

# Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance

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Volume 18

Article 6

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December 2018

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### Recommended Citation

Thurman, Chris (2018) "Hamlet Underground: Revisiting Shakespeare and Dostoevsky," *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*: Vol. 18 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.18778/2083-8530.18.06

Available at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/multishake/vol18/iss33/6>

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Chris Thurman\*

## Hamlet Underground: Revisiting Shakespeare and Dostoevsky

**Abstract:** This is the first of a pair of articles that consider the relationship between Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from the Underground* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Acknowledging Shakespeare's well-known influence on Dostoevsky and paying close attention to similarities between the two texts, the author frames the comparison by reflecting on his own initial encounter with Dostoevsky in David Magarshack's 1968 English translation. A discussion of previous Anglophone scholarly attempts to explore the resonance between the texts leads to a reading of textual echoes (using Magarshack's translation). The wider phenomenon of Hamletism in the nineteenth century is introduced, complicating Dostoevsky's national and generational context, and laying the groundwork for the second article—which questions the 'universalist' assumptions informing the English translator-reader contract.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, *Hamlet*, Hamletism, underground, nihilism.

### Hamlet, the Underground Man and a Naïve Reader

I first read Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (in a Modern Library edition of David Magarshack's 1968 English translation) when I was a graduate student.<sup>1</sup> I was pursuing an MA in Shakespeare Studies and—like a medical student perpetually identifying symptoms of the illnesses he is learning to diagnose—I saw Shakespeare in every book I came across. Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that the novella's anti-hero seemed to me a Hamlet figure. Of course, had I been registered for an MA in nineteenth-century Russian literature, it would have been inevitable for different reasons: firstly, the

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<sup>1</sup> Other English translations of the novella's title include *Notes from Underground*, *Letters from the Underworld* and *Memoirs from the Underground*. Kyril Zinovieff and Jenny Hughes (xi-xv) note that these variations still follow Constance Garnett's original (mis)translation; *Zapiski iz Podpol'ya* is, more accurately, "Notes from Under the Floorboards".

prominence of Shakespeare (and *Hamlet* especially) in Russian literary discourse and intellectual debates throughout that period; secondly, the prominence of Shakespeare (and *Hamlet* especially) throughout Dostoevsky's oeuvre. I will invoke the first of these considerations at various points in this article. Although I will not be applying myself to the second, it is useful to locate *Notes from the Underground* in relation to Dostoevsky's major works by foregrounding the novella's seminal status. "If Dostoevsky's total production can be separated into creative periods at all," posits Ernest J. Simmons (106), "the dividing date should be 1864, when *Notes from the Underground* was published." It thus serves as "a kind of prologue" to *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

If I was a student of Russian literature, I might also have known that the connection between the 'Underground Man' (Dostoevsky's unnamed narrator) and Hamlet was already well established, even if one were limited to literary criticism available in English.<sup>2</sup> John Jones (175) situates Dostoevsky's interest in *Hamlet* within the convention of linking its protagonist to "the indigenous 'superfluous man' ... the Russian of good will and reflective talents who cannot find a part to play in the barracks state." Nonetheless, he observes, "While [Dostoevsky's] contemporaries used *Hamlet* to expatiate on thought and action along Goethe's and Coleridge's lines, Dostoevsky took to himself the Prince's miraculous throw-off about being too much in the sun and had his own hero do something about it, take himself out of the sun, underground, beneath the floor." (Jones 175) Konstantin Mochulsky also positions the *Notes* squarely within the context of nineteenth-century 'Hamletism', describing their narrator as "the new Hamlet" (Mochulsky 248). Other direct comparisons include those made by Jerome J. Rinkus ("Like Dostoevsky's Underground Man, Hamlet suffers because he is hyperconscious"—in them we see "a common human tendency to prefer estrangement"; Rinkus 79) and, more recently, David Denby (the Underground Man is "a spiteful modern Hamlet"; Denby n.p.).

