

# The Stranger Within: Dostoevsky's Underground

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## **Abstract**

*In Fyodor Dostoevsky's influential novel, Notes from Underground, we find one of the most memorable characters in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. The Underground Man, around whom everything else in this book revolves, is in some respects utterly repugnant: he is self-centred, obsessive and cruel. Yet he is also highly intelligent, honest and reflective, and he has suffered significantly at the hands of others. Reading Notes from Underground can be a harrowing experience but also an educative one, for in an encounter with what at first seems unfamiliar and disorienting we can awaken the 'stranger within'. Dostoevsky's work, if we are ready for it, can shake us from our slumbers and allow us to see that what appears to be strange may in fact be deeply familiar to us.*

Keywords: Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, R.S. Peters, Hermann Hesse, strangeness, suffering, compassion

## **Introduction**

The value of Dostoevsky's work for philosophers is widely acknowledged. James Scanlan (2002), for instance, argues that Dostoevsky deserves to be examined as a *thinker*, and this casts his corpus of literary as well as non-fiction writings in a new light. In the great novels of Dostoevsky's maturity – *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, *The Adolescent*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1993, 2001, 1994, 2003, and 1991 respectively) – we see, time and time again, evidence of profound insight in confronting some of the most searching metaphysical, ontological and ethical questions: How are we to understand the nature of reality? Does God exist? What does it mean to be a human being? What is the purpose of life? How ought we to act towards others? Such questions are addressed not in a didactic fashion but through the thoughts, feelings, actions, and relationships of Dostoevsky's many memorable characters. As Magarshack (2001) observes, 'it was only as a creative artist, that is, through the mind and heart of the characters he created, that [Dostoevsky] ... could reach out beyond the borderlines of conscious thought into the darkest recesses of the human personality, and, at the same time, provide the deepest analysis of human nature and human destiny that

any creative writer before or after him was ever able to achieve' (p. xx). Dostoevsky himself adopted a posture of intellectual honesty and humility in his attitude toward philosophy, professing his love for the subject while also stressing that he had no special abilities in the area (Clowes, 2004, p. 88).

If it was only in the later, longer works that Dostoevsky was able to give free rein to his philosophical voice, it is nonetheless the case that in one of his shorter books, *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky's encounter with philosophy finds perhaps its most striking expression. *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky, 2004) was published in 1864, just two years prior to the publication of *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky, 1993). *Notes from Underground* differed markedly in style and substance from any of the books that had preceded it, and while it has often been seen as a forerunner to the major novels that followed (starting with *Crime and Punishment*), in many ways it remains unique among Dostoevsky's writings. *Notes from Underground* was Dostoevsky's response to what he saw as disturbing trends in Western European thought. In *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (Dostoevsky, 2008), published in the year immediately preceding the publication of *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky had distilled his reflections from a visit to London, Paris, Berlin, and other European cities. He noted with alarm the apparent absence of a spirit of brotherhood and love and the rise of a new ethic of individualism and self-interest. His concern was to be heightened when, in the same year as *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* was released, Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* (Chernyshevsky, 1989) appeared. Chernyshevsky was the principal representative of the philosophical doctrine of rational egoism, a branch of 'scientific' utopian thought that was beginning to take hold among younger Europeans (Frank, 2010; Scanlan, 1999). Strongly opposed to this philosophy, Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground* and in so doing, created one of the most influential literary works of the last two hundred years.

At first glance, everything about *Notes from Underground* seems strange. The structure of the book is highly unusual, with a first section that appears to be a philosophical rant against unnamed 'gentlemen' (Chernyshevsky and other rational egoists were the targets) and a second part devoted to the recollection of several bizarre, traumatic events in the life of the central character. And what a central literary figure he is: the Underground Man, as he has become known, is, as Richard Pevear points out, 'one of the most remarkable characters in literature, one who has been placed among the bearers of modern consciousness alongside Don Quixote, Hamlet, and Faust' (Pevear, 2004, p. ix). The Underground Man is aware of his own marginality – of the strangeness of his character, his relations with others, and the life he has carved out for himself in his subterranean hovel. He is, he declares, in the famous opening words of the book, 'a sick man ... a wicked man', unattractive and 'superstitious in the extreme' (Dostoevsky, 2004, p. 5). He is obsessive and self-centred, disliked or ignored by almost all with whom he associates, and hyperconscious of his own intelligence. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Western readers of *Notes from Underground*, we are transported to a world that is disorienting in multiple ways. The novel's setting in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Russia is unfamiliar territory for many of us; Dostoevsky's style of writing is complex and odd; and the actions and thoughts of the Underground Man appear to be utterly irrational and inexplicable.

