NIHILISM AND
NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

BY JOSEPH FRANK

If philosophy among other vagaries were also to have the notion that it could occur to a man to act in accordance with its teaching, one might make out of that a queer comedy.

Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling.

FEW works in modern literature are more widely read or more often cited than Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground. The designation “underground man” has entered into the vocabulary of the modern educated consciousness, and this character has now begun—like Hamlet, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Faust—to take on the symbolic stature of one of the great archetypal literary creations. No book or essay on the situation of modern culture would be complete without some allusion to Dostoevsky’s figure. Every important cultural development of the past half-century—Nietzscheanism, Freudianism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Crisis Theology, Existentialism—has claimed the underground man as its own; and when he has not been adopted as a prophetic anticipation, he has been held up to exhibition as a luridly repulsive warning.

Indeed, Notes from Underground by now would seem to have been discussed from every conceivable point of view—with one single but important exception. For this exception is the point of
view of Dostoevsky himself. Critics are ready to expatiate at the drop of a hat—amid an increasingly suffocating smokescreen of erudite irrelevancies and melodramatic pseudo-profundities—on the vast “cultural significance” of Notes from Underground. Meanwhile, the real point of Dostoevsky’s fascinating little work has gotten completely lost in the shuffle.

What was Dostoevsky himself trying to do? Everyone knows that Notes from Underground was originally begun as a polemic inspired by Dostoevsky’s opposition to the Socialist radicals of his time (popularly called Nihilists as a result of the label affixed to them in Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons). The outstanding spokesman for the Russian radicals at this moment was Nicolai G. Chernyshevsky, whose Utopian novel What Is To Be Done? had appeared in the spring of 1863 and had caused a sensation. Notes from Underground was intended as an answer to What Is To Be Done?; and the accepted account of the relation between them runs as follows.

Chernyshevsky and the radicals believed that man was innately good and amenable to reason, and that, once enlightened as to his true interests, reason and science would ultimately enable him to construct a perfect society. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, believed that man was innately evil, irrational, capricious and destructive; not reason but only faith in Christ could ever succeed in helping him to master the chaos of his impulses. This view of Notes from Underground was first advanced by the Russian religious philosopher V. V. Rozanov in his brilliant study, The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor (1890). And regardless of the differing explanations offered for the genesis of Dostoevsky’s Weltanschauung, this interpretation of Notes from Underground has continued to reign unchallenged ever since.¹

¹This assertion needs some qualification, but not very much. I have come across only one critic who has rejected the Rozanov version in toto. This is A. Skaftymov in his interesting article “Notes from Underground amidst Dostoevsky’s Journalism,” Slavia, VIII (1929-1930). This article, written in Russian but published in a Czech periodical (though Skaftymov is still alive and active in the Soviet Union) contains
Despite the hegemony it has enjoyed, however, Rozanov's theory is at best only a beguiling and misleading half-truth. Rozanov was not primarily concerned with interpreting Dostoevsky's art but with enlisting the awe-inspiring name of the novelist on the side of his religious philosophy; and he unduly emphasizes one pole of the actual dialectic of the work, bringing it to the foreground as the entire meaning of the whole with a total disregard for context. Worst of all, he sees the underground man only as the simple negative of what Dostoevsky was attacking—the irrational against reason, evil and moral chaos against purposive social activity.

If this interpretation were true, then we could only conclude that Dostoevsky was just about the worst polemicist in all of literary history. Could Dostoevsky really have imagined that any reader in his right mind would prefer the world of the underground man as an alternative to Chernyshevsky’s idyllic Socialist Utopia? Hardly! Dostoevsky was by no means as simple-minded or as maladroit as admirers like Rozanov—though certainly without fully realizing it themselves—would make him out to be. In reality his attack on Chernyshevsky and the Nihilists is a good deal more insidious, subtle and effective than Dostoevsky ever has been given credit for.

Beginning with V. L. Komarovich in 1924, a number of Russian critics have explored in detail the relation between Notes from Underground and What Is To Be Done? It is now clear that whole sections of Dostoevsky’s novella—for example, the attempt of the underground man to bump into an officer on the Nevsky Prospect, or the famous encounter with the prostitute many acute general remarks; but Schaftymov’s analysis of the text stays too close to the level of individual psychology and is quite disappointing.

It is amusing to note, incidentally, that Rozanov’s point of view has become standard in the Soviet Union. Rozanov’s name is never mentioned by Soviet writers without an appropriate uncomplimentary epithet (“obscurantist” is the mildest), but his reading of Notes from Underground has become definitive. The only difference is that Rozanov the theologian heartily approves of Dostoevsky’s supposed view of “evil and irrational human nature”; while the Soviet Russians reject it as a product of “bourgeois decadence” and line up with Chernyshevsky’s “optimism.”
Lisa—were conceived entirely as parodies of specific episodes in Chernyshevsky’s book. The uncovering of these parodies provided the first real glimpse into the inner logic of Dostoevsky’s artistry; but the Russian critics themselves have never pressed their own insights home with sufficient rigor. What they have failed to realize is that Notes from Underground as a whole—not only certain details and episodes—was conceived and executed as one magnificent satirical parody.

This parody, however, does not consist merely in rejecting Nihilism and setting up a competing version of “human nature” in its place. Rather, since parody is ridicule by imitation, Dostoevsky assimilates the major doctrines of Russian Nihilism into the life of his underground man; and by revealing the hopeless dilemmas in which he lands as a result, Dostoevsky intends to undermine these doctrines from within. The tragedy of the underground man does not arise, as is popularly supposed, because of his rejection of reason. It derives from his acceptance of all the implications of “reason” in its then-current Russian incarnation—and particularly those implications which the advocates of reason like Chernyshevsky blithely preferred to overlook or deny.

Dostoevsky himself clearly pointed to his use of parody in the footnote appended to the title of his novella. “Both the author of the Notes and the Notes themselves,” he writes, “are, of course, fictitious. Nevertheless, such persons as the author of such memoirs not only may, but must, exist in our society, if we take into consideration the circumstances which led to the formation of our society. It was my intention to bring before our reading public, more conspicuously than is usually done, one of the characters of our recent past. He is one of the representatives of a generation that is still with us.” Dostoevsky here is obviously talking about the formation of Russian (“our”) society, not—as has often been claimed—about the society of nineteenth-century
Western Europe or of "modern culture." And Russian society, as Dostoevsky could expect all his readers to know, had been formed by the successive accretions of Western influence that had streamed into Russia since the time of Peter the Great. The underground man embodies and reflects the latest phases of this evolution in himself; he is a parodistic persona whose life exemplifies the serio-comic impasse of this historical process.