The fullest treatment of the resonance between the two characters is Stanley Cooperman's essay "Shakespeare's Anti-Hero: Hamlet and the Underground Man", in which the author asks:

The man ... who mocks himself no less than others; who burlesques his own postures; who sees all action as absurd and all inaction as sterile; who makes a fetish of his own inconsistency; who takes a perverse pride in his own suffering; who sees men (including himself) as puppets and the world as a bloated carcass; who makes plans while proclaiming the futility of any plan ... who desperately searches for goodness while convinced of the impossibility of

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<sup>2</sup> The narrator-protagonist is sometimes incorrectly referred to as "Ordinov"—this is a conflation with a character in the early story "The Landlady", which is sometimes published along with the *Notes*.

goodness; who laughs, weeps, snarls, blesses and curses in all but the same breath—what can become of such a man? In the character of Hamlet, and in the literary existentialism of the nineteenth century, he becomes the Anti-Hero. (Cooperman 37)

For Cooperman, Hamlet and the Underground Man both fit the profile of “the hero of spiritual perception rather than action”; these anti-heroes seek to expose ugly truths rather than accept the philistinism of “a corrupt world unaware of its own corruption” (39). Writing in 1965, Cooperman was responding to then-prominent readings of *Hamlet* (by Knight, Battenhouse and Goddard) that had appeared to justify or condone Claudius’ actions—or at least, in Cooperman’s opinion, had not expressed adequate condemnation of Claudius as a metonym for the hypocrisy and corruption of Denmark. Cooperman’s aim was thus to demonstrate that “Hamlet’s bitter puns, asides and ironies are not the discharge from a sick mind, but rather the commentaries of a perceptive one” (46). Hamlet’s “strange and anti-social behavior” is “something more than simple negativism” (48); he is not just a “confused intellectual” (49).

The comparison between *Hamlet* and the *Notes* thus implies—indeed, depends upon—a sympathetic reading of the Underground Man. While it was once a critical commonplace that Dostoevsky presented (or at least ‘intended’ to present) the Underground Man satirically, during the latter half of the twentieth century scholars increasingly adopted a view here articulated by Robert Lord: “the Man from Underground ... is not what he has sometimes been supposed to be: a social outcast ... an outsider. He may seem on first acquaintance a bundle of traits which could be loosely labeled psychopathic or, at the very least, abnormal. It is only gradually that this blatantly perverse human being begins to resemble *us*.” (Lord 36) The Underground Man, in other words, is Everyman. Cooperman’s essay briefly entertains the opposite, conservative reading: “If the court represents health, then the disease most certainly is Hamlet’s; if the world of appearance is a fine place after all, the Anti-Hero’s emphasis upon corruption defines nothing more than his own neurosis, and the Underground Man is less a seer than a patient.” (Cooperman 39-40) But Elsinore is not healthy, and the world of appearance is not a fine place; for Cooperman, the Underground Man is such a charismatic, enigmatic creation precisely because Dostoevsky cannot keep him at an ironic distance. Neither Hamlet nor the Underground Man can be “despised or explained away as psychological or spiritual monsters”:

If *Notes from the Underground* is usually read as a case history of neurosis, Hamlet has been played too often as a bloody revenger, a pale, romantic, and womanish figure, complete with ‘poet’s collar’ and much sighing, or a violent madman. The spiritualism and existential symbolism of Shakespeare’s drama, however, like that of *Notes from the Underground*, can be reduced to no comforting formula. Its truth is the realization that affirmation—that faith itself—is based upon consciousness and suffering. (61)

It is worth remarking on a few aspects of Cooperman's analysis that chime with some of my present concerns. Firstly, *Hamlet* is read through the prism of the *Notes* (which is taken as a fixed or familiar reference point), rather than the other way round. This says something about the status of Dostoevsky's novella in the 1960s,<sup>3</sup> but it also differs from the typical practice among Shakespeare scholars who seek to trace Shakespeare's influence on other writers. Secondly, Cooperman does not make any direct textual comparisons between the two works. He does connect some of the images—linking, for example, the imagery of corruption in *Hamlet* to insects that feed on rotten matter and thus to the Kafkaesque 'insects' of modern existential literature, in which category he includes the *Notes*, whose narrator has "wished to become an insect many times" (Dostoevsky/Magarshack 98)<sup>4</sup>—and he also identifies stylistic parallels, notably the twin protagonists' shared propensity for "continuous statement and counterstatement" (Cooperman 56).<sup>5</sup> Reading Constance Garnett's 1918 translation of Dostoevsky, however, Cooperman finds no explicit verbal echoes. Thirdly, it may be noted that Cooperman's engagement with debates over the interpretation of both *Hamlet* and *Notes from Underground*—contestation over the 'meaning' of Hamlet and the Underground Man—matches the shifting connotations of Hamletism in nineteenth-century Russia, which I will suggest are key to our understanding of the relationship between the two texts. But first, back to the excitement of my graduate student 'discovery'.

