In 1849 Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was sentenced to death. He was member of a society which were considered dangerous for their liberal ideas. As the execution was about to set off, he was reprieved and instead sent to prison camp, and afterwards sent off for military service. Notes from underground (written 1864) is one of his first major works after this period, and it clearly marked a turn in his writing career. Before he had affiliated himself with the ideals of the enlightenment and romanticism, rationality, the beautiful and the sublime, but in Notes from Underground these ideals are to large extent ridiculed and instead more doubt, cynism and existential delving arises. The new tone in the narrative is also evident in the later works of Dostoevsky such as Crime and Punishment (1866), The Idiot (1868), and Brothers Karamazov (1879-1880) and because of this Notes from underground has been called a prologue to these works.

Here I'll try to present some of the characteristics which marks this turn in Dostoevsky's writing. I'll argue that in Notes from Underground it is Dostoevsky the philosopher who presents himself. The emphasis in the narration alters from a literary depiction to the presentation of ideas. However, Dostoevsky's philosophising is not characterized by an inclination for argumentation, but rather the ability to create images and incorporate feelings - or as Nikolay Strakhov put it, Dostoevsky "felt thought with unusual liveliness". Another characteristic is that Dostoevsky gets personal and starts to use more of himself in the narration and dares to be self-critical and radically honest. This honesty is both evident in description of narcissistic day-dreaming, fantasies of how he (the main character of the book) donates millions to humanity and how everyone falls in love with him and kisses his feet, and on the other hand descriptions of radical self-blame, for example when he yells to a girl "I hated you already for all the lies I had told you".

Short description of the plot of Notes from Underground

Notes from Underground consists of two parts. The first part, "Underground" is a long monologue, where the protagonist, the Underground Man, presents himself and he describes his ideas. In the second part "Apropos of the wet snow" the Underground Man speaks of some episodes from his life. The monologue in the first part expresses a defense for irrationality. The Underground Man attacks the ones who believes in science and rationality, and says that it is more valuable to act according to ones own "stupid will" rather than to act according to rational arguments of what would be most beneficial. In the second part the Underground Man speaks of episodes from his life where he intentionally puts himself in situations where he knows that he will be humiliated and ashamed. For example, he insists on going to a dinner party which he wasn't invited to with old classmates whom he hates - and at the dinner party he does what he can to act inapproriate, which results in his own unhappiness. One can thus say that the second part illustrates the argumentation of the first part.

Dostoevsky the philosopher presents himself

Dostoevsky hasn't just become famous as a literary artist, but also as a kind of thinker. Notes from Underground is the first of Dostoevsky's works which has been given a wide philosophical acceptance. The story has been considered as one of the foreground works of the philosophical branch of existentialism, for example of Albert Camus, and it was also admired by Friedrich Nietzsche.

If Notes from underground only consisted of the first part, it would be difficult to classify the work. One may think it rather resembles a piece of journalism than literature. And one may question if it isn't better classified as philosophy or psychology or biography? Even if the second part is considered, the book is not plain simple to classify. The ambition of that the notes are suppose to be
something more than literature is also expressed in a footnote to the book, signed by Dostoevsky himself. Dostoevsky writes that "I have tried to expose to the view of the public more distinctly than is commonly done, one of the characters of the recent past", and the purpose with this is to show that such people exist and always will exist. In this formulation there is no immediate literary ambitions. Of course one can question the credibility of such claim, but one is making a mistake if one doesn't take it seriously. Similar claims is also put forward by the Underground Man himself, for example when he writes "you see an idea has occurred to me and I want to realise it at all costs". The most important thing is thus the mediation of an idea. And at the very end of the story, the Underground Man writes "I have felt ashamed all the time I've been writing this story; so it's hardly literature", which expresses a repudiation of the literary ambition. Dostoevsky wrote in a letter to his brother that he dreamed that the story would become "rubbish", but at the same time he had high hopes about it, and he wrote "it's going to be the truth".

There is an emphasis on the presentation of an idea, and thus we conclude that it is Dostoevsky the philosopher who presents himself. An explanation to this philosophical turn can be that shortly before he started writing Notes from Underground, he came in contact with Nikolay Strakhov. Strakhov was a prominent thinker well oriented both in science and philosophy, and became something of a philosophical mentor for Dostoevsky. Strakhov noted that Dostoevsky had a philosophical talent, but that Dostoevsky wasn't any ordinary philosopher. Dostoevsky did not read philosophy, he wasn't oriented in the history of philosophy, but he felt philosophy. Strakhov wrote about Dostoevsky:

>A simple idea, sometimes very familiar and commonplace, would suddenly set him aflame and reveal itself to him in all significance. He, so to speak, felt thought with unusual liveliness. Then he would state it in various forms, sometimes giving it a very sharp, graphic expression, although not explaining it logically or developing its content. Above all, he was an artist, he thought in images and was guided by feeling.