In this strangeness, however, there is also an uncomfortable familiarity. The problems Dostoevsky saw as important in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., an emerging ethic of selfishness) are still with us today. The difficulties posed by Dostoevsky's prose prove, with repeated readings, less daunting than first imagined and echoes of his style can still be detected in fiction today. Most importantly, the Underground Man, who seems to be so far removed from a 'normal' state of being as to be barely worth contemplating as a kind of literary comrade, is not as distant from us in his psychological makeup as we might want to admit. The strangeness of *Notes from Underground*, I shall argue, sets up a distance from the reader but with the effect of allowing us to come nearer to understanding ourselves and our world. In this sense, I suggest, the book can be seen as an *educational* text: one that will disturb but also reward any reader who struggles with it.

The first section provides a brief summary of the book, paying attention to both the philosophical critique of rational egoism in Part One and the three key episodes in the Underground Man's life depicted in Part Two. This is followed by an exploration of educational possibilities in Dostoevsky's text. This section draws on R.S. Peters' well known analysis of education as a process implying a change for the better. While not without its difficulties, Peters' account nonetheless lends itself well to an investigation of transformative power of strangeness in Dostoevsky's fiction. The third section draws on the insightful remarks of the Nobel Prize winning author Hermann Hesse to consider how and when we might best appreciate what Dostoevsky has to offer. I conclude that learning with characters such as Dostoevsky's Underground Man is by no means an easy task but one that is all the more important for that.

### **Beneath the Surface: The World of Dostoevsky's Underground Man**

The Underground Man, we learn near the beginning of the book, is forty years old. He used to work as a civil servant but after coming into a modest inheritance he resigned his position immediately and has consigned himself to his damp, cold apartment on the edge of St Petersburg. He characterises himself as a spiteful, insecure, overly sensitive man. The more aware he became of 'everything beautiful and lofty', he says, the deeper he sunk into the mire of unseemly deeds (Dostoevsky, 2004, p. 9). He claims to admire those who can take revenge and stand up for themselves. Such 'normal' men have a single-mindedness that is not found in those with heightened consciousnesses, the latter being mere mice in seeking vengeance when offended by others. The little intelligent 'mouse', unlike the stupid normal man, schemes and contorts and questions and doubts, eventually feigning indifference or contempt before sinking back into his hole (pp. 12-13).

The Underground Man asserts his right to defy reason and to suffer. There can be pleasure even in toothache, and in humiliation, he claims (pp. 15-16). To relieve himself of boredom, of inertia, the Underground Man would sometimes pull 'stunts' to allow himself to live a little – including, on one occasion, forcing himself to fall in love (p. 17). He would be happy, he says, for his inertia to be the result of laziness; he would then have respect for himself. Instead of being able to toast the 'beautiful and lofty' as a lazybones and glutton might, he has become burdened by it (p. 19). Contrary to the

determinism advocated by the gentlemen he is addressing, the Underground Man asserts the importance of wilfulness, even stubbornness, in seeking what is difficult or absurd (pp. 20-21). Profit for those to whom he is responding is 'prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace, and so on and so forth' (p. 21) but this, according to the Underground Man, ignores the most 'profitable profit' of all: 'free and voluntary wanting' (p. 25). It is on this basis – 'one's own caprice, however wild, one's own fancy, though chafed sometimes to the point of madness' (p. 25) – that humans, always and everywhere, have acted. Humans love to make roads for themselves, wherever they go, but they also love destruction and chaos. They love not just well-being but also suffering. Suffering is doubt but it is also 'the sole cause of consciousness' (p. 33). Consciousness is 'man's greatest misfortune'; yet 'I know that man loves it and will not exchange it for any satisfactions' (p. 33).

As he prepares to record the events in Part Two, the Underground Man claims his recollections are for himself only and will never be read by anyone else. What, then, does he tell us and why did he wish, or claim to wish, that such memories should be kept secret? He begins by detailing the circumstances of his life at age 24, a life that was, by his own account, 'gloomy, disorderly, and solitary to the point of savagery' (p. 41). His alienation from the rest of the world, already signalled in Part One, becomes apparent here straight away. He fancies that people view him with loathing and wonders why others, whose appearance is every bit as unattractive, are not seen in the same way. He talks about his colleagues at the office, holding himself to be superior in intelligence to most of them but despising of many. He notes that he used to read at home in order to stifle 'with external sensations all that was ceaselessly boiling up' inside him (p. 46). Reading 'stirred, delighted, and tormented' him (p. 46).

