

Mapping Meanings in Motion: Dostoevsky's "Notes From Underground" and Bakhtin's Dialogic Self-Consciousness as a Model for Clinical Interaction

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The nameless narrator of Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" is a uniquely memorable literary character, largely because he represents penetrating ideas about human interaction and actively forges a relationship with the reader while doing so. The narrator, known only as the Underground Man, addresses the reader; an invisible audience the reader is a part of, as well as a higher morally judicious authority. Through indirect and direct discourse with all these entities, he embodies Bakhtin's dialogized self-consciousness. He finds that such literary form gives him meaning, albeit an ever-changing disharmony of meanings. Richard Pevear echoes Bakhtin by adding, "unity is not singularity but wholeness, a holding together," and though the Underground Man is a tragic figure, his "dividedness, which is the source of his suffering, is also the source of consciousness" (xix). Ultimately, his theoretical diatribes are tested in practice when he meets a sympathetic prostitute, Liza. This final interaction with Liza serves as a case study that reinforces the nature of understanding as an ongoing process, where identity is dialogic and form is crucial to find meaning – thereby using narrative as a compelling model for clinical interaction.

An essential component of the narration in "Notes From Underground" is that it is unstable, constantly in process, and although is a first-person account, is blatantly built around the voices of several implied others. The Underground Man often delves into the second person perspective to demonstrate this: "I bet that's just what you think. But let me reassure you, ladies and gentlemen: I don't care in the least what you may think, but I haven't really been slapped" (Dostoevsky 92). Bakhtin sees an "endless dialogue" here that tends towards infinity, where "one's attitude towards oneself is inseparably interwoven with one's attitude toward another" – he terms this "dialogized self-consciousness" (Bakhtin 230). This collection of dissonant voices comprises a narrative defined only by its plurality – an exemplary depiction of how meaning in clinical interaction is a malleable product of both the Self and Other. Bakhtin refers to this tendency of the narrator to anticipate the Other's response as a "vicious cycle" (229) to be trapped in, one that can "neither be finished nor finalized" (230). As such, he does not seem to vouch for this process as a potentially productive capability, which may appear contrary to Dostoevsky's narrative strategy and its applicability as a clinical model. However, as the narrator himself describes: everything is always in process and that in itself is most valuable – it is foolish to believe in consistent, concrete answers or personas.

Acceptance of plurality and changeability spearheads the Underground Man's critique of society's increasing dependence on empiricism (the "twice two is four" dictate or "stone wall" metaphor) and the newly rampant belief that any issue can have an irrefutable, rational

solution. The Underground Man himself takes on the unadulterated irrationality of human behavior to an extreme, to contest this 'rationality' pervading society. For instance, he explains, "What do I care about the laws of nature and arithmetic if I have my reasons for disliking them ... I don't have to accept a stone wall just because it's there and I don't have the strength to breach it" (93). He puts objective 'facts' in a subjective, existential frame and then concludes, "everything is a mess in which it is impossible to tell what's what" (93). His character is further aided in proving this point by the narrative's formal use of loopholes. "A loophole is the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's own words [...] it is forever taking into account internally the responsive, contrary evaluation of oneself made by another" (Bakhtin 233). These loopholes have an "unclosed tone" which makes the hero "ambiguous and elusive, even for himself" (234) and accordingly, the narrative ends on a note that manages to "foreground the tendency toward eternal endlessness" (235).

The Underground Man's identity is central to this narrative, especially in the context of using his story as a model for clinical practice, and it can only be determined to be dialogic, at best. Indeed, he admits outright that "the purpose of man's life on earth consists precisely in this uninterrupted striving after a goal, not the goal" (110) – it is the arguing about twice two equals four and not the blind acceptance of its validity that defines people. Nothing less than one's life "being crushed by inertia" is at stake, if they fail to keep engaged in this infinite process of building and rebuilding self-understanding. Both identity and consciousness are dialogic, and conversely he equates the monologic with death. The narrative makes this clear when the Underground Man argues that "an intelligent man cannot turn himself into anything," as he himself has not even one "definite feature" (98) and "only a fool can make anything he wants out of himself" (86). The implied reason is that only a fool would believe in the finality of identity, and its monologic achievability.

An exploration of the methods for creating meaning is thus another necessary function of his ideological narrative, and the most pertinent one for its role as a model of clinical practice. The Underground Man openly confronts his methodology: "Even if I do address myself to imaginary readers, I do it only because it makes it easier for me to write. It's just a matter of form...for I'll never have any readers" (116). For him, the focus is not on any audience, though he acknowledges their necessity as a part of the story-weaving process. The focus is ultimately on narrative – through constructing a narrative, however discordant and paradoxical it may be, he finds deeper meaning. In addition to this metafiction interpretation, actual plot elements portray similar results, for instance when he chases after his old friends following a failed dinner party: "I wanted to show the lot of them that I wasn't the coward I myself thought I was" (141). The narrator's feelings about himself are most candidly revealed in the process of trying to prove a point to others.