Blithely unaware of extant scholarship on the phenomenon of 'Hamlet Underground', I was struck by the resonances between the two protagonists: men of "antic disposition" (*Hamlet* 1.5.172); men whose intellectual acuity leaves them disillusioned and unable to participate in a world of action, claiming that conscience and consciousness cause paralysis; men whose self-denigration is matched only by their misanthropy and misogyny. Admittedly, the fit wasn't perfect. I had to ignore the Hamlet described by Ophelia as "Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,/ The glass of fashion and the mould of form" (3.1.146-7), characteristics lost when his "noble mind" is "o'erthrown" (3.1.144). Moreover,

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<sup>3</sup> A few years either side of Cooperman's essay, Joseph Frank declared, "Few works in modern literature are more widely read or more often cited than Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*" ("Nihilism" 1) and Lord affirmed, "*Notes from Underground* could almost count as a work of our own century. It really belongs to the Literature of the Absurd, and in many surprising ways it anticipates Musil, Kafka and Camus" (Lord 35).

<sup>4</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, subsequent quotations from Dostoevsky refer to David Magarshack's 1968 translation of *Notes from the Underground* in *The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (2001).

<sup>5</sup> See Lord (205-6) for an analysis of this style in the *Notes* based on what Mikhail Bakhtin called the author's technique of "contrapuntal inner dialogue". Yuri Levin, connecting Hamlet and the Underground Man, refers to the latter as a "paradoxalist" ("Dostoevskii and Shakespeare" 70).

Hamlet's despair over his fellow-men (unlike, it seemed to me, that of the Underground Man—although here Cooperman would have disagreed) does not stem from pettiness or bitter pessimism but from his recognition that humankind's behaviour is deplorable, even though we can be "noble in reason" and "infinite in faculties" (2.2.286-88). Furthermore, Hamlet is a young man who has just returned from university, whereas the (experienced) narrator of the *Notes* is in his forties. Nevertheless, I had undoubtedly found evidence of textual interplay between *Hamlet* and *Notes from the Underground*—or, at the very least, "associative richness", the term used by Claes Schaar (20) to describe the effect of infra- and inter-contextual association in the conscious and subliminal minds of reader and author. I was vaguely aware, when I discerned 'echoes' of *Hamlet* in *Notes from the Underground*, of the various surfaces those word-sounds had encountered on the way. But it did not occur to me to ask: How many times have they been distorted or blurred in the process of translation? And is it not odd that I hear them as if they are crystal clear?

This article is the first of a two-part undertaking in response to such questions. Magarshack's translation appeared in 1968 (a few years after Cooperman's essay) and it specifically invokes *Hamlet* as a precursor to the *Notes* through direct Shakespearean quotations and allusions. In the second article, I will return to these, assessing what happens when multiple acts of translation are rendered 'visible' to an English reader with no prior knowledge of Russian. In the present article, however, I want to discuss the relationship between *Notes from the Underground* and *Hamlet* that can be discerned if we allow the translator to remain (temporarily) 'invisible'.

### **Of Mice and Men: Death, Disease and Antic Dispositions**

Images of sickness dominate Shakespeare's descriptions of Hamlet's world, a land stricken by "th'imposthume" that "shows no cause without/Why the man dies" (*Hamlet* 4.4.27-29). In the *Notes*, instead of one young man oppressed by the rotten state of Denmark, we encounter "a sick man" (Dostoevsky/Magarshack 102) who represents a nation of diseased men; the Underground Man concludes that "we have all lost touch with life, we are all cripples" (212). This physical suffering betrays a psychological illness or moral impotence: an immorality most clearly manifested in the Underground Man's cruelty towards Liza/Lisa, the prostitute. He justifies the trauma that he causes her—promising her redemption from the brothel but, finally, paying her for sexual submission to him—by claiming that an insult is "a sort of purification" because it is "the most corrosive and painful form of consciousness": "the memory of that humiliation will raise her and purify her" (211). Ignoring the ways in which this contradicts his own experience, he perversely considers it a form of purgation; he wants her

to be pure because he cannot be, projects his self-disgust onto her, loathes her as a symbol of immorality even though he recognises that this is unfair. He admits that “I was angry with myself, but of course it was she who would suffer for it ... ‘She’s to blame for everything,’ I thought” (203); here we are reminded of Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia and Gertrude.

