

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Fyodor Dostoevsky

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND



AN AUTHORITY TRANSLATION
BACKGROUNDS AND SOURCES
RESPONSES
CRITICISM

SECOND EDITION

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argue that if you imagine each man will give up *everything*, even himself, even his own *I* for everybody, then that means no one will be poor, and everyone will be terribly rich. The socialist would be lying crudely, in a vile and potbellied way. For although it's really true, that is, everyone will be rich, socialism still stops at this point. But this can't be because a socialist can't even conceive of how it's possible to give oneself up freely for others; from his point of view, that's immoral. But that's just the point, the whole infinitude of Christianity over socialism consists precisely in the fact that a Christian (in the ideal), in giving away everything, demands nothing for himself in return.

And if that's not enough, he's even hostile to the idea of recompense, he regards it as nonsensical and will only accept a reward out of love for the donors, or only because he feels that afterward he'll love the donor even more (the new Jerusalem, embraces, green branches).

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

From Winter Notes on Summer Impressions†

Chapter V

BAAL¹

* * * . . . The City² with its millions of inhabitants and worldwide commerce, the Crystal Palace,³ the International Exposition . . . Yes, the Exposition is striking. You feel the terrible force that united here all these countless people coming from all over the world into one fold;⁴ you become aware of an enormous idea; you feel that something significant has been achieved here, some victory or triumph. It's even as if you begin to fear something. However independent you are, you still begin to feel terrified for some reason or other. "Isn't this really the ideal that's been achieved?" you wonder. "Isn't this the goal? Isn't this really the 'one fold?'" Mustn't one really accept all this as ultimate truth and fall silent once and for all? It's all so triumphant, victorious and proud that it begins to take your breath away. You look at these hundreds of thousands, these millions of people, humbly streaming here from all corners of the globe, people who have come with one single

† From F. M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1973), vol. 5, pp. 69–70, 79–80, translated by Michael R. Katz.

1. The name used throughout the Old Testament to designate the pagan deities of Canaan.

2. The central, commercial part of London.

3. A large glass and steel structure built in London in 1851 to serve as the main pavilion for international expositions.

4. From the Gospel According to St. John: "And there shall be one fold, and one shepherd" (10.16).

thought, quietly, stubbornly and silently crowding into this colossal palace, and you sense that here something definitive has taken place, taken place and been completed. It's like some Biblical scene, something about Babylon,⁵ some prophecy from the Apocalypse⁶ taking place before one's very eyes. You sense that it would require a great deal of eternal spiritual fortitude and denial in order not to submit, not to yield to the impression, not to bow down to the fact, and not to worship Baal, that is, not to accept the world that exists as one's own ideal. . . . * * *

Chapter VI

ESSAY ON THE BOURGEOIS

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... Western man talks about brotherhood⁷ as the great motivating force of mankind, but he doesn't realize that there is no place to acquire brotherhood if it does not already exist in reality. What is to be done? Brotherhood has to be created at all costs. But it turns out that it's impossible to create brotherhood because it creates itself, comes of itself, and is found in nature. But in French nature, and in Western nature in general, it does not appear to be present; instead one finds there a principle of individualism, a principle of isolation, of intense self-preservation, of personal gain, self-definition in terms of one's own *I*, the opposition of this *I* to all of nature and to all other people, as an independent, autonomous principle, totally equal and equivalent to everything that exists outside of it. Well, such a juxtaposition cannot create brotherhood. Why? Because in brotherhood, in true brotherhood, it's not the separate personality, not the *I* that should be concerned with its equal value and equivalence to *everything else*, but rather this *everything else* must come *in and of itself* to the person demanding his rights, to that individual *I*, and of itself, without his asking, must recognize him as equal in value and equivalent to himself, that is, to everything else that exists. Moreover, that rebellious and demanding person must first of all offer to sacrifice to society all of itself, all of its *I*, and not only refrain from demanding its rights, but, on the contrary, surrender all to society without any preconditions.

But the Western personality is not accustomed to such a procedure: it fights for what it demands, it demands its rights, it wants to *separate* itself—and brotherhood does not emerge. Of course, might there not

5. The ancient capital of Mesopotamia, known for its wealth, architectural splendor, and hanging gardens.

6. The Revelation of St. John the Divine, the last book of the New Testament.

7. Dostoevsky's translation of the third word in the French revolutionary slogan, "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*."

be a regeneration? But a regeneration is accomplished over thousands of years, for such ideas must first become embodied in flesh and blood in order to become reality. So then, you will say to me, must one be without individuality in order to be happy? Does salvation lie in impersonality? On the contrary, on the contrary, I say, not only is it unnecessary to be without individuality, but it is even essential to achieve a greater degree of individuality than actually exists now in the West. Understand me: voluntary, completely self-conscious, and totally unconstrained sacrifice of one's entire self for the good of everyone is, in my opinion, a sign of the highest development of individuality, of its greatest power, its greatest self-mastery, the greatest freedom of its own will. To lay down one's life willingly for others, to be crucified or burned at the stake for others, can only be done at the very highest stage of individuality. A highly developed individuality, completely convinced of its right to be an individual, no longer fearing for itself, cannot possibly make anything else of its personality, that is, can find no greater use for it than to give it all to others, so that others can become equally autonomous and happy individuals. This is a law of nature; normally man aspires toward it. But there is one fly in the ointment, one tiny little fly; if, however, it finds its way into the mechanism, the whole thing immediately comes crashing down and is destroyed. Namely: all will be lost if in this case there exists even the slightest calculation on behalf of one's own advantage.

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V. F. ODOEVSKY

From Russian Nights†

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A long, long time ago—in the eighteenth century—many intelligent people were excited by theories of social organization; everywhere people debated the reasons for the decline and prosperity of states: on squares, at university discussions, in the bedrooms of beautiful women, in commentaries to ancient writers, and on battlefields.

At that time a young man in Europe was struck by a new, original thought. He said: "We're surrounded by thousands of opinions, thousands of theories; they all have one goal—the prosperity of society,

† From V. F. Odoevsky, *Russkie nochi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1975), pp. 63–64, translated by Michael R. Katz. *Russian Nights* is a collection of prose pieces fusing philosophical thought with the reality of human life.