Only if we approach Notes from Underground in this way can we understand Dostoevsky's choice of subject-matter and method of organization. The work consists of two tableaux selected from the life of the underground man—but each episode also, and more importantly, corresponds to a different and very crucial moment in the spiritual history of the Russian intelligentsia. The first section shows the underground man in the ideological grip of the Nihilism of the Sixties; the second, as a perfect product of the social Romanticism of the Forties. Each section of the work thus reveals the differing manner in which the personality of the educated Russian—depending on the dominant ideology of the moment—had been disorganized and disrupted by the attempt to live according to alien doctrines and ideals. This also explains the peculiar construction of the work, which reverses chronological sequence and proceeds backward in time. The Nihilism of the Sixties was uppermost in the consciousness of Dostoevsky's readers, and had provided the immediate inspiration for the story. Since the underground man was not primarily a private individual but a social type, Dostoevsky sacrifices the natural biographical order of inner growth and development to obtain as much polemical timeliness as possible from the very first page.

Notes from Underground, then, is not the self-revelation of a pathological personality, not a theological cry of despair over the evils of "human nature," least of all a work expressing Dostoevsky's involuntary adoption of Nietzsche's philosophy of "im-
moralism" and the will to power." On the contrary, it is a brilliantly ironic Swiftian parody remarkable for its self-conscious mastery, satirical control and Machiavellian finesse. But to prove this contention we must set the work back in the context from which it came, and endeavor to supply the framework of coordinates on which Dostoevsky depended to obtain his effects.

II. The Dialectic of Determinism

The famous opening tirade of Notes from Underground gives us an unforgettable picture of the underground man stewing in his Petersburg "funk-hole" and mulling over the peculiarities of his character—or rather, his total inability to become a character. Nothing could be more abject, petty and ridiculous than the image he gives of his life. He refuses to be treated for a liver ailment out of "spite"; he remembers an attempt made in his youth, when he was still in the civil service, to browbeat an officer for no reason other than the assertion of petty vanity; he boasts of his honesty, and then, when he realizes how "contemptible" such boasting is, he deliberately lets it stand to degrade himself even more in the eyes of the reader.

The underground man, indeed, seems to be nothing more than a chaos of conflicting emotional impulses; and his conflict may be defined as that of a search for his own character—his quest for himself. "I did not even know how to become anything," he says, "either spiteful or good, either a blackguard or an honest man, either a hero or an insect." At the very moment when he feels most conscious of "the sublime and the beautiful," he tells us, he was also "guilty of the most contemptible actions which—

---

Dostoevsky's so-called "Nietzscheanism" (especially as reflected in Notes from Underground) has been the subject of an influential book by Leo Shestov, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, The Philosophy of Tragedy (1903). Shestov is a powerful thinker and writer, but an extremely irresponsible literary critic who neglects or rejects whatever aspect of a writer does not jibe with his opinions. As a consequence he simply tosses out Dostoevsky's Christianity as "hypocritical."

French and German translations of Shestov's book have had a wide circulation, and have caused a good deal of confusion about the real meaning of Dostoevsky's work. I might add that the philosophical value of Shestov's ideas does not depend on the accuracy of his views about Dostoevsky—or for that matter about Nietzsche.
well, which, in fact, everybody is guilty of, but which, as though on purpose, I only happened to commit when I was most conscious that they ought not to be committed.” Why, he asks plaintively, should this be so?

The answer to this question has invariably been sought in some “abnormal” or “psychopathic” trait of the underground man, which is then usually traced to the hidden recesses of Dostoevsky’s own psychology. But the underground man’s monologue provides a perfectly plausible answer to his question. “Whatever happened,” he assures us, “happened in accordance with the normal and fundamental laws of intensified consciousness and by a sort of inertia which is a direct consequence of those laws, and . . . therefore you could not only not change yourself, but you simply couldn’t make any attempt to.” Dostoevsky, in other words, attributes to his underground man a belief in scientific determinism. The underground man, who remarks that he is “well-educated enough not to be superstitious,” is quite well up on the most enlightened opinion of his time; he knows all about science and the laws of intensified consciousness; and he accepts the fact that whatever he does is inevitable and unalterable because it is totally determined by the laws of nature.

The moral impotence of the underground man thus springs directly from his acceptance of one of the cornerstones of Chernyshevsky’s thought—absolute determinism. This aspect of Chernyshevsky’s philosophy is mentioned only incidentally in What Is To Be Done?; and the behavior of some of the characters—as Chernyshevsky himself is embarrassedly forced to concede—can hardly be reconciled with this doctrine. Nonetheless, in his resounding article on The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy (1860), which was equally if not more famous than his novel, Chernyshevsky had flatly denied the existence of anything remotely resembling free will—or, for that matter, any kind of will. An act of will, according to Chernyshevsky, is “only the subjective impression which accompanies in our minds the rise of thoughts
or actions from preceding thoughts, actions or external facts.” Dostoevsky thus begins his parody of Nihilism by having the underground man use Chernyshevsky’s philosophy as an excuse for his moral flaccidity. Under the magic wand of Chernyshevsky’s determinism, if taken seriously and consequentially, all moral action has become impossible.

With skillful dialectical ingenuity, Dostoevsky displays the bewildered demoralization of his character before this unprecedented situation. The underground man, for instance, imagines that he wishes to forgive someone magnanimously for having slapped him in the face; but the more he thinks about it, the more impossible such an action becomes. “For I should most certainly not have known what to do with my magnanimity—not to forgive, since the man who would have slapped my face would most probably have done it in obedience to the laws of nature; nor to forget, since though even if it is the law of nature, it hurts all the same.”

Or suppose he wishes to act the other way round—not to forgive magnanimously but to take revenge. How can one take revenge when nobody is to blame for anything? “One look and the object disappears into thin air, your reasons evaporate, there is no guilty man, the injury is no longer an injury but just fate, something in the nature of toothache for which no one can be blamed.” That is why, as the underground man says, “the direct, the inevitable and the legitimate result of consciousness is to make all action impossible.” Or, if any action is taken—say on the matter of revenge—then “it would merely be out of spite.” Spite is not a valid cause for any kind of action, but it is the only one left when the “laws of nature” make any other response illegitimate.

In such passages, the moral vacuum created by the underground man’s acceptance of scientific determinism is expressed with unrivalled psychological acumen. But while, as a well-trained member of the intelligentsia, reason forces him to accept de-
terminism, it is impossible for him humanly to live with its conclusions. As a result of the laws of intensified consciousness, he writes sardonically, “you are quite right in being a blackguard, as though it were any consolation to the blackguard that he actually is a blackguard.” Or, as regards the slap in the face, it is impossible to forget because “though even if it is the law of nature, it hurts all the same.” Both these comments pose a total human reaction—a moral revulsion at being a blackguard, an upsurge of anger at the insult of being slapped—against a scientific rationale that dissolves all human responsibility and thus all possibility of a human response. “Reason” tells the underground man that feelings of guilt or even of indignation are totally irrational and unjustified; but conscience and a sense of dignity are not “reasonable”—happily for mankind—and they manage to assert themselves all the same.