T.S. Eliot’s criticism of Hamlet—that his fury at his mother has no “objective correlative”, that it outweighs her “insignificance” (Eliot 58)—echoes the Underground Man’s complaint: “It is somehow your own fault” and yet “it is abundantly clear that it is not your fault at all”: “there isn’t really anyone you can be angry with ... there is really no object for your anger” (Dostoevsky/Magarshack 105).<sup>6</sup> Our understanding of his complex attitude towards women is deepened when we read that, as Liza was about to embrace him, he was overcome by “a feeling of domination and possession ... How I hated her and how I was drawn to her at that moment! One feeling intensified the other. This was almost like vengeance!” (207-8) The Underground Man’s disillusionment with himself and the society in which he finds himself, as well as his inability to take any moral action against it, is bound up with his misogynistic treatment of Liza: “She guessed that my outburst of passion was nothing but revenge, a fresh insult for her, and that to my earlier, almost aimless, hatred there was now added a *personal, jealous* hatred of her.” (208) Liza is a conflation of Ophelia, whom Hamlet loves but offends and ultimately destroys, and Gertrude, who elicits from him both desire and repulsion.

Fractured parent-child relationships are central to the Underground Man’s psyche. Talking to Liza, in the midst of his romanticised homily on the importance of family structures, he reveals: “I grew up without a home. That’s why I suppose I am what I am—a man without feeling.” (179) In his closing diatribe, he chastises himself and his contemporaries, because (like Hamlet, who is fatherless at the beginning of the play) “for a long time we have been begotten not by living fathers” (213). He continues, “soon we shall invent some way of being ... begotten by an idea”, having earlier referred to men born “out of a test tube” (102). The Underground Man is a product of a society that is on the verge of a new modern age. He is caught between a traditional, hierarchically-structured world, where concerns of rank and the preservation of “honour” (115) drive his anachronistic obsession with duels and revenge, and a world of new and foreign ideas, in which, according to “the laws of nature”, the Underground Man fears “everything will be calculated and specified with such an exactness that there will be no more independent actions or adventures” (116). What place is there for volition—“One’s own free and unfettered choice, one’s own whims”—when “our ends” are determined for us, “Rough-hew them how we will” (*Hamlet* 5.2.10-11)?

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<sup>6</sup> Hamlet is also unable (or unwilling) to identify the cause of his melancholy: “I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth” (2.2.280).

This ideological battle is set, as in *Hamlet*, against a backdrop of warfare. The Underground Man considers himself morally superior to the power-hungry, bloodthirsty men of his age: “Take all our nineteenth century ... Look at Napoleon, the Great and the present one. Look at North America—the everlasting union. Look, finally, at Schleswig-Holstein ... And what, pray, does civilisation soften in us?” (114) He frequently expresses his hatred of sword-rattling military men, from the ladies’ man Zverkov to the army officer he once determined to bump into on Nevsky Avenue. His resentment of the soldier-figure, however, betrays an envy of “men of action” (96)—a constant refrain in the narrative. He cannot be one of those “people who know how to avenge themselves and, generally, how to stand up for themselves” (101) because he is paralysed by hesitancy and indecisiveness. He feels oppressed by his manservant Apollon precisely because Apollon is “never in doubt” (196). Presented with a metaphorical “wall”, a potential obstruction to any course of action, the “man of great sensibility” will capitulate: he will “think and consequently do nothing” (102)—just as Hamlet, in “thinking too precisely on th’event” (*Hamlet* 4.4.41) is like Pyrrhus, who, “like a neutral to his will and matter/Did nothing” (2.2.439-40).

This mental and physical paralysis is inextricable, in the *Notes*, from the conceit of sickness: “To be too acutely conscious is a disease, a real, honest-to-goodness disease” (99) because “the legitimate result of consciousness is to make all action impossible” (108). The man thus diseased becomes full of “spite” (102), directed towards others as well as to himself; he considers himself a coward, a “mouse” that “has accumulated such a large number of insoluble questions round every one question that it is drowned in a sort of deadly brew, a stinking puddle made up of its doubts, its flurries of emotion, and lastly, the contempt with which the plain men of action cover it from head to foot while they stand solemnly round as judges” (103). Hamlet, too, is aware of how his actions may be judged: “Am I a coward? Who calls me villain?” (*Hamlet* 2.2.523-27). The ashamed and insulted “mouse” has nothing left to do but “scurry back ingloriously into its hole”, an underground world like the narrator’s “funk-hole” (103), a refuge where one can escape from taking arms “against a sea of troubles” (*Hamlet* 3.1.59).<sup>7</sup> His psychological funk-hole is stifling, however, and even here he cannot avoid consciousness—he still longs to be an insect, a worm, a louse—until he is released from that burden by death.