These thoughts pave the way for his description of the first key event: the 'bumping' episode. The Underground Man notes that his usual habit is to move out of the way of others, darting 'like an eel' among other passers-by (p. 49). He plans to seek revenge on an officer he feels has wronged him by emphatically not giving way, and prepares meticulously for this moment, even borrowing money to buy new clothes. After several failed attempts, and about to give up, one evening he suddenly closes his eyes when just a few steps away from the officer and bumps into him solidly, 'shoulder against shoulder!' (p. 52). He recalls with joy that he 'did not yield an inch and passed by on a perfectly equal footing!' (pp. 52-53). The officer does not even look back, and the Underground Man fancies that he (the officer) only pretended not to notice. He acknowledges that he was the worse for it physically, the officer being stronger, but suggests that that was not the point: the point was, he says, 'that I had achieved my purpose, preserved my dignity, yielded not a step, and placed myself publicly on an equal social footing with him' (p. 53). He returns home in ecstasy, feeling 'perfectly avenged for everything' (p. 53).

As a prelude to the second key episode in Part Two, the Underground Man describes his experience of nausea and repentance. He speaks of dreams that used to come to him, and then mock him: dreams of 'faith, hope, love' (p. 54). His flashes of 'everything beautiful and lofty' would arrive as if mixed like a good sauce, consisting of 'contradiction and suffering, of tormenting inner analysis' but also some profundity (p. 54). In his dreams, he experienced 'fantastical love', love that he afterwards never felt any need to apply in reality (pp. 54-55). At the end of these recollections, he notes he has

maintained something of an association with a schoolfellow, Simonov. He had severed ties with most of his school acquaintances, wanting to 'cut off all at once the whole of that hateful childhood of mine' (p. 56). 'Curses on that school', he cries, 'on those terrible years of penal servitude!' (p. 56).

He meets up with Simonov and several of his other former school fellows, who are planning a farewell dinner for one of their number. The Underground Man indicates that he would like to be included in the dinner gathering. After expressing surprise and disgust, the others agree to let him join them, and the Underground Man then suffers the humiliation of not being able to pay in advance his share towards the expenses. He arrives early the next evening, having not been told by the others that the dinner had been delayed by an hour, and over the next few hours experiences one excruciating incident after another. The others treat him with contempt, mocking and ignoring him. Large amounts of alcohol are consumed by all. The Underground Man breaks into sweats; he makes a long speech; he expresses anger and then shame. As a final indignity, he does not have the money to pay for his meal and must ask Simonov to help.

His school fellows leave to spend the last part of the evening at a house of ill repute. The Underground Man remains alone for a period, reflecting on the disorder and the 'tormenting anguish' in his heart (p. 76). Eventually he leaves, observing that even if his persecutors beg for forgiveness on their knees it will not be sufficient. Realising that '[a]ll is lost now' (p. 76), he heads, by horse and sled, for the same establishment as the others, fantasising all the while about his imagined duel and the consequences, and starts to weep. He stops the horse, gets out of the sled and stands in the snow in the middle of the street, and wonders whether to go on. Either way, he concludes, will be impossible, and he decides destiny is pulling him forward. He arrives, only to find the others have gone. While pacing the room and talking to himself, feeling as if he 'had been saved from death', he meets a young woman, with a 'fresh, young, somewhat pale face, with straight dark eyebrows and serious, as if somewhat astonished, eyes' (p. 80). This, we discover, is Liza, a prostitute, and the Underground Man's interactions with her make up the third key element of the second part of the book.

The Underground Man begins a conversation with Liza, asking for details about her background, before opining at length, and in a bookish manner, on a wide range of subjects, from goodness to grief. He experiences a desire to be cruel to Liza, to crush her with tales of the horrors that await her in her profession. His efforts in this regard are all too successful, and Liza collapses in tears. The Underground Man is filled with remorse and asks Liza to visit him. When he awakes the next day he immediately completes a 'gentlemanly, good-natured' letter to Simonov, 'adroitly, nobly, and, above all, with not a word too many' blaming himself for everything (p. 99). He seals the six roubles he owes to Simonov in the letter and arranges for his servant Apollon to deliver it. He is then tormented by the thought that Liza might come. By the next day, he desperately wants her to arrive. Several days pass and he has dreams about what he will say to her and their future together. When she does arrive, he is in the middle of a furious argument with Apollon. He unleashes his anger on her but she receives this with compassion and understanding. He feels as if he both hates Liza and is drawn to her. He is burdened by her remaining presence, longing for the peace of his solitude in the underground. Liza leaves and he is left to reflect on his suffering and shame.