This description tallies well with how Dostoevsky depicts ideas in Notes from Underground. The Underground Man's depiction of ideas springs of images and metaphors. For example, he describes the laws of nature as a stone wall, something big and hard which most people plainly surrenders in front of, but which he himself bangs his head against for no benefit. And he describes that "Twice two makes four is a pert coxcomb who stands with arms akimbo barring your path and spitting." He incorporates feelings in concepts which for mathematicians and scientists tends to appear entirely empty of feelings. The argumentation which the Underground Man puts forward is not logical, but partly it is also the point that the argumentation is not supposed to be logical. The Underground Man follows the principle of feeling and not the principle of thought.

From a logical point of view one may note that the Underground Man's argumentation is contradictory. He commits major mistakes when he repeatedly messes up empirical claims with logical claims. He writes that men "traverses oceans" to find out that "twice two makes four", but that twice two makes four is concluded by introspection and not by observation. And he says that if somebody proves that "you are descended from a monkey" it is simply to accept fact for "twice two is a law of mathematics", but evidence for human's eventual lineage from the apes is nothing that can be proved by mathematics since mathematics is non-empirical. Yet it can feel hopelessy uncontestable that man originates from apes just as it can feel hopelessy uncontestable that twice two makes four - and it is just that feeling which the Underground Man wants to mediate.

Just as Strakhov pointed out Dostoevsky doesn't explicate the content of ideas, and he doesn't explain the logic, but he creates images and he incorporates feelings in the ideas. Lev Shestov means likewise when he writes that "Dostoevsky was a great artist, but a poor thinker" and that "Dostoevsky is not disposed to argue", that is, Dostoevsky has no inclination to reason logically. However, these comments by Strakhov and Shestov about Dostoevsky doesn't need to be regarded derogatory, or even as negative criticism. It can be understood by taking the typology of Carl
Gustav Jung into consideration. Jung describes two ways of gathering information: by sensation and by intuition, and two ways of judging information: by thinking and by feeling. Sensation and intuition forms an opposite, and thinking and feeling forms another opposite. According to Jung these functions are all vital, but it is also in human nature to develop certain functions more than others. And in order to develop, make conscious, a function it also requires a relative shifting of its opposite function to the subconscious.

According to Strakhov's description Dostoevsky could fit into a type who has intuition as a dominant function and feeling as auxilliary function. Jung describes this as "artistic intuition which selects and presents its images by means of feeling judgment". In order for Dostoevsky to keep a feeling with strong motivation power, it was required that he to large extent had to subside his thinking to the subconscious. This is also evident in Notes from Underground, as for example shown above, and also the Underground Man himself admits that he messes up the "problems of life" in a "logical tangle".

Daring to be personal and honest

Shestov writes: "With the years, as his talent developed and matured, [Dostoevsky] spoke of himself with ever greater daring and truth." In Notes from Underground Dostoevsky starts the story with a footnote, where he writes "The author of the diary and the diary itself are, of course, imaginary." Dostoevsky is here eager to stress that he doesn't write about himself, but according to Shestov this comment only achieve the opposite effect. "Methods of this kind, of course, achieve directly opposite results. From the very first pages, the reader is convinced that not the notes and their author have been invented, but the annotation of them."

No doubt there is lot of truth in Shestov's quote. For example, one may note that the Underground Man is so self-couscious that Dostoevsky hardly can detach himself from him. All imaginable criticism of him, he has already confronted himself with, and let be spoken through his fictive listeners. When the Underground Man writes "I have felt ashamed all the time I've been writing this story; so it's hardly literature", of course it is feelings which also must've pained Dostoevsky himself. Certainly Dostoevsky must be accountable for what he writes, and what this story presents is quite extraordinary. Dostoevsky also admits in the letter to his brother that "sometimes I dream of that it will become rubbish". Dostoevsky did not feel ashamed during all of the time he wrote, but once one have learned The Underground's way of speaking one understands that it is not what the Underground Man really means either. The Underground Man has a habit of exaggeration.

The quote about how he feels deeply ashamed is one of many examples on the self-criticism and brusque honesty which Dostoevsky expresses in Notes from Underground. Few other authors express such feelings so naked. It is an example of that Dostoevsky rejects the glorification of the beautiful and sublime, and instead seeks truth through existential delving. In order to be honest to oneself one has to dare to be self-critical and confront ones darker sides. One example of this is when the Underground Man is together with a girl who shows him good-will and love, but who he is not able to show gratitude. He tells the girl that "I hated you already because of the lies I had told you. Because I only like playing with words, only dreaming, but, do you know, what I really want is that you should all go to hell. That is what I want. I want peace; yes, I'd sell the whole world for a farthing, straight off, so long as I was left in peace." When he is here shown understanding and compassion his inner hatred grows. It's against reason to react this way, but yet it is a trait in human nature. What the Underground Man writes is provocative, but it is probably a feeling which most of us can, in some regard, recognize ourselves in.
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