Hamlet, emblematically contemplating a skull and exchanging morbid jokes with a gravedigger, muses over mortality. The Underground Man becomes

<sup>7</sup> Applying a Freudian reading to the play, it could be argued that Hamlet, too, sees himself as a kind of rodent. He dubs his theatrical contrivance to confirm Claudius’ guilt “The Mousetrap” (3.2.226) and, when he kills Polonius on the mistaken assumption that it is his uncle behind the arras, he calls him “a rat” (3.4.24). If Hamlet unconsciously identifies with Claudius—as his father’s killer and his mother’s new husband—these epithets apply equally to the protagonist.



grotesquely fascinated by the macabre details of a prostitute's burial, which he relates to Liza with cruel delight. Short of dying, the only way of numbing the pain of consciousness is, it seems, to retreat into the funk-hole of insanity. Those who are insane are marked out as unique; they are not merely cogs in a machine, or ants on an anthill. Madness is a way of asserting independence and free will over determinism, individuality and personality over rationality: "[If] the mere possibility of calculating it all beforehand would stop it all and reason would triumph in the end—well, if that were to happen man would go purposely mad in order to rid himself of reason and carry his point! ... man exists for the purpose of proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not an organ-stop!" (121)<sup>8</sup>

The question of Hamlet's madness has always been a puzzle: to what extent is his "antic disposition" feigned, and to what extent is his behaviour that of a man who is truly distracted? How would modern psychologists diagnose his condition? Hamlet's socially inappropriate (because unrestrained) conduct during the performance of 'The Mousetrap', for example, or his graveside tussle with Laertes, match the Underground Man's predisposition towards theatricality and melodrama. Consider his outlandish behaviour at the dinner party held for Zverkov, or his admission that, croaking to Liza in a faint voice having burst out crying a few moments before, "I was, what is called, *play-acting* ... though my fit was real enough" (203). Hamlet's quibbles, riddles and obscure questions seem to be both a despairing attempt at prevarication and a sincere effort to come to terms with his circumstances. The Underground Man imagines the "gentlemen" of his "audience" accusing him of duplicity: "You long for life, yet you try to solve the problems of life by a logical tangle! And how tiresome, how insolent your tricks are, and, at the same time, how awfully frightened you are! ... You assure us that you are gnashing your teeth, but at the same time you crack jokes to make us laugh." (126-27)

Indeed, extrapolating the 'death' of Dostoevsky as author of the *Notes* and therefore as creator of their narrator, we can imagine the Underground Man styling *himself* on the version of Hamlet he may have encountered in the Petersburg theatre that he regularly attended. We can even imagine him triumphantly reading Belinsky's comment, in 1840, that Hamlet "is weak and self-disgusted; however, only those who are themselves low and trivial can call him low and trivial, overlooking the splendour and magnificence of his worthlessness"—or we can guess at his reaction, as one of the men who "talk

<sup>8</sup> The image of the stops in a musical instrument echoes Hamlet's envy of those who are not "a pipe for Fortune's finger/To sound what stop she pleases" (3.2.60-61) and his outrage at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (3.2.334). As Kenneth Lantz (95) notes, however, Dostoevsky's use of the "organ-stop" (which can also be translated as "piano key") is more likely derived from Diderot's *Entretien entre Diderot et D'Alembert* (1769).

and talk and talk”, to Belinsky’s complaint that Hamlet “hesitates and only talks, but never acts” (in Levin, “Dostoevskii and Shakespeare” 125).

