormented resistance, his tireless self-reflection, and his self-diagnoses delivered through an invented other — all of this, despite its rebellion against rationality and its insistence on free will, in its excess and spiritual crisis constitutes a tragic inversion of the legitimate human quest for self-determination and self-affirmation. His revolt never yields a plenitude but ultimately demonstrates the impossibility of authentic revolt without faith: that consciousness divorced from any ground of affirmation, turned entirely upon itself, becomes the very prison it seeks to escape. Perhaps the higher truth Dostoevsky calls for is similar in spirit to the "yes" delivered by the absurd man: an affirmation of the spiritual, a "higher fidelity", is what finally overcomes its paralysis.

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