We all know that Dostoevskii defined his work as an exercise in “higher realism.” The *locus classicus* here is contained in the famous letter to Strakhov on March 10, 1869: “I have my own view of art, and that which the majority call fantastic and exceptional is for me the very essence of reality.” Explanations of what Dostoevskii meant by this have often focused on thematics: this paper is an attempt to define Dostoevskii’s distinctive realism as it works itself out in specific literary structures. The major assumption in what follows is that Dostoevskii’s realism is superior to conventional literary realism in the degree to which it is open to contingency, the gratuitous, chance. Contingency is not only what *Notes from Underground* is about — it is the condition which is dramatized in that work’s unique plot. Dostoevskii gives the illusion of contingency by systematically subverting the traditional literary expectation of a neat beginning, middle, and end. Knowingly or not, most authors at all times have met the conditions for plot outlined by Aristotle for tragedy: something which “is an imitation of a whole, that is, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.”

The high degree of abstraction in such a definition permits endless interpretations of what might constitute a beginning, middle, or end. But two things are clear: Aristotelian plot is *ordered*, and it has *movement*. Later in *The Poetics* he says: “the tragic plot must not be composed of irrational parts. Everything irrational should, if possible, be excluded.” The order of the Aristotelian plot is achieved, then, through rules of exclusion. It ignores chance, the absurd, and

1. VII. 2, 1450b, in S. H. Butcher’s tr. (New York, 1951).
thus its movement is logical. Now let us recall that the Underground Man is opposed to logic, the syllogism. Therefore it should come as no surprise that the plot in which he is caught, the plot which defines him, is not linear or Aristotellean. It is in fact the Underground Man's twisted formula of $2 \times 2 = 5$ expressed in architectonics. Aristotellean plot also has parallels with the metaphor, which is defined in classical rhetoric, since at least Quintillian, as also having three parts: a metaphor is a comparison of two things, based on a third element common to both, the tertium comparationis. By subverting classical plot structure, Dostoevskii simultaneously explodes the metaphoric quality inherent in most fiction. As Bede Alleman has pointed out: "For [Aristotle] analogy is something easily expressed mathematically, that is by a proportional equation: the proportion of a to b equals the proportion of c to d .... [But] modern poetry no longer recognizes the essential prerequisite for this act of combination; namely the idea of a rational order of the universe that can be represented adequately by a network or relationships."13 It is precisely this breakdown of "the rational order of the universe" which defines the Underground Man, a breakdown which is structurally dramatized in the collapse of that linear plot which characterized fiction in ages of greater certainty.

Before turning to the text of Notes from Underground, let me very quickly recapitulate what I understand to be the specific qualities of traditional plot against which Dostoevskii is working. Most dictionaries give four definitions of plot: it is (1) an area marked off on a surface, usually ground; (2) a chart, diagram, or map; (3) the plan of action of a play, novel, poem, short story, etc.; (4) a secret project or scheme, a conspiracy. All of these meanings bear on the history of our subject. A plot is, above all, a thing marked off, something which has boundaries, which is distinctively itself and not some other thing. In order to achieve this quality of boundedness it must work by rules of exclusion, certain things must be left out. What plots leave out is, of course, various degrees of contingency, the state in which events may occur by chance, accidentally, fortuitously. This is the irrational against which Aristotle inveighs, the messiness of ordinary lived experience with its confusions, its half-finished sentences, its daily eruptions of the absurd. Plots are a means to cut all that out, and are thus like maps, which turn stormy oceans into neat, still designs, or the chaos of a jungle into a geometric patch of green. Thus plot is bounded, purged of contingency, and therefore available to linearity.