

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY'S

POSTS FROM UNDERGROUND

A NEW TRANSLATION-
CHRONOABERRATION BY
VANYA BAGAEV



PfU II: How I wanted to become a bug

nova-nevedoma.com/posts-from-underground-2/

This project aims to recreate Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" with modern vocabulary and setting.

Previous instalments of "Posts": [I Cb. I](#) / [Book page](#)

II

Now, dear readers, whether you want it or not, I want to tell you why I couldn't become even a bug. I'm serious when I say I wanted to become a bug, many times, read Kafka and all that. But even that didn't help. I swear, dear readers, that to be hyper-conscious, hyper-aware is a disease, real, absolute disease. For everyday life it would be enough to have an ordinary human consciousness, that is a half, a quarter as much as the portion that gets dumped on a developed human in our miserable twenty-first century and, furthermore, who has the bad luck to dwell in Moscow, the most self-obsessed and performative city on the whole planet. (There are cities with and without main character syndrome). It would be totally enough, for example, the kind of consciousness that

so-called midwits have. I bet you think that I write this because I'm so cliché, thinking I'm on the right side of the curve and enjoy showing it off like some do. But dear readers, who would boast about his disease and show it off?

Anyway, what am I on about? — everyone does that; boasting about their diseases, and I even more than anyone. Let's not argue; my objection is ridiculous. But I still firmly believe that not just too much consciousness but even any consciousness is a disease. I stand by that. Let's put it away for a minute. Tell me something: why is it that, of all times, in those, yes, those exact moments when I was most conscious and aware of “everything grand and beautiful”, as people used to say, I would do such shitty things which... well, in a word, everyone does probably, but which, of all times, I did exactly when I was most conscious that they shouldn't be done? The more I was conscious of goodness and all that “grand and beautiful”, the deeper I plunged myself into my mud and the more capable I was to completely bog down in it. But the main thing was, it seemed to me that it all wasn't some coincidence, as if it was supposed to be that way. As if this was my most normal state and not a disease or dysfunction, so, finally, I lost all desire to fight that dysfunction. It ended in a way that I almost believed (or maybe actually believed) that it is, perhaps, my normal state. But early on? Fuck, what hell I went through trying to fight it! I couldn't believe that it could happen to others and my whole life I hid that part of myself as a secret. I was ashamed (maybe still ashamed even); got to the point where I felt an esoteric, schizo, sneaky joy in coming back, as it

happened, on some vilest Moscow nights to my corner and be hyper-conscious of the gross thing I'd done and that there was no taking it back, and inwardly, covertly, to gnaw, gnaw myself for that with my teeth, tear and drain myself until the bitterness finally turned into some shameful, cursed sweetness and finally — into genuine, unironic pleasure! Yes, into pleasure, into pleasure! I stand by that. I've started talking about it to learn this: do any of you have such pleasures? Let me explain: the pleasure here was exactly due to overly lucid awareness of own humiliation; due to your own feeling that you are completely fucked up; that it's nasty but also inevitable; that you don't have a choice, that you'll never become another man; that even if you had faith and time to become something else, you wouldn't want to change; and did you want that, you wouldn't do anything because the only thing you could become is actually nothing. And in the end, most importantly, that everything happens according to normal and primary laws of hyper-consciousness, by inertia that's downstream of those laws, hence you can't just not change but simply can't do anything at all. So, eventually, what comes out of being hyper-aware: yeah, you're a piece of shit — like that's supposed to comfort the piece of shit when he already knows damn well that he is one. But enough of that... Ugh, look at all this rambling, did I actually explain anything?.. How does all this explain the pleasure? But I will explain! I'll see it through to the end! That's why I started Substack in the first place...

I'm insanely vain, for instance. Paranoid and touchy, like a manlet or virgin, but honestly, there've been times when if someone spat at me, I'd

probably be glad. I'm serious: I'd probably manage to find some kind of pleasure even in that, a pleasure of despair, of course, but it's in despair that the most vivid of pleasures happen, especially when you're hyper-conscious of how totally cooked you are. And with the spit — that's when consciousness really crushes you with how badly you got owned. But the main thing is, no matter how you look at it, it always turns out that I'm the one to blame for everything, and what really pisses me off is I'm taking the fall for nothing, because it's just biology, so to speak. Because, first of all, I'm guilty of being smarter than everyone around me. (I've always considered myself smarter than everyone around me, and sometimes, believe it or not, I was even ashamed of this. At least, all my life I've looked away somehow and could never look people straight in the eyes). Because, finally, I'm guilty that even if I had any magnanimity in me, it would only cause me more torment from being hyper-conscious of how completely useless it is. I mean, I probably wouldn't be able to do anything with my magnanimity: neither forgive, because my offender spat at me due to biology, and you can't forgive biology; nor forget, because even though it's just biology, it still pisses me off. Finally, even if I wanted to be completely petty and, on the contrary, wanted to take revenge on my offender, I couldn't take revenge on anyone for anything, because I probably wouldn't dare do anything, even if I could. Why wouldn't I dare? I want to say a couple words about this specifically.

But that's for the next time.

Commentary:

The project must go on for one reason: we all enjoy it. Surprised I was how well it “translates”, not just the language but the whole story, the character, his psychology — shocked even; it ended up being a lot of fun for myself.

My theory why it works and why it’s worth doing has two main parts:

(1) Dostoevsky was already breaking the formal register in “Notes” — compare, say, to Turgenev or Tolstoy who wrote at the same time, or to Dostoevsky’s later novels;

(2) Russian literary language hasn’t changed as much as English literary language in syntax and vocabulary. Traditionally, when *Underground Man* is translated to English, it’s done in somewhat Victorian English, which can be characterised with elaborate syntax, Latinate vocabulary, a kind of elevated prose style, while modern literary English significantly moved towards colloquialism, directness. Russian literary language has evolved too, but there’s arguably more continuity within the literary tradition [*en masse*]. On top of “normal” register, you can, of course, write in dozens of other registers — be it a prison or villager vernacular or many others — as well as more formal and elevated register, but there’s no such thing as “Latinate” Russian that wouldn’t be context specific — it would either be overly bureaucratic, archaic, or churchpeak. In other words, there’s no class-neutral elevated vocabulary.

On top of that, Literary Russian at Dostoevsky's time was a very young language, established a few decades earlier by Pushkin. Later, in Soviet Union, when there was a lot of effort put into standardisation of language, it was the literature classics that constituted "proper Russian", which is perhaps still the case — This is the language taught in school. So when you read 19th century classics from today, the distance isn't extreme, plus you're used to it; it feels more or less normal with only some quirks and cultural specifics, but when you get those classics and translate it using Victorian English to preserve the spirit of the era, etc. it suddenly gets posh, restrained, dignified, elevated, which in the case of *Underground Man* is the exact opposite of how it should be. (*The same — or at least similar — effect I can see when reading / translating Chekhov. His language is extremely colloquial, and even today he doesn't sound like from 19th century at all; he's not supposed to sound like Dickens when translated — actually, fuck historical authenticity, perpendicularly.*)

In my translation-adaptation, I attempt to preserve the psychological effect, the timeless consciousness on the page and ignore or even subvert the historical distance. It will, however, get exponentially difficult in Part II of the book, and I'll have to make more changes to map the religious and cultural specifics to the 21st century authentically.

But that — later; see you next time!

WAIT!!!! In case by any miracle you're properly into Dostoevsky and Dostoevsky-themed shitpoasting, here's one for you:

Read next part

PfU III: It's So Over (The Wall)

<https://nova-nevedoma.com/its-so-over-the-wall/>

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