The view that Hamlet’s “worthlessness” is splendid and magnificent was, however, increasingly contested in mid-nineteenth century Russia. I have mentioned already that, although those aspects of Hamlet and *Hamlet* discernible in *Notes from the Underground* could be seen as consistent with Dostoevsky’s use of Hamlet as a character ‘type’ in his later novels, in the *Notes* this similarity is an uncomfortable one—not least because Hamlet is a young man, whereas the narrator of the *Notes* is in his forties. The second, more detailed portion of the *Notes*, however, refers back to a period in the Underground Man’s youth. This is a significant narrative arrangement and provides a further key to the ambiguous interplay between *Notes from the Underground* and *Hamlet*. The temporal structure of the *Notes* may be related to the shift that occurred in Russian attitudes to Shakespeare away from the obsessive Hamletism of the earlier part of the century towards an increased disillusionment both with Shakespeare and with Russian adaptations of *Hamlet*. When the *Notes* were published in 1864, Tolstoy’s infamous rejection of Shakespeare was still four decades away—but even amidst the Bardolatry of that tercentenary year, ‘Hamletism’ was being used in Russia as a term of opprobrium.

### **Hamletism, ‘the West’ and *Notes from the Underground***

Nikolai Polevoy’s 1837 production of his modernised translation of *Hamlet* was a crucial part of Shakespeare’s entrenchment in Russian public life. “It is possible,” Yuri Levin writes, “that it was this translation that also drew the attention of the sixteen-year-old [Dostoevsky] to the playwright”; passages from Polevoy’s text “made such an impression on him that he was to quote them in the 1860s and 1870s, even though by then newer translations of the tragedy existed” (“Dostoevskii and Shakespeare” 41). It is also possible, Levin suggests, that the young Dostoevsky managed to see the famous tragedian Pavel Mochalov perform the role of Hamlet in Moscow before he moved to Petersburg in May 1837. (We may note, on the point of the Underground protagonist-narrator’s age, that Mochalov was almost forty himself at the time.)

In Polevoy’s version, “the image of Hamlet was somewhat distorted, his state of spiritual loss, his frustration, his despair over man’s wretchedness were intensified and stressed” (Levin, “Shakespeare and Russian Literature 122). This distortion, however, captured the zeitgeist; Hamlet gave voice to the frustrations of many young Russian intellectuals who anticipated social reform but remained politically impotent, in the same way that “while being fully aware of the inhuman and hostile nature of his surroundings and clearly seeing that it is his moral duty to fight against it, Hamlet feels himself to be unequal to the task” (124). The presiding sense of helplessness encouraged criticism of Hamlet as

self-criticism. In the eighteen-sixties, however, when the drive for practical political reform had gained new impetus, the inactive and withdrawn Hamlet was viewed with less sympathy: “In the new historical context the ‘Hamlets’ of the forties had degenerated into the so-called ‘superfluous men’. In other words, Hamletism became identified with self-centred individualism.” (126) Levin also points out that, on an aesthetic level, Shakespeare’s poetic influence was regretted by Russia’s growing school of realist writers, who wanted a return to ‘natural’ language (Dostoevsky in turn offered his own ‘fantastic realism’ as an alternative to what he saw as stifling realist prose).

A parallel mid-nineteenth century ideological and literary conflict between and within generations is the central focus of Joseph Frank’s essay “Nihilism and *Notes from Underground*”. He points out that, in the subtitle to the second part of the *Notes*, “Apropos of the Wet Snow”, and in the curtailed extract from a poem by Nekrasov that functions as its epigraph, Dostoevsky evokes “an image of Petersburg in the forties—an image of the most ‘abstract and premeditated city in the world’, whose very existence had become symbolic in Russian literature of the violence and unnaturalness of the Russian adaption to Western culture”, thus signalling his intention “to satirise the sentimental social Romanticism of the forties” (Frank, “Nihilism” 50-1). Frank maintains that Dostoevsky wanted to reveal the destructive nature of this dependence on foreign ideas and foreign literature: the Underground Man, in his encounter with Liza, is reminded that he is “speaking as though [he is] reading from a book”, and he constantly refers to himself as “bookish” (Dostoevsky/Magarshack 183). His narcissistic withdrawal into a world of ideals prevents him from appreciating either Liza’s pain or her generosity. This “idealistic egoism of the forties, with its cultivation of a sense of spiritual *noblesse* and its emphasis on individual moral consciousness” (Frank, “Nihilism” 57) resonates with the phenomenon of Hamletism. Tragically, Liza becomes the victim of a self-centred Hamletism that prizes “exalted suffering” over “cheap happiness” (Dostoevsky/Magarshack 211).

