



VINTAGE

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NOTES FROM  
UNDERGROUND  
FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

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## About the Book

From the award-winning translators Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, with an introduction and notes.

The apology and confession of a minor mid-nineteenth-century Russian official, *Notes from Underground* is a half-desperate, half-mocking political critique and a powerful, absurdly comical account of one man's break from society and his descent 'underground'.

## About the Author

Born in Moscow in 1821, Fyodor Mikhaylovich Dostoevsky is regarded as one of the greatest writers who ever lived. Literary modernism and various schools of psychology and theology have been deeply changed by his ideas. He died in 1881 in St Petersburg, Russia.

Richard Pevear has published translations of Alain Yves Bonnefoy, Alberto Savinio and Pavel Florensky, as well as two books of poetry. He has received fellowships for translation from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ingram Merrill Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in support of the translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Larissa Volokhonsky was born in Leningrad. She has translated the work of the prominent Orthodox theologians Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorff.

Together Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky have translated Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*, available from Vintage Classics.

ALSO BY FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

*The Brothers Karamazov*

*Crime and Punishment*

*Demons*

# Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Translated and Annotated by  
Richard Pevear and  
Larissa Volokhonsky

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

## THE HISTORY OF VINTAGE

The famous american publisher Alfred A. Knopf (1892-1984) founded Vintage Books in the United States in 1954 as a paperback home for the authors published by his company. Vintage was launched in the United Kingdom in 1990 and works independently from the American imprint although both are part of the international publishing group, Random House.

Vintage in the United Kingdom was initially created to publish paperback editions of books acquired by the prestigious hardback imprints in the Random House Group such as Jonathan Cape, Chatto & Windus, Hutchinson and later William Heinemann, Secker & Warburg and The Harvill Press. There are many Booker and Nobel Prize-winning authors on the Vintage list and the imprint publishes a huge variety of fiction and non-fiction. Over the years Vintage has expanded and the list now includes great authors of the past – who are published under the Vintage Classics imprint – as well as many of the most influential authors of the present.

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## Foreword

The Ellipsis after the opening sentence of *Notes from Underground* is like a window affording us a first glimpse of one of the most remarkable characters in literature, one who has been placed among the bearers of modern consciousness alongside Don Quixote, Hamlet, and Faust. What we see is a man glancing at us out of the corner of his eye, very much aware of us as he speaks, very much concerned with the impression his words are making. In fact, we do not really see him, we only hear him, and not through anything so respectable as a window, but through a crack in the floorboards. He addresses the world from that crack; he has also spent a lifetime listening at it. Everything that can be said about him, and more particularly against him, he already knows; he has, as he says in a typical paradox, overheard it all, anticipated it all, invented it all. "I am a sick man . . . I am a wicked man." In the space of that pause Dostoevsky introduces the unifying idea of his tale: the instability, the perpetual "dialectic" of isolated consciousness.

The nameless hero—nameless "because 'I' is all of us," the critic Viktor Shklovsky suggested—is, like so many of Dostoevsky's heroes, a writer. Not a professional man of letters (none of Dostoevsky's "writers" is that), but one whom circumstances have led or forced to take up the pen, to try to fix something in words, for his own sake first of all, but also with an eye for some indeterminate *others*—readers, critics, judges, fellow creatures. He is a passionate amateur, a condition that marks the style and structure as well as the content of the book. Where the master



practitioner would present us with a seamless and harmonious verbal construction, the man from underground, who literally cannot contain himself, breaks decorum all the time, interrupts himself, comments on his own intentions, defies his readers, polemicizes with other writers. The literariness of his “notes” and the unliterariness of his style are both results of his “heightened consciousness,” his hostility to and dependence upon the words of others. Thus the unifying idea of *Notes from Underground*, embodied in the person of its narrator, is dramatized in the process of its writing. The controlling art of Dostoevsky remains at a second remove.

This man who may be trying to write his way out of the underground, originally read his way into it. “At home,” he says, “I mainly used to read. I wished to stifle with external sensations all that was ceaselessly boiling up inside me. And among external sensations the only one possible for me was reading. Reading was, of course, a great help—it stirred, delighted, and tormented me.” That was during his youth, in the 1840s. He read, he dreamed, and he engaged in “little debauches.” These were his three diversions, and it is interesting that he puts them together. What did he read? At various points in his account he compares himself with Byron’s *Manfred*, with characters from Pushkin and Lermontov—all romantic figures. He refers more than once to Rousseau. Farther in the background, but looming large, stand Kant and Schiller, representing German philosophical and poetic idealism, summoned up in the phrase “the beautiful and lofty,” which had become a commonplace of Russian liberal criticism of the 1840s. His reading was, in other words, that of the typical educated Russian of the time. Reading nourished his dreaming, and even found its way into his little debauches “in exactly the proportion required for a good sauce.” And so it was that he evaded the petty squalor and inner anguish of his daily life; so it was, as he confesses sixteen years later, that he “defaulted

on his life through moral corruption in a corner.” One main thematic strand of the book is the underground man’s denunciation of the estranging and vitiating influence of books, so that from his perspective of the 1860s, when he begins to write, the word “literary” has become one of the most sarcastic he can utter. To all the features for an antihero purposely collected in *Notes from Underground* there are added all the features for an antibook.