It is this assertion of the moral-emotive level of the personality, striving to keep alive its significance in the face of the laws of nature, that is expressed by the underground man’s so-called “masochism.” He confesses, in a much-commented passage:

I felt a sort of secret, abnormal, contemptible delight when, on coming home on one of the foulest nights in Petersburg, I used to realize intensely that again I had been guilty of some dastardly action that day... and inwardly, secretly, I used to go on nagging myself, worrying myself, accusing myself, till at last the bitterness I felt turned into a sort of shameful, damnable sweetness, and finally, into real positive delight! Yes, into delight!... The feeling of delight was there just because I was so intensely aware of my own degradation.

Whatever a passage of this kind may reveal about Dostoevsky’s psyche to the trained clinical eye, in the context of Notes from Underground it does not refer to Dostoevsky but to the underground man; and it has a specific dramatic function. The am-
biguous "delight" of the underground man arises from the moral-emotive response of his human nature to the blank nullity of the laws of nature. It signifies his refusal to abdicate his conscience and submit silently to determinism, even though his reason assures him that there is nothing he can really do to change for the better. The "masochism" of the underground man thus has a reverse significance from that usually attributed to it. Instead of being a sign of pathological abnormality, it is in reality an indication of the underground man's paradoxical spiritual health—his preservation of his moral sense.

III. The Man of Action

It is only from this perspective, with its deceptive transvaluation of the normal moral horizon, that we can grasp the underground man's relation to the imaginary interlocutor with whom he argues all through the first part of Notes from Underground. This interlocutor is obviously a follower of Chernyshevsky, a man of action, l'homme de la nature et de la vérité; and the underground man, as we see, accepts his theory that all human life is simply a mechanical product of the laws of nature. But the underground man knows what the man of action does not—that this theory makes all moral action impossible, or at least meaningless. "I envy such a man with all the forces of my embittered heart," says the underground man. "He is stupid—I am not disputing that. But perhaps the normal man should be stupid." The normal man, for example, the man of action, inspired by a feeling of revenge, "goes straight to his goal, like a mad bull, with lowered horns." He does not realize that what he thinks of as the basis for his action, i.e., justice, is a ludicrously old-fashioned and unscientific prejudice eliminated by the laws of nature. It is only his stupidity that allows him to maintain his complacency, and to look on the underground man's squirmings with unfeigned contempt. Or conversely, the men of action "capitulate in all sincerity" before the "stone wall" of scientific determinism and
the laws of nature, which exert "a sort of calming influence upon them, a sort of final and morally decisive influence and perhaps even a mystic one." The plain men of action simply do not understand that scientific determinism does not allow them to be "morally decisive" about anything; and they accept its conclusions with a smug awareness of being up-to-date, while they go on behaving exactly as in the past.

Very different is the response of the ignominious underground man, who knows only too well what the "stone wall" really means and, as a consequence, can only nurse a despicable resentment that he cannot justly discharge against anybody. But the underground man, with his well-known "masochism," cannot help behaving as if some sort of free human response were still possible and meaningful—"consequently there is only one solution left, namely, knocking your head against the wall as hard as you can." "Is it not much better to understand everything," cries the underground man, "to be aware of everything, to be conscious of all the impossibilities and stone walls? Not to be reconciled to any of those impossibilities or stone walls if you hate being reconciled to them? To reach by way of the most irrefutable logical combinations the most hideous conclusions on the eternal theme that it is somehow your own fault if there is a stone wall, though again it is abundantly clear that it is not your fault at all, and therefore to abandon yourself sensuously to doing nothing, and silently and impotently gnashing your teeth?"

Here, at first sight, the paradoxes of the underground man appear to reach a paroxysm of psychopathic self-accusation; but once we understand the logic of Dostoevsky's creation, it is quite clear that nobody in the world can be guilty of anything except the underground man. He knows that the idea of guilt, along with all other moral notions, has been abolished by the laws of nature; yet he persists in having moral responses just the same. And since there is nowhere else for him to assign moral responsibility, by the most irrefutable logic he and he alone is to blame for everything.
The portrait of the underground man we have been tracing is developed up through Chapter VI of the first part of *Notes from Underground*. And, as we have tried to show, it is based on an imaginative dramatization of a double movement: the acceptance of Chernyshevsky’s determinism by the underground man’s reason, but its rejection by his moral-emotive instincts. It is only from this point of view, indeed, that we can grasp the complex raillery of Dostoevsky’s creation. The self-mockery of the underground man, the disgusted pejoratives he uses about himself, have usually been taken literally; but as we have seen in the case of “masochism,” such a literal reading entirely misses Dostoevsky’s meaning. In the same way, the continual self-derision of the underground man is intended to convey a consummate tragi-comic irony.

The underground man becomes what he is because his life is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the metaphysics of the man of action; and the more repulsive and hideous he portrays this life (and himself) as being, the more he underlines the incredible obtuseness of his self-confident judge. Far from wishing to portray the underground man as the embodiment of evil, the whole purpose of *Notes from Underground* is quite the opposite. Only in a world where human choice can make a difference, only where there is no absolute determinism, is any morality possible at all; and Dostoevsky adroitly defends the underground man’s “capriciousness” as the necessary precondition for any morality whatsoever.

*IV. The Crystal Palace*

Beginning with Chapter VII of *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky shifts his target of attack. Up to this point he has been aiming at Chernyshevsky’s metaphysics in its most general formulation; but now he turns to his ethics of “rational egoism” on the one hand, and, on the other, to the ideal of the Crystal Palace. Both these doctrines are exploded by the use of the same
strategy that Dostoevsky has already employed—his technique, as it were, of projection into the absolute. Dostoevsky, that is, places himself imaginatively at the position where the doctrine he wishes to attack has already achieved its goal; and then he demonstrates the moral-psychological incompatibility of this achievement with some aspect of the nature of man—in this case, man’s need to feel spiritually free and morally responsible. This is what Dostoevsky meant when he spoke of the “fantastic realism” of his work—a realism of the possible and the extreme rather than of the median and the actual; and his first large-scale use of this “fantastic realism” occurs in *Notes from Underground*.