## Reaching Out to a Stranger: Educative Change

How should we read this perplexing book if we are to make sense of its strangeness? Bakhtin (1984) argues that Dostoevsky creates distinctively complex characters, with voices that have their own integrity and do not merely serve as the vehicle for the author's views. In this respect, Dostoevsky's novels can be said to be *polyphonic* rather than monological in form. In the *Underground Man*, we find a tortured individual, a lonely man who is at odds with the world around him. His emotions swing wildly. He can be calculating and vindictive one moment, filled with uncontrollable despair the next. He is, literally and figuratively, a man submerged. 'The underground' is his place of residence but it also signals something deep beneath the surface in human consciousness: thoughts, feelings, ideas, desires that exert a powerful but seldom detected influence on our everyday lives. The *Underground Man* is a stranger to us, and yet not so much so that we cannot relate to him. Bakhtin captures, with great subtlety, the nature of strangeness and its purpose in Dostoevsky's work:

The self-clarification, self-revelation of the hero, his discourse about himself not predetermined (as the ultimate goal of his construction) by some neutral image of him, does indeed sometimes make the author's setting "fantastic", even for Dostoevsky. For Dostoevsky the verisimilitude of a character is verisimilitude of the character's own internal discourse about himself in all its purity – but, in order to hear and display that discourse, in order to incorporate it into the field of vision of another person, the laws of that other field must be violated, for the normal field can find a place for the object-image of another person but not for another field of vision in its entirety. Some fantastical viewpoint must be sought for the author outside ordinary fields of vision. (p. 54)

The *Underground Man*, true to Dostoevsky's polyphonic design, seems almost to spring out of the book, daring the reader to try and refute his logic, or to tell him something about himself that he does not already know (cf. Bakhtin, 1984, p. 52). Once encountered, he becomes more than an interesting literary construction; he works his way into the reader's mind, occupying a not altogether comfortable place in a little submerged corner, shouting out challenges and reminding us every now and then of our own failings with a sharp 'I told you so'. Reading *Notes from Underground* is thus not an exercise to be taken lightly. The book is, as D.S. Mirsky puts it, a 'strong poison'. *Notes from Underground* is 'quite as much philosophy as literature'. It can be seen as a 'mystical revelation'; an expression – paradoxical, unexpected and ruthless in its form – of Dostoevsky's understanding of the tragic dimension to human existence. 'Viewed as literature', Mirsky says, 'it is the most original of Dostoevsky's works, although also the most unpleasant and the most "cruel"'. It cannot be recommended to those who are not either sufficiently strong to overcome it or sufficiently innocent to remain unpoisoned' (cited in Briggs, 1994, p. 181).

This points to the potential educative value of the text, while also sounding a warning. Education, however we might define it, always implies some form of change. Change occurs at different levels and in a multitude of different ways. We can identify small moments within educative situations where a new piece of information is acquired

or a new skill is learned or a fresh way of looking at a problem is adopted. We can also speak of gradual, deeper changes in understanding across the course of a lifetime. Change may also occur, however, in more sudden and dramatic ways. A traumatic event can leave an immediate and permanent mark on a person; equally, the sensations and feelings associated with an experience of supreme joy can remain forever. We cannot always see the educational significance of such events and experiences until later in our lives. They overwhelm through their impact on our emotions and it is only with the moderating influences of reason, time and distance that we can gain some perspective on them and appreciate the nature of the transformation that has occurred. This is not to suggest that the emotional content of such experiences is somehow prior to or separate from their educative value; to the contrary, the intensity of the feelings engendered by encounters of this kind is both necessary for and integral to the process of education at work here. But making sense of what at first can seem surreal, strange or shocking, demands more than emotion alone.