Dostoevsky maintained an ambivalent attitude towards the nations of western Europe. He had drawn inspiration from Shakespeare and other European literary forebears, but he did not wish to see Russia fall prey to the perceived bourgeois materialism and shallow morality of ‘the West’. His disenchantment was confirmed by what he saw during his travels in France, England, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and Italy—a series of journeys undertaken in 1862, shortly before he began writing *Notes from the Underground*, and described in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (one of the last pieces by Dostoevsky published in *Vremya* before the magazine was forced to close in 1863). The connection between the texts is clear, but for Frank it is not just that “certain motifs” of the travel sketches turn up in *Notes from the Underground*: “a much deeper and more fundamental relation exists ... than has generally been suspected. Indeed, it would hardly be an exaggeration to regard *Winter Notes* as a first draft of the more famous work.” (Frank, “The Encounter with Europe” 237)

Dostoevsky would later return to live for short spells in Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy, and continue to wrestle with his gambling demons. In his first encounters, however, the distinctions drawn between Russia and the West were clear. Western Europe is “irresistibly attractive” to Russians, and “Western values” are “admired by the educated Russian on the level of reason and conscious doctrine”, but this is matched by a “Russian refusal to kow-tow to Europe emotionally” because, as Frank summarises it, “at heart all Russians have been, and will continue to be, secret Slavophiles ... The Russian nature is thus in continual, surreptitious revolt against what it most reveres [about Europe]; and the dialectic of this revolt is embodied in *Winter Notes* by Dostoevsky’s own self-dramatization.” (“The Encounter with Europe” 239-40) Writing about himself as disillusioned traveller, Dostoevsky is writing about Russia’s paradoxical relationship with the West—and, in doing so, he gives us “the first glimpse ... of that cranky, eccentric and irrational individual” (240) who will become the narrator of *Notes from the Underground*.

Dostoevsky’s travels in England included a visit to the Haymarket Theatre, which was transformed into the “Hay Market” brothel of *Notes from the Underground*; he also saw the Crystal Palace, which he described in the *Winter Notes* as “something out of Babylon ... out of the Apocalypse” and which, as Frank affirms, “re-appears [in *Notes from the Underground*] as a symbol of the total and definitive triumph of materialism accepted as mankind’s final ideal” (“The Encounter with Europe” 243). Shakespeare, removed in time from this England for which Dostoevsky expressed such disdain, remained untainted in his imagination. But what about Hamlet, specifically, as an icon of western European literature and culture in the nineteenth century—a figure revered by the same British and Germans (and even the Italians and the French) whom Dostoevsky seemed so to despise after his travels? What does this mean for *Notes from the Underground* as addressed to Russian readers? Are the Hamlet-like characteristics of the Underground Man targeting the self-deprecating sufferers of Hamletism, depicting the *reductio ad absurdum* of the Hamlet idolised by Russians in the eighteen-forties? Insofar as Dostoevsky had as a young man himself held fast to a certain Romantic idealism, is *Notes from the Underground* “a public, albeit a veiled, renunciation of his past”, as Lev Shestov claimed (in Katz 150)? Perhaps. Yet there is something else to the relationship between the Underground Man—“an educated man, a modern intellectual” (149)—and the student from Wittenburg.

### Fathers, Sons and Freedom

The reworking of Hamlet’s dilemmas in *Notes from the Underground* is more than just another criticism of the Hamletism of the eighteen-forties with the hindsight of the eighteen-sixties; it is also addressed to the younger

generation. *Notes from the Underground* was partly conceived as a riposte to Chernyshevsky's popular socialist-utopian novel *What is to be Done* (1863), which argued that, because man is essentially reasonable, he will ultimately form an ideal society—a society in which his best interests are served—if he is able to discern what his best interests are. In the first part of the *Notes*, the narrator rejects this utilitarianism and struggles with the implications of scientific determinism and the emblematic “two times two makes four”. He refuses to renounce his free will, and famously asserts that man's “advantage” is not as important to him as the ability to act *against* his advantage, if he should choose to do so. Dostoevsky was an earnest participant in the debate that raged in Russia during the eighteen-sixties over the nature and function of art, in particular its relation to the material orientation of socialism and nihilism. Shakespeare was a central subject in this debate, as in Dostoevsky's well-known complaint that the nihilists “admit it with pride: boots are better than Shakespeare” (in Catteau 204).