In the first part of this section, the underground man waxes merry over the “theory of the regeneration of the whole human race by means of the system of its own advantages.” But what is man’s true advantage? Can it only be found by “taking the average of statistical figures and relying on scientific and economic formulas”? “That’s the trouble, gentlemen,” says the underground man commiseratingly, “that there exists something which is dearer to almost every man than his greatest good, or (not to upset the logic of my argument) that there exists one most valuable good (the one, too, that is being constantly overlooked, namely, the one we are talking about) which is greater and more desirable than all other goods, and for the sake of which a man, if need be, is ready to challenge all law, that is to say, reason, honor, peace, prosperity—in short, all those excellent and useful things, provided he can obtain that primary and most desirable good which is dearer to him than anything in the world.”

The tone and language of this passage, with its pretense of philosophical precision, is clearly a parody of some of the more laborious passages in *The Anthropological Principle*. Even more important, however, is to understand why Dostoevsky’s “one most valuable good” is placed in such inimitigable opposition to “reason, honor, peace, prosperity,” etc. The ultimate goal of Chernyshevsky’s ethics of “rational egoism” was the creation of
a sanctified humanity which, out of sheer rational calculations of self-interest, had lost the very possibility of doing evil. A true “rational egoist,” according to Chernyshevsky, “may say to himself: I will be wicked, I will do people harm; but he will not be able to do that any more than a clever man can be a fool even if he wanted to be one.” Not Dostoevsky but Chernyshevsky had posed the alternative: either moral freedom, i.e., the freedom to choose between good and evil, or “reason” with all its material advantages. And the answer of the underground man 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. To obtain this “good” he will “deliberately and consciously desire something that is injurious, stupid, even outrageously stupid, just because he wants to have the right to desire for himself even what is very stupid and not to be bound by an obligation to desire only what is sensible.” For at all events, 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.”

The underground man’s rejection of “rational egoism” paves the way for his reaction against its ultimate ideal in the future—the world of the Crystal Palace. In this future Utopia, described in What Is To Be Done? all the laws of nature governing society will have been discovered. Here Dostoevsky is no longer dramatizing the moral-psychological impossibility of a purely deterministic world; the laws of nature are now seen in the light of their future triumphs, which will guide man’s way to overwhelming material prosperity. The Crystal Palace was modelled, as all Chernyshevsky’s readers knew, on the Fourierist phalanstery; and Fourier had calculated and combined all the details of life in the phalanstery with a precision that was not only mathematical but maniacal. The phalanstery, as Emile

*Chernyshevsky’s description of the Crystal Palace is now conveniently available in English in a new edition of Notes from Underground, edited with selections and translations of relevant material by Ralph E. Matlaw (Dutton Paperbacks, 1960).
JOSEPH FRANK

Faguet once pithily remarked, "c'est l'Arcadie d'un chef de bureau."

The triumph of the Crystal Palace 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. For science proves that man "possesses neither will nor caprices, and never has done, and . . . he himself is nothing more than a sort of piano-key or organ-stop." (Fourier, it might be mentioned, spoke of the phalanstery as embodying the laws and principles of "harmony." His chief disciple, Victor Considerant, in a famous Socialist treatise mentioned anagrammatically in *What Is To Be Done?* compared human passions to a "clavier" whose notes could be blended into such harmony: hence Dostoevsky's musical imagery.) The trouble is, however, that man is "phenomenally ungrateful. I'm even inclined," says the underground man, "to believe that the best definition of man is—a creature who walks on two legs and is ungrateful." For even if you "shower all the earthly blessings upon him, drown him in happiness, head over ears, so that only bubbles should be visible on the surface, or bestow such economic prosperity upon him as would leave him with nothing to do but sleep, eat cakes, and only worry about keeping world history going . . . even then he will, man will, out of sheer ingratitude . . . play a dirty trick on you." This "dirty trick" is precisely that he will throw everything overboard, will set his heart on the most uneconomic and positively harmful nonsense, "for the sole purpose of proving to himself (as though that were so necessary) that men are still men and not keys on a piano."

At this point, the underground man rises to a climactic vision of universal chaos which duplicates, on the socio-historical level, the chaos of the underground man's life in the earlier chapters. And

*La Destinée Sociale* (1834-1838). This work, which systematized Fourier and expounded him a lively style, was more widely read than Fourier himself.
in both cases, the cause of this chaos is the same—the revolt of the personality against the vision of a world in which personality and free-will have no further reason for being. For even if such a world could really be created,

even if he [man] really were nothing but a piano-key, even if this were proved to him by natural science and mathematically, even then he would refuse to come to his senses. . . . And if he has no other remedy, he will plan destruction and chaos, he will devise all sorts of sufferings. . . . If you say that this, too, can be calculated by the mathematical table—chaos, and darkness, and curses—so that the mere possibility of calculating it all before hand would stop it all and reason would triumph in the end—well, if that were to happen man would go purposely mad in order to rid himself of reason and carry his point.

Nothing in Notes from Underground, at first sight, seems more daring and shocking than this invocation to the gods of darkness—to destruction, chaos, and madness. And, not surprisingly, all interpreters of Dostoevsky have invariably taken it with the same literalness with which they took the underground man’s “masochism” and “immorality.” None have paid the slightest attention to the hypothetical and conditional form in which Dostoevsky cast these assertions, nor have they seen them in the light of his projection of the future ideal of the Crystal Palace. In fact, however, the senseless and self-destructive revolt of freedom is envisaged by Dostoevsky only as a last-ditch defense, in circumstances where man has no other way of preserving the autonomy of his personality. Indeed, the underground man himself makes abundantly clear that his frenetic harangue does not refer to man as he actually exists in ordinary “irrational” life; it applies to man as he might be forced to become if Chernyshevsky’s Fourierist Utopia were ever realized. For after lividly declaring in the name of curses, darkness and chaos, the underground man
returns to reality for a moment and adds: “And how is one after that to resist the temptation to rejoice that all this has not happened yet and that so far desire depends on the devil alone knows what.”

Once having envisaged the completion of the Crystal Palace, however, the underground man continues, in Chapter IX, to question the confidence of Chernyshevsky and the Socialist radicals that such an ideal was what man really wanted. “Man likes to create and clear paths—that is undeniable,” the underground man agrees; man wishes to accomplish useful and socially productive labor. But the underground man denies that man wishes to achieve the static secular Apocalypse of the Crystal Palace, to reach the literal end of history when all further striving, moral struggle, and inner conflict will have ceased. Perhaps man “is instinctively afraid of reaching the goal and completing the building he is erecting? . . . Perhaps he only loves building it and not living in it, preferring to leave it later aux animaux domestiques such as ants, sheep, etc., etc., . . . They [ants] have one marvellous building of this kind, a building that is forever indestructible—the ant-hill.” The ideal of the “ant-hill” is suitable aux animaux domestiques exactly because they have no inkling of man’s need to feel creative and free—because all they desire is to complete their appointed tasks in conformity with reason and the laws of nature through all eternity.