That book is the underground man’s book, not Dostoevsky’s, though the two coincide almost word for word. Indeed, the sharp personality of the underground man, the intensity of his attacks and confessions, the apparent lack of critical distance in the first person narrative, have given many readers the impression that they have to do here with a direct statement of Dostoevsky’s own ideological position, and much commentary has been written on the book in that light. Much has also been said about the tragic (or at least “terribly sad”) essence of its vision. Both notions seem to overlook the humor—stylistic, situational, polemical, parodic—that pervades *Notes from Underground*. Dostoevsky certainly put a lot of himself into the situations and emotions of his narrator; what distinguishes his book from the narrator’s is an extra dimension of laughter. Laughter creates the distance that allows for recognition, without which the book might be a tract, a case history, a cry of despair, anything you like, but not a work of art. *Notes from Underground* has been called the prelude to the great novels of Dostoevsky’s last period, and it is so partly because here Dostoevsky first perfected the method of tonal distancing that enabled him to present characters and events simultaneously from different points of view, to counter empathy with intellection.

The underground man’s book is a personal outpouring—harsh, self-accusatory, defiant, negligently written, loosely structured—a long diatribe, followed by some avowedly

random recollections (“I will not introduce any order or system. Whatever I recall, I will write down.”) It claims to be *genuine*, if artistically crude. “No longer literature, but corrective punishment,” the narrator finally decides. Nietzsche thought he could hear “the voice of the blood” in it.

Dostoevsky’s novel is something quite different. It is a tragicomedy of ideas, admirable for the dramatic expressiveness of its prose, which gives subtle life to this voice from under the floorboards with all its withholdings, second thoughts, loopholes, special pleadings; and admirable, too, for the dynamics of its composition, the interplay of its two parts, which represent two historical moments, two “climates of opinion,” as well as two images of the man from underground, revealed by different means and with very different tonalities.

The two parts of *Notes from Underground* were first published in 1864, in the January and April issues of *Epoch*, a magazine edited by Dostoevsky’s brother Mikhail, the successor to their magazine *Time*, which had been suppressed by the censors in 1863. The note Dostoevsky added to the first part insists on the social and typical, as opposed to personal and psychological, aspects of the man from underground: “such persons as the writer of such notes not only may but even must exist in our society, taking into consideration the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed.” His view of those circumstances would have been familiar to readers of his articles in *Time* over the previous few years, particularly “Winter Notes on Summer Impressions,” an account of his first trip to Europe in 1862, which had appeared in the February and March issues of *Time* for 1863. There he discussed Russia’s “captivation” with the West:

Why, everything, unquestionably almost everything that we have—of development, science, art, civic-mindedness, humanity, everything,

everything comes from there—from that same land of holy wonders! Why, our entire life, even from very childhood itself, has been set up along European lines.

Russian society had been formed by decades of imported “development” and “enlightenment,” words that acquire a sharply ironic inflection in Dostoevsky’s later work. Some sources of this ideology have already been mentioned—Rousseau, Schiller, Kant. To this list may be added the names of such French social romantics as Victor Hugo, Eugene Sue, George Sand, and the utopian socialists Fourier and Saint-Simon. In *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation*, Joseph Frank points to the presence of these “influences” in the theme of the redeemed prostitute, which was a favorite among Russian liberals of the 1840s (the poet Nikolai Nekrasov, for example), and which Dostoevsky parodies brilliantly in the second part of *Notes from Underground*. The parody is, of course, Dostoevsky’s, not the underground man’s. The latter, on the contrary, had taken all these influences to heart; they had made him into a “developed man of the nineteenth century,” a man of “heightened consciousness.” It was the attempt to live by them that drove him “underground.” In the social displacement of an imported culture, Dostoevsky perceived a more profound human displacement, a spiritual void filled with foreign content.

A second theme from “Winter Notes” reappears in *Notes from Underground*—that of the “crystal palace,” which is as central to the polemics of the novel’s first part as the redeemed prostitute is to the parody of the second. The crystal palace in the travel article is the cast-iron and glass exhibition hall built in London in 1851 for the Great Exhibition. It appeared to Dostoevsky as a terrifying structure, a symbol of false unity, of “the full triumph of Baal, the ultimate organization of an anthill.” The tones in which he speaks of it will be echoed almost twenty years later by the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

But if you saw how proud is that mighty spirit who created this colossal setting and how proudly convinced this spirit is of its victory and of its triumph, then you would shudder for its pride, obstinacy, and blindness, but you would shudder also for those over whom this proud spirit hovers and reigns.