Literary form, or narrative, is indeed the major way that meaning is derived, even accidentally. Amidst a hypothetical debate with Liza, the Underground Man appears happier than anywhere else in the narrative, because he is "enjoying the argument more and more" (159). He goes on to also project his struggles onto Liza's story, thus revealing his own deepest dreads: "No one will pray for you, no one will be sorry for you – they'll only be concerned with getting you out of the way" (171) that were only touched upon in his public bumping into the Officer. Not to be dismissed just as transference, this conversational exchange is intriguing from a clinical standpoint. As Arthur Frank postulates, "we hear others' stories as discoveries of what things matter to them – since 'things that matter' are not there *a priori* but are discovered in the course of living and narrating." These discoveries are more than just

therapeutic – they can reveal foundational character traits and lead the way towards deeper understanding of a person, and consequently better-informed actions taken in their regard.

A counterargument would recommend caution when using form and literature as a rigid reference point, as it can be unproductive. The Underground Man's struggle to distinguish genuine responses from literary responses in a damaging way is substantial proof. He concedes, "I was so used to everything happening the way it does in books ... that at first I didn't understand what was going on" (189). Moreover, during his drunken discourse with Liza, he is cognizant of his dangerous dependency on the literary: "I knew that what I was saying was contrived, even 'literary' stuff, but then, that was the only way I knew how to speak – 'like a book' as she had put it" (172). This tendency to force a 'literary' story when out of place is portrayed as a serious shortcoming. He is also victimized by this need while feeling painfully bullied by his manservant's silence, or lack of dialogic interaction: "He would fix his stern gaze on me for several moments" (181). Sometimes the servant would merely "sigh very deeply" and that is all it would take for the Underground Man to fall apart and surrender. This symbolically reinforces his strict need for dialogue as a form of effective construction of relationships or meaning. Eventually it is Liza that rescues him (however briefly) from a rapid downward spiral and reminds readers of the utility of narrative in a clinical context, as she is able to keep her wits about her and simply listen to him. He confesses, "Liza had understood much more than I had thought ... she was concerned over the pain it must have caused me to say all that" (189-190). The appropriate moral and affective response in that moment, represented by her embrace, is the result of her dialogic consciousness of his trials.

Liza takes on the role of a caregiver for the Underground Man in this story, and exemplifies the benefits of said dialogic consciousness while she patiently listens to and takes in his narrative, pathos and all. What follows is her ability to respond with complete empathy. Soon after she embraces him, the Underground Man reveals his deepest secret, almost offhand: "They don't let me...I can't be good..." (190) Through their dialogue, he confronts the crux of his troubled existence more effectively than throughout all his monologic diatribes. Liza's behavior towards him follows Arthur Frank's insistence that one should hear and "amplify those sparks of moral impulse in stories..." Indeed, Liza does not entirely resolve the Underground Man's existential turmoil, but she engages with this unsolvable dilemma and proves that the answer is the attempt.

His dialogue with Liza also exhibits a narrative's power of sculpting or subverting identity. After his breakdown, the Underground man notices, "she now had the heroic role, and I was the beaten-down, crushed creature she had been..." (190). He tries to reclaim his subjugation of Liza by paying her a meager sum for their sexual encounter. Immediately, he reflects, "This cruelty was so contrived and such *bad literature* that I couldn't bear it myself and leaped away to the far corner of the room" (192). He seems more affectively jarred by the fact that his actions were a clichéd composition – mere mimicry lacking any discourse, and not his genuine dialogic response to her. Finally, another level of rare self-understanding arises in his narrative when he finds that Liza left the money there. He admits, "I was so egotistical, I despised people so much, that I'd never imagined she'd do it. It was too much. The next moment I was pulling on any clothes I could find and was off after her" (193). Not only this interaction with an Other allow him to meaningfully reflect on his Self, it prompts him to perform a discernibly moral action. Bakhtin's concept of a dialogical self-consciousness proves especially useful in an interactive setting, clinical or otherwise.

As the Underground Man himself concludes: "Left alone without literature, we immediately become entangled and lost..." (195) Recognizing that literature is narrative and narrative mediates interaction with oneself, others and life as a whole, Dostoevsky's "Notes From Underground" goes a step further and proposes narrative as a means for understanding and providing impetus for morality. His metafictional approach to the an understanding of the Self indeed occurs in relation to an Other, that is through the process of using Bakhtin's "dialogic self-consciousness." This subsequently fits into the overall preoccupations of the narrative to establish the plurality, relativism and constantly changing nature of identity and knowledge. Through its multiplicity of voices, rhetoric, perspectives, and conflicting theories, "Notes From Underground" is an amalgamated Other that intensely engages readers' Selves in an endless debate on fundamental questions about morality and humanity.

Works Cited

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