SECTION I: INTERPRETATIONS

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_The Defective Memory of the Ridiculous Man_

"The Dream of A Ridiculous Man" has the odd distinction of provoking interpretations that not only differ but that contradict each other completely. Most scholars accept as true the Ridiculous Man's account of his own transformation upon seeing the earthly paradise. Wasiolik, on the other hand, claims that the story is a study in self-deception and blasphemy; no transformation occurred at all.¹ Unfortunately Wasiolek offers only assertions based on analogies with Stavrogin's dream in _The Devils_ and Versilov's dream in _The Adolescent_. What is needed is a close analysis of the story itself. A consistent picture should emerge that would settle the question of the interpretation.

We are given certain facts about the Ridiculous Man. He describes himself as a "contemporary Russian progressive and a despicable Petersburger." He has had a university education, is an atheist, and has friends who are engineers. He has always felt ridiculous, especially from the age of seven,² and his university training has strengthened this feeling. He admits that he is very proud. In this Russian progressive we see traits of the Underground Man, Raskol'nikov, Kirillov, Stavrogin, and Ivan Karamazov: he belongs

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2. According to Aristotle, a child develops the ability to reason at the age of seven. The Orthodox and Catholic faiths make the same assumption: they both consider that at the age of seven a child is mature enough to be able to distinguish good from evil, hence at that age a child first goes to Confession.
to Dostoevskii's gallery of uprooted intellectuals.

The Ridiculous Man differs from most of these uprooted intellectuals (except for the Underground Man) in being the first-person narrator of his story. There are few examples of first-person narrators in the works of Dostoevskii wrote after his return from Siberia. The outstanding example is Arkady Dolgorukii, the young narrator of The Adolescent. I have discussed elsewhere how crucial it was for Dostoevskii personally to have Dolgorukii as a first-person narrator—how crucial it was and disastrous, for this choice of a narrator ruined the novel.3 The first-person narrator is also found in Notes from Underground and the short story "The Meek One" (Krotkaia). In these two stories first-person narration offers certain advantages. Both stories are concerned with self-analysis, self-discovery, in the course of which the omissions, the hedging, the tone are as revealing as the emphases. It is also of interest that these three first-person narrators (the Underground Man, the narrator in "The Meek One" and the Ridiculous Man) belong to the same class of educated intellectuals, divorced (as Dostoevskii would say) from the soil and the masses, and they share strikingly similar traits. They have strong beings are power plays in which they are conquerors or victims, or both at different times.

What is most striking about the Ridiculous Man is that, as a first-person narrator, he can conveniently forget to tell us many things. Most of these memory gaps occur near the beginning of the story, as if to set the "tone" for the rest of the story. Thus we are told that the narrator is and has been ridiculous from childhood on, but we are not told what made him ridiculous or who regarded him as ridiculous. What made him suddenly realize that nothing mattered (vse ravno)? What led him to conclude that the world did not and never had existed? When he looked up at a star, why did he then decide to commit suicide? Why had he postponed committing suicide? Why did he corrupt the inhabitants of paradise whom he had adored and whose feet he had kissed? And after he had corrupted them, why did he beg them to crucify him? (He could have chosen to be shot or hanged or he could have drowned himself.) Finally, we are not told some important details of his preaching. His message is that we should love our fellowmen as ourselves, but he neglects to point out that this commandment came from Christ; in fact, he never mentions Christ's name or any other teachings of Christ. Both at the beginning and end of the story he insists that he alone in the world has the truth, but if the truth consists of Christ's commandment and the earthly paradise, these are far from new revelations. How can he fail to see that? All these memory gaps suggest that a useful way to look