The link between change and education is not a straightforward one. As all philosophers of education know, several decades ago R.S. Peters (1970, 1973) argued that education implies a change for the *better*. Peters used an analogy with the notion of 'reform'. Just as we wouldn't say that someone had been reformed but not changed for the better, Peters maintained, so too would we not want to say that a person had been educated but not changed in some beneficial way. Education, for Peters, 'is not a concept that marks out any particular type of process such as training, or activity such as lecturing: rather, it suggests criteria to which processes such as training must conform' (Peters, 1973, pp. 86-87). Peters continues: 'People ... think that education must be for the sake of something extrinsic that is worthwhile, whereas the truth is that being worthwhile is part of what is meant by calling it "education"' (p. 87). Education thus requires that something of value be passed on. This is, in part, why Peters distinguishes 'training' from 'educating': while we *may* be educating people while training them, it is equally possible that we may not be – we may, for example, be training someone in the art of torture. Moreover, the individual who is being educated must come to care about the valuable things involved and want to achieve those things that are deemed (by Peters) to be 'worthwhile'. For this to come about, participation should be, as far as reasonably possible, voluntary and the participant must have some understanding or knowledge of what he or she is doing. This allows us to rule out some forms of drill, for example, where a person may be compelled to repeat things endlessly and mindlessly. Further, the individual being educated must have some sort of breadth of cognitive perspective – that is, he or she should be able to see the connection between what he or she is doing and other things.

For Peters, change for the better involved initiation into rational disciplines, and it was this element of his work perhaps more than any other that attracted criticism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The inherent conservatism in Peters' position, and indeed in the work of the 'London School' more generally (Peters, Hirst and Dearden), came under attack from Marxists (e.g., Harris, 1979, 1982) and feminists (e.g., Martin, 1981), among others. Education, for the London School, was principally concerned with the development of *reason*. Emotion and the qualities associated with nurturance were, as Jane Roland Martin and other feminists pointed out, devalued. And as Marxists such as Harris argued, Peters failed to contextualise his concept of education, ignoring its

rootedness in a form of class privilege. Nonetheless, Peters does provide a helpful prompt in thinking about change of the kind that might be engendered by reading Dostoevsky. *Notes from Underground* can jolt the reader from his or her intellectual and emotional slumber. The Underground Man, when we first encounter him, seems to have few endearing characteristics. He is self-absorbed, petty, vindictive, and rude. It is, however, impossible to ignore him: he ‘shouts’ at us, forcing us to enter his psychological and social world. This can be a harrowing experience but it can also bring about a change for the better in the reader. It is possible to see ‘the strange’ and ‘the better’ as in tension with each other but this can be a productive tension. New encounters with that which appears strange can prompt us to reconsider taken for granted notions of ‘betterness’. In doing this, however, the engagement with strangeness affirms its value, for the very idea of troubling that which is given is itself an important part of what makes it a worthwhile process of change.

*Notes from Underground*, if encountered in a certain way, allows us to more deeply understand ourselves by ‘reaching out’ to a character who at first seems repugnant in his strangeness. If this is to be an educational process, it must, as Peters argued, involve wittingness on the part of the reader. We must, in Mirsky’s terms, be fully aware of the strong poison we are about to ingest. Consistent with Peters, we might also say that we should come to care about the activity of reading and reflecting on a text of this kind. More than this, however, we must come to care about the Underground Man himself. We need sufficient breadth in perspective – an understanding not only of literature but of *life* – to place *Notes from Underground* in its appropriate broader contexts (e.g., in relation to Dostoevsky’s other works, the problems of his time, and the history of existentialist thought). Crucially, we need to see the experience of reading *Notes from Underground* as both emotional and rational. The Underground Man, as Scanlan (1999, 2002) shows, mounts a well reasoned case against rational egoism in Part One of the book. *Notes from Underground*, in common with Dostoevsky’s other novels, has educative value in teaching us to appreciate the importance of reason (cf. Siegel, 1997). Engaging a work of this kind is, however, also a strongly emotional experience, and it is in the feelings created by the book that the most telling marks are made.

