The Paradox of Textuality: Writing as Entrapment and Deliverance in Notes From Underground

The Paradox of Writing

A fundamental characteristic of Dostoevskii's underground man is his need for literary texts in order to interpret and function in the world. His "chief occupation at home," he explains, is reading, his "only external sensations available" being in reading.1 Through his reading he develops conceptions of himself, others, and his world, emerging in his adventures and private reveries as a product of his textual models. As James Holquist notes, "the essential meaning of the underground man's literariness is [that]... it is his way of organizing reality, of giving shape to the events which constantly threaten to overwhelm him."2 In his dreams, the beautiful modes of existence are "entirely ready-made, largely stolen from poets and novelists and adapted to serve every need and demand" (p. 67). And in his encounters with the Nevskii officer, his former schoolmates and with Liza, he demonstrates his inability to function without literature as a guide for action. When he meets the officer, he first desires a "proper, regular quarrel, a more decent, more literary one" (p. 57); and is offended when he is ignored. He composes a text "to describe that officer in a kind of exposé or caricature, in the form of a story" (p. 59); and writes but does not send "an excellent, charming letter, pleading with him to apologize" (pp. 50-60). Later, in his social engagement with his former schoolmates, the underground man is embarrassed by a spot on his clothing because, he thinks, "worst of how, how paltry, how unliterary, how ordinary it would all be" (p. 81). And in his encounter with Liza, he delivers a lengthy diatribe in the brothel which Liza remarks sounds like it is "out of a book" (p. 115). The underground man confesses that "I knew I was speaking stiffly, artificially, even bookishly; indeed, I was incapable of speaking otherwise than like out of a book" (p. 121). And when Liza visits him at home, he knows that his cruel rejection of her is "so make-believe, so much a product of the mind, so purposely invented, bookish" (p. 149).

Yet while the underground man confesses his own dependence on literary texts in order to function, he proclaims that he is not alone; that no one is

able to live without texts for guidance. He criticizes the utopian socialists for perpetrating their fiction of the crystal palace, comparing it to a musical comedy. "In vaudeville, for instance," he writes, "suffering is inadmissible, . . . . In a crystal palace it is unthinkable" (p. 39). Further, he remarks that the seemingly "nonliterary" Liza creates an image of herself with her letter from the medical student; that, as Holquist notes, Liza "has her stories too." And addressing his readers, the underground man affirms that we "have all lost touch with life, we all limp, each to a greater or lesser degree" because of our dependence on texts. "We've reached a point where we virtually regard 'living life' as hard labor, almost servitude, and we all agree in private that it's much better according to books" (p. 152). For without texts we are lost; "leave us on our own, without a book and we shall instantly become confused and lost, we shall not know what to join, what to believe in, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise" (p. 153). In being slave to our texts, we lose our freedom, for if someone would "untie the hands of any one of us, we shall immediately beg to be placed under tutelage again" (p. 152); and in losing our freedom, we also forfeit our power, the real creative force within us.

Given his distrust of submitting to texts, we might assume that the underground man would cease writing, thereby at least removing one text from his reader's temptation. And yet, despiet his resolve that he will cease writing, the underground man continues to compose his work. He thus is caught in a paradox in which he attacks the danger of textual entrapment, but does so in the medium of a text. Ultimately it is the "editor" of the Notes who must arbitrarily terminate the writing. "This in truth is not yet the end of the 'Notes' of this paradoxicalist," the editor remarks. "He would not keep his resolve and went on writing. But it seems to us, too, that we may well stop here" (p. 153).

Recent critics, focussing on this and other paradoxes in the Notes, have tended to reject earlier critical interpretations which, focussing primarily on part one, portrayed the underground man as a paradigm of spontaneity and freedom. In contrast, these later critics tend to find the underground man

3. Ibid., p. 234.
4. Critics who construe the underground man as a paradigm of existential freedom tend to hear in his words Dostoevskii's own voice, rather than the soul of an entrapped individual from whom Dostoevskii wishes to dissociate himself. Lev Shestov (in Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche, trans. Bernard Martin and Spencer Roberts [Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1969], p. 144) writes that "The 'underground' which Dostoevsky had depicted so vividly was not something completely alien to him, but something kindred, his very own." Further, these critics tend to construe part two of the Notes as an illustration of part one rather than a contrasting portrait of the narrator. Walter Kauffman in his Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre (Cleveland: World, 1969) writes that "Part One of the Notes From Underground is the best overture for existentialism ever written" (p. 14) and that the incidents in part two "illustrate his character and some of his obsessions in part one," but do not "greatly add to the thought content of part one" (p. 53).