This comparison of the Socialist ideal to an “ant-hill” was a commonplace in the Russian journalism of the period, but the use of such an image here as a symbol for the secular end of history very probably derives from Alexander Herzen. “If humanity went straight to some goal,” Herzen wrote in From the Other Shore (1855), “there would be no history, only logic; humanity would stop in some finished form, in a spontaneous status quo like the animals . . . Besides, if the libretto existed, history would lose all interest, it would become futile, boring, ridiculous.” Of all Herzen’s works, Dostoevsky publicly expressed special admiration
for *From the Other Shore,* and the similarity is too great to be accidental. Now Herzen, more than any other single individual, was responsible for the propagation of Socialist ideas in Russia; but he never accepted the Nihilist scientism and determinism of the Sixties. Like Dostoevsky himself, Herzen was a member of the generation of the Forties which had been nurtured on Schelling and Hegel; and no member of this generation, regardless of politics, ever succumbed completely to the lure of mechanical materialism. Dostoevsky here is thus using the Forties to argue against the Sixties, as he was to do later again in *The Devils* (1871-1872). And this interplay between the generations, as we shall see, is of first importance for understanding the meaning of *Notes from Underground* as a whole.

The ultimate argument of the underground man against the Crystal Palace is that it outlaws suffering. "In the Crystal Palace it is unthinkable; suffering is doubt, it is negation, and what sort of Crystal Palace would it be if one were to have any doubts about it? And yet I am convinced that man will never renounce real suffering, that is to say, destruction and chaos. Suffering! Why it's the sole cause of consciousness!" Within the ideological context of *Notes from Underground,* "suffering" clearly has the same function as "masochism" or as the underground man's inverted irony. It is the only way left of keeping alive his "consciousness" as a human being, of asserting his personality, individuality and moral responsibility. And in returning to the problem of "consciousness" at this point—the end of Chapter IX—Dostoevsky brings his demolition of the Crystal Palace into relation with his earlier chapters, establishing the unity of what appears to be the underground man's spasmodic and disorderly tirade.

"Once, chatting with the late Herzen, I praised one of his works to the skies—*From the Other Shore.*" See Dostoevsky's article "Old Acquaintances" in *Diary of a Writer,* 1873. It is likely this conversation took place in the summer of 1862, when Dostoevsky visited Herzen in London.
V. The Palatial Hencoop

In Chapter X, the penultimate section of *Notes from Underground*, the reader becomes aware of a new note being struck, or rather, of a note which had hitherto remained in the background suddenly ringing out above all the others. Up to this point, the self-torture and suffering of the underground man had been made amply evident. Still, the underground man's sacrilegious assertion that he had found “delight” in his suffering, and the sarcastic satisfaction with which he flaunts this “delight” before the horrified eyes of his interlocutor, somewhat mitigates our sense of his anguish. But in Chapter X, 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.” The underground man is desperately searching for some solution to his racking dilemma; and he makes very clear that the underground revolt of the personality, valuable though it may be, is by no means a positive answer. “I rejected the Crystal Palace myself for the sole reason that one would not be allowed to stick out one’s tongue at it” (again a self-mocking and derisive image for the revolt of moral freedom). “But I did not say that because I am so fond of sticking out my tongue. . . . On the contrary, I'd gladly have let my tongue be cut off out of gratitude if things could be so arranged that I should have no wish to stick it out at all.”

Dostoevsky leaves us in no doubt that the underground man, far from rejecting all ideals, is desperately searching for one that would truly satisfy the needs of his spirit. Such an ideal would not spur his personality to revolt in rabid frenzy; on the contrary, it would lead to the willing surrender of himself in its favor. This alternative ideal obviously could only be one which, recog-
nizing the autonomy of the will and the freedom of the person-
ality, appealed to the moral nature of man instead of to “reason”
and self-interest in the service of determinism. From a letter of
Dostoevsky’s we know that Chapter X originally contained some
clear indication that this alternative ideal was that of Christ; but
this part of the text was mangled both by the censors and by the
carelessness of the proof readers.

“I am not at all happy about my article,” Dostoevsky wrote
after the publication of the first part of Notes from Under-
ground; “there are terrible proofreading errors, and it would
have been better not to publish the penultimate chapter (the most
important, where 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 de-
duced the necessity of belief in Christ, they cut it out. Why, are
the censors perhaps conspiring against the government?”

Dostoevsky, we may assume, corrected some of these errors
when he revised the magazine text for publication in book form;
but while the alternative ideal to the Crystal Palace is clearly
enough indicated, some confusion still remains in the final text.
This confusion arises when, in Chapter X, the underground man
begins to compare the Crystal Palace to another structure that
would be a “real” palace instead of a hencoop.

“You see” he says, “if it [the Crystal Palace] were not a pal-
ace but a hencoop, and if it should rain, I might crawl into it to
avoid getting wet, but I would never pretend that the hencoop
was a palace out of gratitude to it for sheltering me from the rain.
You laugh and you tell me that in such circumstances even a hen-
coop is as good as a palace. Yes, I reply, it certainly is if the
only purpose in life is not to get wet.” It is not the usefulness of
the hencoop that is impugned by the underground man, but the
fact that it is mistaken for a palace, i.e., that in return for its
practical advantages it has been elevated into mankind’s ideal. But the underground man refuses to accept the hencoop-qua-palace as his ideal. “But what is to be done if I’ve got it into my head that that [i.e., not to get wet] is not the only purpose of life, and that if one has to live, one had better live in a palace?”

Here, as we can see, the underground man poses a “true” against the “false” palace; and this is the point at which the confusion occurs. For the underground man develops this comparison as follows: “For the time being,” he says, “... I refuse to accept a hencoop for a palace. 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?” Now it is obvious that something is wrong here: the “Crystal Palace” mentioned in this passage is the opposite of everything it has stood for throughout 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. Moreover, the underground man’s allusion to “certain old and irrational habits of my generation” reminds us that he is a member of the generation of the Forties. This paves the way for part two of the work, and also indicates Dostoevsky’s recognition that the Forties—whatever else this era may have been guilty of from his point of view—still believed in the existence of the will and in the importance of feeling and desire. In any case, it is clear that the “Crystal Palace” of this citation refers to the “true” palace which is not a hencoop; but the fact that Dostoevsky allows the same designation to stand for both “palaces” cannot help but baffle the reader.*

* A Soviet scholar, S. Borschevskii, has pointed out, quite rightly, that Dostoevsky uses two words for “palace.” Sometimes he says literally “palace” (dvorets) and sometimes he speaks of a crystal “building” (zdanie). On this basis, Borschevskii
Despite Dostoevsky’s indication of this alternative ideal, however, the essence of his conception of the underground man requires the latter to remain trapped in the negative phase of the revolt for freedom. He longs for another ideal, he knows that it must exist, but—accepting determinism and the laws of nature—he does not yet know how to attain it. All he can do is affirm despairingly: “I know that I shall never be content with a compromise, with an everlasting and recurring zero because it exists according to the laws of nature and actually exists. I will not accept as the crown of all my desires a big house with model flats for the poor on a lease of ninety-nine hundred and ninety-nine years.”