Even if we have little interest in the philosophy of rational egoism and the Underground Man’s critique of it, it is difficult not to squirm when reading Part Two of the novel. For in the awkwardness the Underground Man displays, the humiliation he suffers at the hands of his school fellows, and the cruelty he inflicts on Liza we see, to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche (1996), much that is ‘human, all too human’. In this sense, the Underground Man is *all of us*. He is, to be sure, more extreme than most in the way he exhibits these qualities, and he admits to this at the end of his tale, but the tendencies toward destructiveness and the frailties on show are those found – in some way – in most human lives. We can be critical of him but must also turn that critical gaze back on ourselves. We can, then, feel a certain solidarity with the Underground Man despite his excesses, obsessions and failings. Richard Rorty (1989) contends that solidarity can best be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, ‘the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of the other, unfamiliar sorts of people’ (p. xvi). For Rorty, ‘[t]his process of coming to see other human beings as “one of us” rather than as “them” is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like



and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel' (p. xvi). We cringe when reading *Notes from Underground* not because the thoughts and feelings expressed, the actions undertaken, and the human relations described are so strange as to be unrecognisable but precisely because they have a certain uncomfortable familiarity. This is, to a considerable extent, what gives the book its latent educational power, but we must be ready to experience it. Hermann Hesse, the German Nobel laureate and one of Dostoevsky's literary heirs, provides some insightful thoughts on when we can best appreciate what Dostoevsky has to offer.

### **Appreciating Dostoevsky**

Hesse was well acquainted with several Russian writers. He read, and sometimes wrote about, Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev and Tolstoy, among others (see Mihailovich, 1967). It was Dostoevsky, however, for whom he felt the greatest respect. Seidlin (1950) notes that while Hesse has often been compared with his contemporary, Thomas Mann, the two differ in some important ways.

Thomas Mann – at least the mature Thomas Mann – is the apex of civilization; the demons, who are by no means alien to him, are subdued and neutralized. In this he is a true heir of Goethe. Hesse is the heir of Dostoevsky, whose concern is not man's autonomous dignity but man's saintliness, not justice but grace. The demons are on the loose in Dostoevsky as in Hesse. Thomas Mann is, if these geospiritual generalizations be taken with a grain of salt, a Westerner, Hesse an Easterner ... Thomas Mann's work is undoubtedly wider in scope, richer with meaning and purer in outline; yet his heart never pulsates so visibly, audibly and close beneath the surface as does Hesse's. It is a tormented and struggling heart, beset by the tragic upheavals of the times, but much more thoroughly beset by the unalterable and timeless tragedy of man's existence. (Seidlin, 1950, p. 347)

Hesse, like Dostoevsky, is a writer among those 'who tear out their hearts so that grace may be bestowed upon them' (p. 346). This marvellous phrase from Seidlin finds further elaboration in Hesse's own words on Dostoevsky.

Hesse wrote several important essays on Dostoevsky, including a lengthy piece on *The Brothers Karamazov* and a shorter but incisive article on *The Idiot*. In a third, more general essay, Hesse makes some fascinating comments about the process of reading Dostoevsky. The time to read Dostoevsky, he says, 'is when we are miserable, when we have suffered to the limits of our capacity for suffering and feel the entirety of life as a single searing wound, when we breathe despair and have died the death of hopelessness' (Hesse, 1978, p. 133). Hesse continues:

Staring from afar into life, bereft and crippled by misery and no longer able to understand life in its wild, beautiful cruelty, wishing to have no more to do with it, then we are open to the music of this terrifying and magnificent writer. Then we are no longer onlookers, no longer epicures and judges; we are fellow

creatures among all the poor devils of Dostoevsky's creation, then we suffer their woes, and we stare fascinated and breathless with them into the hurly-burly of life, into the eternally grinding mill of death. But at the same time we can also catch Dostoevsky's music, his comfort, his love, and then we can first experience the marvelous meaning of his terrifying and so often hellish world. (p. 133)

Hesse argues that there are two forces at work in Dostoevsky's fiction. One is despair: 'the suffering of evil, submission and nonresistance to the cruel, bloody harshness and ambiguity of all human existence' (p. 134). Beyond this, however, lies a second, more heavenly voice: the human conscience. The human conscience has great strength, and provides the path out of deep despair, but most people live counter to their consciences, resisting them. Hesse observes:

Some people have to rage and sin against conscience until they have experienced all the hells and soiled themselves with all the horrors in order finally, sighing with relief, to recognize their error and experience the hour of transformation. Others live in perfect friendship with their consciences, rare, happy, and holy men, and whatever happens to them touches them only on the outside, never reaching their hearts. They remain always pure, the smile does not vanish from their faces. (p. 135)

For Hesse, Dostoevsky's work is like Beethoven's music. Both must be experienced when one is ready, when one has been properly prepared by sorrow and despair. In Beethoven, as in Dostoevsky, there is an understanding of wisdom, happiness and harmony – to be found not on a smooth road but on 'paths close to the abyss', and to be grasped not smilingly 'but only with tears and in exhaustion and sorrow' (p. 135).