This mighty spirit is the spirit of industrial capitalism, and the crystal palace is its temple. In *Notes from Underground* the same structure comes to stand for the future organization of socialism. It remains an image of false unity, but is denounced in rather different terms: the underground man puts his tongue out at it, calls it a tenement house and a chicken coop.

The two time periods of the novel represent two stages in the evolution of the Russian intelligentsia: the sentimental, literary 1840s and the rational and utilitarian 1860s; the time of the liberals and the time of the nihilists. One of Dostoevsky's constant preoccupations in his later work was the responsibility of the liberal generation for the emergence of the nihilists, an idea he embodied literally in the novel *Demons* (1871-72) in the figures of the dreamy individualist Stepan Verkhovensky and his deadly utilitarian son Pyotr. In *Notes from Underground* the same evolution is reflected in the mind of one man: the polemicist of the first part grew out of the defeated dreamer of the second. The inverted time sequence of the two parts seems to lead us to this discovery.

However, the underground man is hardly a typical "rational egoist," any more than he had been a typical romantic. There is a quality in him that sets him apart, which he himself defines on the last page of the book: "Excuse me, gentlemen, but I am not justifying myself with this *allishness*. As far as I myself am concerned, I have merely carried to an extreme in my life what you have not dared to carry even halfway." Submitted to the testing of full acceptance, the testing of this irreducible human existence, the "heightened consciousness" of the rationalist, like the

sentimental impulses of the romantic, runs into disastrous and comic reversals. Hence the paradoxically defiant double-mindedness of the underground man, and his intransitive dilemma.

The “gentlemen” he addresses throughout his notes, when they are not a more indeterminate “you,” are typical intellectuals of the 1860s. More specifically, they are presumed to be followers of the writer Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, the chief spokesman and ideologist of the young radicals. N. G. Chernyshevsky was the author of a number of critical works, notably *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy* (1860), in which he propounded the abovementioned doctrine of “rational egoism,” an adaptation of the “enlightened self-interest” of the English utilitarians. His programmatic utopian novel *What Is to Be Done?*, written in prison following his arrest in 1862 for revolutionary activities and published in 1863, immediately became a manual for social activists. Several decades later, V. I. Lenin, who dubbed Dostoevsky a “superlatively bad” writer, could testify that *What Is to Be Done?* had made him into a confirmed revolutionary. The nature of Chernyshevsky’s hero and his ideas may be deduced from the following passage:

Yes, I will always do what I want. I will never sacrifice anything, not even a whim, for the sake of something I do not desire. What I want, with all my heart, is to make people happy. In this lies my happiness. Mine! Can you hear that, you, in your underground hole?

This is the voice of the healthy rational egoist, the ingenuous man of action. Dostoevsky took up the challenge.

Though Chernyshevsky is not mentioned by name in *Notes from Underground*, his theories, and in particular his novel, are the most immediate targets both of the underground man’s diatribes and of Dostoevsky’s subtler, more penetrating parody. Dostoevsky had intended originally to write a critical review of *What Is to Be Done?* for

the first issue of *Epoch*, but was unable to produce anything. The strained conditions of his personal life at that time and the problems of starting the new magazine do not explain the difficulty he faced. Evidently it was not enough for him simply to counter Chernyshevsky's arguments; more was at stake than a conflict of ideas—there was a question of the very nature of the human being who was to be so forcibly made happy. Dostoevsky's response had to take artistic form. He was challenged to reveal "the man in man," precisely in and through the ideas of the new radicals themselves.

The counterarguments of the "gentlemen" in the later chapters of the first part, for example, are clearly Chernyshevskian, based on his notions of normal interests, natural law, and the denial of free will. The crystal palace, too, in its reappearance here, has been transmuted by its passage through "The Fourth Dream of Vera Pavlovna," the section of *What Is to Be Done?* that presents Chernyshevsky's vision of mankind made happy. The pseudoscientific terms and even a certain clumsy use of parentheses, as Joseph Frank has shown, are the narrator's deliberate mockery of Chernyshevsky's writing. Frank has also shown that the attack is not limited to Part I: two of the three main episodes in the second part of *Notes*—the episode of the bumped officer and the episode with the prostitute Liza—are in fact parodic developments of episodes from Chernyshevsky's novel. The latter episode, which is the climactic episode of the novel as a whole, gives fullest play to Dostoevsky's criticism through comic reversal. But the reversal is not a simple contrary; it is the puncturing of a literary cliché by a truth drawn from a different source, from what the narrator comes in the end to call "living life."

Dostoevsky's reply to Chernyshevsky is both ideological and artistic, the implication being that the two are inseparable, and the further implication being that the indispensable unity of artistic form reflects a more