And our last glimpse of the underground man, in the final Chapter XI, masterfully depicts this state of mind, in which he both denies and affirms his underground revolt and his “dark cellar” in the space of a few lines.

Though I have said that I envy the normal man to the point of exasperation, I wouldn’t care to be in his place in the circumstances in which I find him (though I shall never cease envying him. No, no, the dark cellar is, at any rate, of much greater advantage to me!). In the dark cellar one can at least... Sorry, I’m afraid I am exaggerating. I am exaggerating because I know, as well as twice-two, that it is not the dark cellar that is better, but something else, something else altogether, something I long for but cannot find.

To hell with the dark cellar!

interprets Chapter X as the opposition of the crystal dvorets (false) to the crystal zdanie (true).

There is only one objection to this theory. In the very first sentence of Chapter X, Dostoevsky uses zdanie to refer unmistakably to the “false” palace. “You believe in the Crystal Palace (zdanie) forever indestructible, that is to say, in one at which you won’t be able to stick out your tongue,” etc. See S. Borschevskii, Schedrin i Dos-
tovsky (Moscow, 1956), p. 97.

There seems to be no way of clearing up this matter short of consulting the original manuscript. We may speculate, however, that Dostoevsky at this point tried to link the symbol of a "true" Crystal Palace with Christ. But this must certainly have startled and confused the censors, who had also read Chernyshevsky and took the Crystal Palace as a symbol of atheistic Socialism. Hence they systematically eliminated all the Christian allusions interwoven with the Crystal Palace.
What that "something else" is, and why the underground man cannot attain it, forms the substance of the second part of *Notes from Underground*.

**VI. Idealists of the Forties**

The second part of *Notes from Underground* is subtitled: "Apropos of the Wet Snow." Since the snow plays no role whatever in the story, one may wonder why Dostoevsky chose to highlight it in this manner. The answer is: to heighten the symbolic atmosphere. This subtitle, along with the quotation from Nekrasov used as epigraph, serves to set this second part firmly in the ideological ambiance that Dostoevsky wishes to evoke. It had already been noted in the Forties (by P. V. Annenkov) that writers of the "natural school" were fond of employing "wet snow" as a typical feature of the Petersburg landscape; and Dostoevsky uses it to summon up instantly an image of Petersburg in the Forties—an image of the most "abstract and premeditated city in the whole world," whose very existence had become symbolic in Russian literature for the violence and unnaturalness of the Russian adaption to Western culture. In addition, the poem by Nekrasov also conjures up the moral and spiritual climate of the period.

Nekrasov's famous poem, to which Dostoevsky had also alluded ironically in an earlier work—*The Friend of the Family* (1859)—reproduces the pathetic confession of a repentant prostitute redeemed from her degraded life by the author:

> When with a word of fervent conviction,  
> From the lowest dregs of dark affliction,  
> A soul from eternal doom I saved;

Citing some further lines, Dostoevsky suddenly cuts it short with etc., etc.,—thereby indirectly indicating his feeling that the poem was completely conventional chatter. The redemption-of-a-
prostitute theme, which runs from social Romantics like Eugène Sue, George Sand and Hugo right through to Tolstoy’s Resurrection (1899), had become a commonplace in the Russian literature of the Forties and also figures as a minor incident in What Is To Be Done?. The climactic episode in the second part of Notes from Underground—the encounter between the underground man and the prostitute Lisa—is clearly an ironic parody and reversal of this social Romantic cliché.

The second part of Notes from Underground, then, is intended to satirize the sentimental social Romanticism of the Forties just as the first part had satirized the Nihilism of the Sixties. And a good deal of light is thrown on this second part by articles that Dostoevsky published in his magazine Time in the years immediately preceding the composition of his novella. The Forties, Dostoevsky wrote in 1860, had been the moment when “the spirit of analysis penetrated into our intellectual classes. . . . Then everything was done according to principle, we lived according to principles, and we had a horrible fear of doing anything not according to the latest ideas.” All spontaneity and unself-consciousness was lost; not to live by the light of “the latest ideas” was literally unthinkable. And under the influence of “the latest ideas” a new social type appeared among the Russian intelligentsia—the “Byronic natures,” the liberal idealists of the Forties.

As Dostoevsky describes them, these idealists were burning to help “humanity”; but they could find no occupation worthy of their powers. “They said it was not really worth the trouble to become angry and curse—that everything was so dirty that one hardly had the desire to wiggle a single finger, and that a good dinner was worth more than anything.” All this was taken as the fine irony of despair, even when these idealists became fat and rosy-cheeked—or even when, as sometimes happened, they began to cheat at cards and were caught with their hands in someone else’s pockets. But since these idealists were always longing to
“sacrifice” themselves for “the good of humanity,” Dostoevsky tauntingly pretends to take them at their word. Why, he asks, should they not really accomplish a sacrifice—and perhaps go so far as to teach a serf child to read? “Sacrifice yourselves, O giants,” he bitingly enjoins them, “for the good of all. . . . Sacrifice yourselves completely, with your sublime temperament and your sublime ideas—lower yourselves, shrink yourselves, to this one particular child.”

The social Romanticism of the Forties, in Dostoevsky’s opinion, had fostered an inflated “egoism of principle,” which allowed the Russian intelligentsia to live in a dream-world of “universal” beneficence while actually nursing their own vanity with perfect moral complacency. And the moral task confronting these liberal idealists was to live up to their own pretensions, i.e., to turn their abstract love of “humanity,” which chiefly served to heighten their own self-esteem, into a concrete act of self-sacrifice directed toward a particular, concrete individual. This is of course precisely the theme of the second part of Notes from Underground; and we find a corresponding shift of style and treatment to accord with the new atmosphere of the period. Earlier the irony had been harsh, grating, jarring; the final argument of the underground man against the world of the Crystal Palace could only be the rage of madness and self-destruction. But what now comes to the foreground is a lighter comic tone of burlesque and caricature.

