

## En Underjordisk Dagbok

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March 3-5, 2013

This short novel is composed of two parts, rather independent of each other. The first is a philosophical monologue, when the narrator (and the author?) is a mature man of forty, while the second is a story presented in an absurd style worthy of a Gogol, a recollection of a few episodes during the authors youth at twenty-five. Its object is to show the extreme awkwardness of the narrator as a social persona. How he is torn between his disdain for the world and his desperate desire to join it. The two contradictory emotions together inspire actions at cross-purposes, creating situations close to slap-stick.

So let us first briefly recall the second part. The narrator leads a socially isolated life as an underpaid civil servant. But no matter how much you are down in 19th century Russia there are always people being worse off, and even a poor man has a servant, the narrator being no exception, although his status is low enough to allow his underling to put on airs. The only resource to social intercourse he has is through his former school-mates, with whom he always had uneasy relations, being constantly bullied and resented for his academic success. When he finds out that some of his former school-mates are planning to give a farewell dinner to yet another school-mate, whom he always held in low esteem, he is overcome with a desire to join the charmed circle. Reluctantly his presence is indulged, but not without snubs, to which he is quick to react. The outcome is absurd and even farcical, the narrator being reduced to lying on a sofa, while the party goes on unheeded of his presence. Incidentally, the expense of the party is that of the monthly wage of the servant, which gives you some insight into the economical conditions. But the narrator is not yet satisfied but insists to join the 'Nachspiel' which takes place in a brothel. He arrives late and in deep inebriation, and ends up with a young woman. Upon awakening from his stupor the next morning he gives her a lengthy lecture on the wickedness of her life and her need to reform, with such abandon, that eventually he moves her. He gives her his address and encourages her to seek him out, only to regret it afterwards. Why should he suffer the consequences of his eloquence, why cannot he be left alone. She does not come, and he can start to relax, only to find himself unexpectedly at her presence. She comes with expectations and he does his best to disappoint them, and when he has thoroughly succeeded he breaks down and succumbs to a weeping fit, only once again to try and bring her closer to himself, to the infinite confusion of the poor girl. The whole thing is not so much comical as painful to the reader, and no doubt to the narrator (and the author?) as well.

Literature is one thing, and philosophy another, and they tend to mix as oil and water, that is not to mix at all. But what may be distasteful to the reader, is not necessarily so for a writer. The philosophical sentiments may be closest to his heart, and it is often more by accident than design he manages to make them come alive through the detour provided by a literary narrative. The narration if successful, in spite of the ambitions of the author, may survive for a very long time, while philosophical preaching quickly dates

and fades. Most people are capable of the latter, few of the former, and even if the deftness of a professional writer may add some luster to a philosophical soliloquy, he is essentially not better at it than the proverbial man in the street.

What Dostoevsky (using the mouthpiece of his invented character) advocates is the free will, the devil take the consequences. Its essence is to be found in its freedom to manifest itself and in the independence out of which it is wrought. In particular one has to make a distinction between your will and rational reasoning, because the latter is in the form of a calculation, and the outcome of a calculation is neither necessarily predictable and nor within the powers of your will. As the underground man puts it. If will and reason are married you cannot rationally will the irrational. Furthermore our rationality is only part of us, while our will encompasses so much more. In fact it involves the whole life of an individual. He continues to propose that what may seem the most stupid, may after all be the most rational and the most useful. What he abhors the most is the subjugation of man to mere arithmetic. Two times two is four regardless of my will. Man is basically irrational, almost to the extent of being ridiculous, She wants to arrive at a goal, but once she has arrived she cannot care less. He summarizes his diatribe by claiming that it is not suffering as such that he wants to promote, but the right to follow your impulses, regardless of the suffering it may cause. Furthermore it is only in suffering that man is brought to his highest level of consciousness.

The underground man rebels against the ambitions of social engineering. In mathematical models in economy, man is reduced to an actor, whose aim it is, it is assumed, to maximize certain things in his life and to go about it optimally. Man not only as homo economics, but as above all as a rational creature. This is something that goes against the grain of many people, not only underground men with an overriding wish to be apart. This is simply not the way we lead our lives, they claim. Life is an irregular business swayed by passion and impulses and not guided by calculation, except by those frigid souls who restrict themselves to be scheming and calculating individuals. Is mathematics wrong, the insufferable inflexibility of arithmetics, which refuses to once in a while allow two times two to be five? No, I would say. People in general are too ignorant of mathematics and its scope to really appreciate its subversive aspects. The diagonal principle of Cantor is one such aspect, which I like to think of the ultimate manifestation of free will. Just as a man traveling backwards in time may decide to kill his mother as a young girl, Not because of any hatred against his mother, nor because of any sadism, at least not of the personal kind, but just for the heck of it making his very act impossible by making himself unable to be conceived and born, This was applied by Cantor to show the uncountability of the reals, or more generally the awesome power of the powerset, ideas which were popularized by Russell in his eponymous paradox. To twist an argument against itself. Man is rational by willing the rational, but let it will the irrational. There is no reason why it should not, and hence it is imperative that it does.