Nowhere is Hesse's advice on reading Dostoevsky more apposite than in relation to *Notes from Underground*. The Underground Man is, on the surface, one of Dostoevsky's least sympathetic characters. The structure of the book is, at first glance, jarring and difficult. The barrage of philosophical arrows launched in Part One can seem over-the-top, even overwhelming, and the reader must pause to regain his or her balance. Any temporary state of equilibrium does not last long, for in Part Two, the book becomes, if anything, even more challenging. There, as the interactions with others unfold, the Underground Man's words, actions and relationships become ever more desperate. Robert Louis Jackson (1984) argues that there is an inevitability to the Underground Man's fate: 'Every attempt to introduce the irrational into his life and to bring an illusion of authentic freedom, choice, self-determination; every attempt to play with the plot of his life only further underscores his subjection to the power of blind destiny' (p. 80). Yet it seems to me that Dostoevsky holds open the *possibility* of something more, even if this is not realised in the portion of the life conveyed. In the middle of the Underground Man's despair there is hidden beauty. The conscience to which Hesse refers is only apparently absent in *Notes from Underground*, and we need to have felt something of the pain experienced by the Underground Man to be able to identify this. The Underground Man is, to be sure, self-centred, obsessive, oversensitive, manipulative, and spiteful – but he is still yearning to be something more, something other than the repulsive creature he initially seems to be. His conscience is projected in

the form of Liza, to whom he reaches out at one moment, only to cruelly withdraw the next.

It is in the severity of the Underground Man's emotional swaying, however, that the possibility of something more is revealed. More than once he lapses into tears, the strain of not only his tortured night with his school acquaintances but the whole of his miserable existence proving too much to bear. Rowan Williams (2008) refers to the Underground Man's state of mind as the embodiment, with some refinements, of the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness: 'the Underground Man is neither a ludicrous irrationalist, though his exaggerated rhetoric invites this charge, as he well knows, nor a trial run for some Sartrean rebel or voluntarist, glorying in the refusal of the world as it is'. '[T]his is a state of consciousness', Williams observes, 'that is deeply miserable and painful, and has no glory about it' (p. 19). In this sense, depressing though this may be, the Underground Man is not so very different from many of us. Dostoevsky had an interest in 'ridiculous' characters throughout much of his writing career (see Cox, 1980; Dostoevsky, 1997; Phillips, 1975), and those he created all experienced some form of suffering, often teetering on the edge of sanity and sometimes finding themselves on the brink of suicide. Such dramas need not be lived out in precisely the same way to appreciate the thoughts and feelings that underlie the actions of Dostoevsky's characters. The burdens of life, both externally imposed and self-inflicted, can sometimes seem insurmountable. This process can gather pace, intensifying with certain trigger events, until the dam bursts and the whole river of emotions pours out. At that point, and this may be conceived as a period in life rather than a single moment, we become, as Hesse observes so well, ready to read Dostoevsky. This is by no means an easy educational process, but that, I think, is why he should be read: Dostoevsky reminds us of why life is worth living precisely at those times when this is least clearly evident to us. He is, in this sense and in other ways, a hopeful writer and one with something important to offer all educationists.

## **Conclusion**

More than four decades ago, Konstantin Mochulsky declared *Notes from Underground* a 'strange' work. In its structure, style and subject matter, Mochulsky argued, the book is striking, and '[a]s for strength and daring of thought, Dostoevsky yields neither to Nietzsche nor Kierkegaard' (cited in Briggs, 1994, p. 182). Richard Pevear (2004) too has spoken of the 'formal inventiveness of *Notes from Underground*: its striking language, unlike any literary prose ever written; its multiple and conflicting tonalities; the oddity of its reversed structure, which seems random but all at once reveals its deeper coherence' (p. xvii). In this article, I have tried to show that the strangeness of the book can be profoundly unsettling but also educative in its effects. If the educational value of *Notes from Underground* is to be realised, we have to be well prepared, and Hermann Hesse provides some important observations on how and why this might be so. If Hesse's counsel is taken seriously, the path of educational development through Dostoevsky is not the easier road but the harder one. By portraying with such subtlety and skill such a memorable and complex character, Dostoevsky allows us to see that the

Underground Man can be both a stranger and a friend: a frightening figure but also someone we can embrace as a fellow, frail, learning human being.

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