The youthful underground man, as Dostoevsky conceives him, is stuffed full of bookish ideas culled from the European and Russian Romantics and social Romantics—“I could not speak” he says of himself, “except ‘as though I was reading from a book.’ ” Describing his own life he writes: “At home I mostly spent my time reading. . . . it [the reading] excited, delighted and tormented me.” All through the second part there are constant allusions to the artificiality of his responses (“how paltry, un-literary, and commonplace the whole affair would be,” he thinks at
one point). Entire sections are nothing but an extended burlesque of the underground man’s stilted and pedantic reactions to the simplest human situations; and it is a testimony to the power of received ideas that Dostoevsky’s sharply derisive comedy should so long have gone unnoticed. This comedy predominates in all the episodes preceding the meeting with the prostitute Lisa; for in these the underground man is caught in what we may call a “dialectic of vanity,” which parallels the “dialectic of determinism” in part one. The underground man’s vanity convinces him of his own intellectual superiority and he despises everybody; but when he realizes that he cannot rest without their recognition of his superiority, he hates others for their indifference and falls into self-loathing at his own humiliating dependence. This is the inevitable dialectic of an egoism which cannot forget about itself for a moment, and, in seeking to wrest recognition from the world, only receives dislike and hostility in return. Psychologically, this dialectic duplicates the conflict of all against all that arises socially from the Western European principle of egoistic individualism. And Dostoevsky’s implication is that the underground man—an “educated man, a modern intellectual,” as he gleefully calls himself—has, as a result of imbibing the European culture popular in Russia in the Forties, lost almost all capacity for undistorted and selfless moral feeling.

*All through his Winter Notes on Summer Impressions (1865), the work immediately preceding Notes from Underground, Dostoevsky contrasts the nature of Western European man with that of the Russian.

What predominates in the Western nature, he writes, is “a principle of individuality, a principle of isolation, intense self-preservation, of personal egoism, self-definition in terms of one’s own I, in placing this I in opposition to all nature and all other people, as an autonomous, independent principle completely equal and equally valuable to everything that exists outside it.” In contrast to this, the Russian nature instinctively possesses a response of true “brotherhood” in which each individual feels himself a part of all and is ready to sacrifice himself for the other.

Dostoevsky transposes and dramatizes this contrast particularly in the second part of Notes from Underground. It might be observed that this view of the “Russian nature,” though Slavophil in origin, was also shared by Herzen and those under his influence in the Fifties and Sixties, and by Mikhailovsky and the left-wing Populists in the Seventies.
VII. Lisa

The comedy changes into tragedy, however, when the underground man finally encounters another human being who fails to respond in the accustomed fashion. Dostoevsky was well aware of this alteration in texture, and, while working on the second part of his novella, wrote to his brother Mikhail: “You understand what is called a transition in music. Exactly the same thing happens here. In the first chapter, seemingly, there is just chatter; but suddenly this chatter, in the last two chapters, is resolved by a catastrophe.” (In the final version the catastrophe is actually developed through Chapters V to X). This catastrophe is the incident with the prostitute Lisa, which resolves the conflict between imaginary sentimental idealism and ethical reality in dexterous fashion. And, by the ironic paradox of the conclusion, it reveals all the shabbiness of the intelligentsia’s “ideals” when confronted with spontaneous and unselfish love.

The incident with Lisa begins on the underground man’s arrival in the brothel. The proprietress treats him like any other patron and a girl enters. As he goes out with her, he catches sight of himself in a mirror: “My flustered face looked utterly revolting to me: pale, evil, mean, with dishevelled hair. ‘It’s all right, I’m glad of it,’ I thought, I’m glad that I’ll seem repulsive to her. I like that...’” Not having been able either to subdue his companions earlier or to insult them with sufficient weight to be taken seriously, the underground man characteristically anticipates revenging himself on the helpless girl. The more repulsive he is to her, the more his egoism and need for domination will be satisfied by forcing her to submit to his desires. It is not by physical submission alone, however, that the underground man attains his triumph over Lisa. For when he becomes aware of her hostile and resentful attitude, “a peevish thought stirred in my mind and seemed to pass all over my body like some vile sensation.” This thought takes the form of an effort to play on
Lisa’s feelings, and to triumph over her not only physically but morally as well.

The underground man thus proceeds to break down the armor of indifference and assumed cynicism by which Lisa protects herself against the debasing circumstances of her life. Mingling horrible details of degradation with images of felicity whose banality makes them all the more poignant—and drawing on Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* in the process—the underground man succeeds in bringing to the surface Lisa’s true feelings about herself and causing the total humiliation of her emotional breakdown. None of this was of course meant seriously; the underground man simply had been carried away by the power of his own eloquence. But this time his words hit home—Lisa is too young, naive and helpless to see through their falsity. “I worked myself up into so pathetic a state” he says, “that I felt a lump rising in my throat and—all of a sudden I stopped . . . and, bending over apprehensively, began to listen with a violently beating heart.” Lisa’s bosom was heaving spasmodically, and she was making harrowing efforts to contain her sobs. “She bit the pillow, she bit her arm till it bled (I saw it afterwards), or clutching at her dishevelled hair with her fingers, went rigid with that superhuman effort, holding her breath and clenching her teeth.”

The underground man, carried away by his victory, cannot resist living up to the exalted role of hero and benefactor that he had so often given himself in fantasy. When he leaves Lisa he gives her his address with a lordly gesture, inviting her to come and see him; and it is on this gesture that Dostoevsky turns the dénouement of the second part. For the moment the underground man emerges from the self-adulatory haze of his charlatanism, he is stricken with terror. He cannot bear the thought

> “You see, I once knew a father who was very strict, a very stern man he was, but he used to go down on his knees to his daughter, kiss her hands and feet . . . . She would spend the evening dancing at some party, and he'd stand for five hours in the same place without taking his eyes off her. . . . He would go about in a dirty old coat, he was a miser to everyone else, but on her he'd lavish everything he had,” etc.
that Lisa might see him as he really is—wrapped in his shabby dressing-gown, living in his squalid "funk-hole," completely under the thumb of his manservant Apollon, immersed in all the exterior poverty and ignominy of his daily life. Never for a moment does it occur to him that he might help her nonetheless; he is so absorbed in himself that the only thought of her as a reality is an obscure sense of guilt. "Inside me, deep down in my heart and conscience, something kept stirring, would not die, and manifested itself in a feeling of poignant anguish."

After a few days pass and Lisa does not appear, the underground man becomes more cheerful; at times, he says, "I even began indulging in rather sweet day-dreams." These all concerned the process of Lisa's re-education, her confession of love for him, and his own confession that "I did not dare lay claim to your heart first because I knew you were under my influence and was afraid that, out of gratitude, you would deliberately force yourself to respond to my love, that you would rouse a feeling in your heart which perhaps did not really exist, and I did not want this because it—it would be sheer despotism on my part—it would have been indelicate. . . . (Well, in short, here I got myself entangled in a sort of European, George-Sandian inexpressibly noble subtleties)."