#### *A note on the translation*

This is a new translation (2010) by Barbara Lönnqvist published by Lind et co. In

my library I also have an older one (< 1970) by Cecilia Borelius<sup>1</sup> and published by Tidens förlag, both in Swedish. Finally I have access to an English translation, likewise from my collection, from 1961 by Andrew R. Macandrew published by Signet Classics.

The Russian title is Записки из подполья. The word Записки refers to *anteckningar*, (*notes*) often made concurrently say during a trip. While Подполье either means *källare* (*basement, cellar*) or more metaphorically *underjordisk* (*underground*) denoting a subversive and illegal activity. The older Swedish translation takes the literal meaning of the word and translates the title into *Anteckningar från ett källarhål* (as BL suggests, being influenced by the German title *Aufzeichnungen aus dem Kellerloch*<sup>2</sup>) while the English title *Notes from Underground* clearly uses the more metaphorical meaning of Подполье which according to the BL is the most idiomatic use. Her own translation *En underjordisk dagbok* is somewhat freer, elaborating the notes into a diary and dispensing altogether with the location the word Подполье indicates while emphasizing the nature of the writing.

Now without the Russian original, not to mention the lack of command of the language, makes any serious discussion of the comparative values of either translation impossible. In her article<sup>3</sup> BL discusses at some length the various ways she has chosen to differ from earlier translations. I will instead take one short section at random, and then compare the three translations, and by some act of reverse engineering, get some clue. So let us start with the beginning of section 9 as it occurs in the translation of CB.

*Mitt herrskap, jag skämtar naturligtvis, jag vet själv att mina skämt är misslyckade, men allt bör inte uppfattas som skämt. Jag skär tänderna medan jag skämtar. Mitt herrskap, det är några frågor som pinar mig; lös dem åt mig. Ni vill t.ex. vänja en människa av med gamla vanor och sätta hennes vilja i överensstämmelse med vetenskapens och det sunnda förnuftets fordringar. Men hur vet ni att man inte bara kan utan också måste ändra om människan? Varav sluter ni er till att det är så absolut nödvändigt för den mänskliga viljan att ändra sig? Med ett ord, hur vet ni att en sådan förändring verkligen medför någon fördel åt människan?*

While the translation by BL proceeds as follows:

*Nu skämtar jag förstås, gott folk, och jag vet också att det var ett dåligt skämt, men allt skall inte tas för ett skämt. Jag kanske skämtar och gnisslar tänderna samtidigt. Hör nu vilka frågor som plågar mig, låt mig förklara. Till exempel, ni vill att människan skall lämna sina gamla vanor, ni vill rätta till hennes vilja, så som vetenskapen och det sunnda förnuftet kräver. Men varifrån har ni fått att man inte bara kan utan också bör göra om människan? Av vad sluter ni er till*

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<sup>1</sup> Originally Cecilia Rohnström, and first published in 1953, indicating a translation done in the early 50's.

<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian translation is likewise *Opptegnelser fra et kjellerdyp* just as the Danish *Opptegnelser fra et kælderdyb*. Furthermore the Dutch is given by *Aanteekeningen uit het ondergrondse* and the French by *Les Carnets du sous-sol*

<sup>3</sup> Le Style - c'est l'home. Om berättarens röst hos Tolstoj och Dostojevski. I 'Aspekter av litterär nyöversättning. Olof Eriksson (rd.) Linnaeus University Press, p. 145-157.

*att viljandet hos människan nödvändigtvis måste rättas till? Kort sagt, hur vet ni att sådant rättande verkligen är till nytta för människan?*

The differences are mainly stylistic, the meanings conveyed by the two translations are essentially identical. One noteworthy detail is that two words are emphasized in both versions, which indicates that they are so in the original *but* the words emphasized are different.

What about the English translation?

*Of course I'm joking, my friends and I realize that my jokes are weak. Still everything can't be laughed off. Perhaps I am joking through clenched teeth. You see that I am haunted by certain questions, and perhaps you'll allow me to ask them. Now, you, for instance - you want to cure man of his bad old habits and reshape his will according to the requirements of science and common sense. But what makes you think that man either can or should be changed in this way? What leads you to the conclusion that it is absolutely necessary to change man's desires? How do you know that these corrections will actually be to man's advantage?*

Once again, the meaning is basically the same, but the style is more colloquial and differ more from either Swedish translation than those differ from each other, apart from the language. Note also that in the English text only one word is emphasized, and incidentally the same as in the two previous cases. Finally the Russian original:

Господа, я, конечно, шучу, и сам знаю, что неудачно, но ведь и нельзя, же все принимать за шутку. Я может быть, скрывая зубами шучу. Господа; пазпешите их мне. Вот вы, например, человека от старых привычек хотите отычить и волю его исправить, сообразно с требованиями науки и здравого смысла. Хо почему вы знаете, что человека не только можно, но и ныжно так переделывать? из чего бы заключете, что хотенью человеческому так непбходимо надо исправитьця?

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