

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY'S

POSTS FROM UNDERGROUND

A NEW TRANSLATION-
CHRONOABERRATION BY
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Posts from Underground

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Posts from Underground

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

What follows is a translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" that does two things in particular: 1) aims to recreate the energy of the original, 2) happens in the 21st century.

The catalyst for its creation was simple — seeing countless out-of-context badly translated quotes from the novella, as well as generally solemn "philosophical" aura around it. The book is, on contrary, a comedy, but archaic translations completely bury its manic, self-contradictory energy, so it becomes hard, almost impossible to see that behind "the wise voice from the 19th century." So, the idea is to rip it off from that aspect completely and hopefully look at it from a new — if not originally intended — angle. It still does follow the original text faithfully when it comes to wording, syntax, speech cadence, etc. — you can see how little I changed if you know Russian; it is a translation — only with modernised setting and historical detail, so we could also see how the same psychology manifests now.

In a letter to his brother Mikhail, Dostoevsky himself described the tone as "strange, harsh and wild", adding, "it might not be liked; therefore, poetry must soften everything and carry it through". It's easy to be enamoured by that poetry — even in Russian — especially when it's so poetic and articulate, and confuse the satire on an incoherent and

contradictory worldview with a philosophical treatise, especially when it at times strikes the “literally me” nerve so much.

So, “Notes from Underground” is a deadpan cringe comedy about an exhausting and ridiculous armchair philosopher who mistakes neurotic paralysis for sophisticated intelligence who would absolutely go up on an open-mic stage and do unhinged stand-up screeds about his wretched life. Or post it on Substack at 3am.

Thus we would have what I shall call “[Posts from Underground](#)”.



I

I'm a sick man... I'm a spiteful man. Unattractive man I am. I think I have depression. Although I don't understand anything about my condition and don't know whether I have it at all. I'm not in therapy and never been to therapy, though I respect psychology and have read Freud. Besides, I constantly self-diagnose; well, at least enough to respect the profession (I'm smart enough not to self-diagnose, but also educated enough to self-diagnose). Nah, I won't go to therapy out of spite. You won't understand it. But I do understand. I obviously can't explain to you for whom exactly things are worse because of my spite; I know perfectly well that I'm not hurting therapists by not going to therapy; I know better than anyone that I'm only fucking myself over with all this and nobody else. But still, if I don't go to therapy, it's out of spite. I'm depressed, so let me get even more depressed!

I've been living like that for a while — maybe twenty years. Now I'm forty. I used to work, now I don't. I was a toxic IT support guy. I was rude and took pleasure in it. I mean, I didn't steal company equipment, so I had to compensate myself somehow (Bad joke; but I won't delete it. I wrote it thinking it was witty, but now that I see I just wanted to show off pathetically — I'm deliberately leaving it in!) When users would come to my desk with their tickets, I'd grind my teeth at them and feel inexorable pleasure when I managed to upset someone. Almost always managed to. Mostly they were all timid types: you know — users. But

among the self-important ones there was some middle manager I especially couldn't stand. He refused to submit and kept stubbornly following up on tickets. I had a war with him over his tickets for a year and a half. I finally broke him. He stopped following up. Though this happened when I was younger. But do you know, dear readers, what the main point of my spite was? The whole thing, the nastiest thing, was the every minute, even in moments of my strongest bile, I shamefully realised that I was not only not spiteful, but not even a bitter person, that I was just barking at shadows for nothing and amusing myself with it. I'm foaming at my mouth, but bring me some little treat — a cup of coffee or whatnot — and I'll calm down. I'll even feel touched, though afterwards I'll grind my teeth at myself and suffer from insomnia for months. That's just my way.

I lied to you above, lied that I was a toxic IT guy. Lied out of spite. I was just messing around with the users and that one guy, but in reality I could never be mean to anyone. I was constantly aware of many, many other feelings opposite to that. I felt them swarming in me, these opposite feelings. I knew they'd been swarming in me my whole life and trying to get out, but I wouldn't let them, I didn't, never did. They tortured me to the point of shame, brought me to convulsions and — I was completely fed up with them! Don't you reckon, dear readers, that I'm repenting something before you now, that I'm asking your forgiveness for something?... I'm sure that you do reckon... But anyway, I assure you, I don't care even if you do...

I not only failed to become mean, I failed to become anything, really:

not mean, not good, not scum, not decent, not a hero, not even a bug. Now I'm rotting away in my hole, mocking myself with the spiteful and completely useless consolation that an intelligent person cannot really become anything, and only an idiot becomes something. Indeed, an intelligent person of the twenty first century must and is morally obligated to be essentially a characterless being; while a person with a character, an achiever, is essentially an NPC. This is my belief at forty. I'm forty now, and forty years is where your life ends. To live past forty is vulgar, immoral and degenerate. Tell me, who lives past forty, honestly? I'll tell you who: NPCs and grifters live past forty. I'll say this to all boomers' faces, all these respectable boomers who "lived through worse in the 90s" and won't shut up about it! I'll say this the whole world's face! I have the right to say this because I myself will live to sixty. I'll live to seventy! To eighty!... Wait! Let me catch my breath...

You probably think, dear readers, that I'm here to make you laugh? You're wrong at that, too. I'm not some shitposter you think I am, or maybe think I am; however, if you, pissed off with all my rambling (and I can feel you are), decide to ask me, what am I then? I'll tell you: I'm that guy from IT. I worked to pay the bills (and only for that), and when last year one of my distant relatives left me a room in a communal flat in their will, I immediately quit and holed up in my corner. I lived in this corner before, but now I really feel settled. My room is shitty, in a Soviet building on the edge of Moscow. The woman I share the kitchen and bathroom with is old, mean from stupidity, and she always smells bad on top of it. People tell me that Moscow is bad for my mental

health and that with my pathetic means it's very expensive to live in Moscow. I know all this, know it better than all these experienced and wise advisors and those who nod along. But I'm staying in Moscow; I won't leave Moscow! I'm not leaving because... Ah! Who cares whether I leave it or not.

But anyway: what can any decent man talk about with the most pleasure?

Answer: himself.

Well then, I'll talk about myself.

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": [ICb.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 churchspeak. 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 shitposting, here’s one for you:

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for original fictions and translations.*

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