Interspersed with these reveries—which are a slap both at Sand's importance in the Forties, and the strong Sandian influence in What Is To Be Done?—is the low comedy of the underground man's efforts to bend the stubborn Apollon to his will. Dostoevsky, as it were, here uses the classical theatrical technique of two identical plots, one serious and the other farcical; and he interweaves them adroitly by having Lisa enter when the underground man is revealing all of his hysterical impotence in face of the imperturbable Apollon.

By this time, the underground man has reached a dangerous pitch of frustration and nervous exasperation. He breaks down
completely before the bewildered Lisa, sobbing and complaining that he is "tortured" by Apollon. But all this is so humiliating that he cannot help turning on her in spiteful fury when, by stammering that she wishes to get out of the brothel, she reminds him of all that has taken place. And here he breaks into a famous tirade, in which he tells her the bitter truth about their relation: "To avenge my wounded pride on someone, to get my own back, I vented my spite on you and I laughed at you. I had been humiliated, so I too wanted to humiliate someone." With the typical inversion of his egoist's logic, he shouts: "I shall never forgive you for the tears which I was shedding before you a minute ago . . . Nor shall I ever forgive you for what I am confessing to you!"

But at this point, a strange thing occurs—strange at least to the underground man. Instead of flaring up herself and hitting back—the only response the underground man is accustomed to—Lisa realizes that he too is unhappy and suffering. She throws herself into his arms to console him, and they both break into tears; but given the character of the underground man, who cannot respond selflessly to any feelings, such a moment cannot last very long. "It . . . occurred to me just then, overwrought as I was, that our parts were now completely changed, that she was the heroine now, while I was exactly the same crushed and humiliated creature as she had appeared to me that night four days before." And not out of love but out of hate, the underground man makes love to her on the spot to revenge himself on her for having dared to try to console him. Even more, to make his revenge complete and humiliate her further, he slips a five-rouble note into her hand; but though completely broken by this encounter, Lisa manages to fling the money on the table unnoticed before leaving.

All the moral depravity of the underground man is starkly revealed in this climactic scene—or perhaps not so much depravity
as moral impotence. For he retains his moral awareness all through the novella, although his egoism prevents him from ever putting this awareness into practice. Even here, when he finds the five-rouble note, he distractedly rushes out after Lisa in the silent, snow-filled street to ask her forgiveness. But then, pulling himself up short, he realizes the futility of all his agitation. For he understands very well that “I could not possibly have loved anyone because, I repeat, to me love meant to tyrannize and be morally superior.”

And as he turns slowly home, he conceives the most diabolic rationalization of all for his conduct.

Will it not be better, [he thinks] suppressing the living pain in [his] heart . . . that she should now carry that insult away with her for ever? What is an insult but a sort of purification? It is the most corrosive and painful form of consciousness! . . . The memory of that humiliation will raise her and purify her by hatred, and, well, perhaps also by forgiveness . . . And, really . . . which is better: cheap happiness or exalted suffering? Well, which is better?

With this final stabbing irony, Dostoevsky allows his underground man to use the very idea of purification through suffering as a rationalization for his viciousness. In so doing, he returns to the main theme of the first part and places it in a new light. “Consciousness” and “suffering” were seen to be values when the underground man, out of a need to preserve his human identity, wished to suffer himself rather than to rationalize his conduct as an effect of the laws of nature. But so long as these values remain a function only of egoism, there is always the possibility that they will be devilishly interpreted primarily to cause others to suffer as a way of purifying their souls. And here, we might add, Dostoevsky has provided an inadvertent but prophetic parody on all those critics who have so often accused him of advocating an indiscriminate “salvation through suffering.”
VIII. Conclusion

As the second part of Notes from Underground comes to an end, the underground man again returns to his frustrated isolation. For one moment he had caught a glimpse of the way out of his racking dialectic. Lisa’s complete disregard of her own humiliation, her whole-souled identification with the underground man’s torments—in short, her capacity for selfless love and self-sacrifice—is the only way to break the sorcerer’s spell of egocentricity. When she rushes into the arms of the underground man, not thinking of herself but only of his suffering, she is at the same time illustrating that “something else” which his egoism will never allow him to attain. This “something else” is the ideal of the voluntary self-sacrifice of the personality out of love. In his encounter with Lisa, the underground man has met this ideal in the flesh; and his failure to respond to its appeal dooms him irrevocably for the future.

Nonetheless, if we look at Notes from Underground as a whole, we see that the idealistic egoism of the Forties, with its cultivation of a sense of spiritual noblesse and its emphasis on individual moral consciousness, does not merely have a negative value. It was precisely because of such “old and irrational habits” of his generation that, as we noted, the underground man held out against the Nihilism of the Sixties; and this is the relation between the Forties and Sixties that continues to prevail in Dostoevsky’s work. Egocentric though it may have been, the sentimental idealism of the Forties still stressed the importance of free-will and preserved a sense of the inner autonomy of the personality. Such a sense is the presupposition for any human world whatever; and this is the basis on which Dostoevsky defends “egoism.” But so long as such egoism remains self-centered, it is not by itself a moral act; more is required, as we see in part two, for the underground man to achieve moral self-definition. Exactly the same relation between the two generations was later portrayed in The Devils, where the sentimental idealism of the old liberal Stepan
Trofimovitch Verkhovensky is far superior morally to the utilitarian ruthlessness of Peter Verkhovensky; but Stepan Trofimovitch is himself morally impotent, and, like the underground man in part two, rhetorically longs for some contact with "reality."

As a coda to the entire work, Dostoevsky offers some remarks in which both ideologies of the radical intelligentsia are rejected; and in which we hear the same plea to return to the Russian "soil" that echoes in Dostoevsky's articles. For these ideologies have disoriented the natural, instinctive, spontaneous, spiritual reactions of the Russian intelligentsia to the point where, without such foreign ideas, they are totally helpless; but so long as they cling to such crutches, they can never learn to walk by themselves. "Leave us alone without any books," writes the underground man caustically, "and we shall at once get confused, lose ourselves in a maze, we shall not know what to cling to, what to hold on to, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise. We even find it hard to be men, men of real flesh and blood, our own flesh and blood." And to the reply that the underground man is only speaking for himself, Dostoevsky re-affirms the "typicality" he had stressed in the opening footnote, while at the same time defining the technique of satirical exaggeration and parodistic caricature that he had used. "For my part," remarks the underground man, "I have merely carried to extremes in my life what you have not dared to carry even half-way, and, in addition, you have mistaken your cowardice for common sense and have found comfort in that, deceiving yourselves." Nothing, it seems to me, could more amply confirm the interpretation of Notes from Underground offered in these pages.