We are reminded in an authorial footnote that individuals such as the Underground Man “not only may, but actually must exist within our society, considering the circumstances under which our society was formed” and that he is “one of the characters of the recent past” who is *also* “a representative of the current generation” (95). For Dostoevsky, disillusioned with an older generation over-dependent on foreign literature and a younger generation rejecting non-realist prose, there could be no more appropriate character to have in mind; Hamlet Underground is a conglomeration of nineteenth-century Russian critical interpretations of *Hamlet*. He is the incarnation of a Hamletism that is both dangerously Romantic and painfully Rational. Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862), which engaged directly with inter-generational conflict, was in part responsible for the currency of the term “nihilism” in the early 1860s—as had been the case with his “superfluous man” in the previous decade—and it spurred Chernyshevsky's novel; for Turgenev, Hamlet stands for “Analysis and egotism, and therefore lack of faith. He lives for himself alone ... He is a sceptic—always reflecting and brooding upon his own self; always concerned with his situation and never with his responsibilities.” (in Levin, “Nihilism” 126) And yet the young prince's reluctance to play the revenging son is bound up with the metaphysical dilemma of reason and free will—he is unwilling to accept the role that appears to be determined for him.

Why is it, then, that having paced a dining-room for three hours and having listened, outraged but submissive, to the drunken conversation of his old school acquaintances, the Underground Man eventually reacts to Zverkov's declaration that “Shakespeare [is] immortal”? (Dostoevsky/Magarshack 165) Levin remarks of this moment that, since “acknowledgement of Shakespeare's greatness became a banal point of common agreement” in nineteenth-century Russia, and since lampooning “such idle chatter by ignorant people” was a well-

established practice of writers such as Belinsky and Nekrasov, Dostoevsky “contributed nothing new in this respect” (“Dostoevskii and Shakespeare” 44). This comment returns us to the difficult matter of relating the author’s views to those of his narrator. Frank would argue that Dostoevsky’s strategy is to present the Underground Man ironically *at all times*, and that readers and critics should be wary of any association between author and narrator. Although the Underground Man’s vitriolic outbursts express Dostoevsky’s opposition to nihilism, for instance, Frank disagrees with those who view the psychological sado-masochism of the *Notes* as an expression of the author’s own darker attributes. Nevertheless, as conscious ‘intention’ is not the sole determinant of creative processes, and given that Dostoevsky’s satirical intent was blurred—while writing the *Notes*, we know, Dostoevsky was in the midst of a personal *annus horribilis*, and these private difficulties evidently informed his sympathy with the tortured Underground Man—a psychoanalytic reading may furnish some useful insights.

Freud affirmed a close alignment between Dostoevsky the man and the characters created by Dostoevsky the author, suggesting that young Fyodor felt tremendous guilt over his father’s premature death in 1839 because that event fulfilled a suppressed Oedipal wish. This is the same process, of course, that a Freudian would identify in Hamlet’s emotional turmoil: he cannot simply blame and kill Claudius because his uncle has fulfilled his own hidden desires. As we read in the *Notes*, “your reasons evaporate, there is no guilty man, the injury is no longer an injury but just fate.” (109) According to Freud’s rather overstretched interpretation, Dostoevsky’s epilepsy represented the desire to enter a death-like state in order to sympathise with his dead father; Hamlet, too, wishes for death—that “this too too solid flesh would melt” (*Hamlet* 1.2.129).

Although Freud was writing about *The Brothers Karamazov*, his essay is relevant to the *Notes* not only because of the link with *Hamlet* but also because both guilt and filial anxiety inform the narrator’s psyche. The Freudian reading thus complements an Existential reading concerned with the limited agency of either character. For Frank, the Underground Man alone can be, or feel, guilty, because he alone refuses to accept that his life is not determined: taking responsibility for his actions (or lack of action) places him within a moral framework, and in this way even his ‘immoral’ behaviour is preferable to the abjuration of that responsibility. According to the Underground Man, the negation of action caused by consciousness is deemed superior to the ignorance of “men of action”; he complains that “Every decent man of our age is, and indeed has to be, a coward and a slave.” (132) The protagonist of *Notes from the Underground*, like the “modern intellectual” who inverts the medieval revenge plot in *Hamlet*—a different kind of “coward and slave”—problematizes the defined moral framework of his age. Hamlet and the Underground Man see themselves simultaneously as the victims of a time “out of joint” (*Hamlet* 1.5.189) and as doomed rebels fighting against a pre-determined fate.

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