“THE UNEXPECTED HAS BROKEN IN”: SURPRISE AND RECONCILIATION IN *NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND*

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Ten years before writing *Notes from Underground*, Fyodor Dostoevsky, recently released from prison camp, wrote to a friend that "if someone was to prove to me that Christ was outside the truth, and it was really the case that the truth lay outside Christ, then I should choose to stay with Christ rather than with the truth."[1] Using this quote as a launching point, I will examine the way *Notes* explores decisive breaks between "Christ" and "the truth," as well as a key element in facilitating the reconciliation of the two: the power of the unexpected act. In *Notes*, Liza embodies this element of surprise. Through a series of unexpected acts, Liza becomes a model of the potential for integration between Dostoevsky's dichotomized "Christ" and "truth," as she bears witness to a path toward emergence from the underground. The Underground Man, however, reveals the result of resisting surprise: an isolated consciousness, a malformed personhood, and a lifetime below the floorboards.

Rowan Williams, in relaying Dostoevsky's rather shocking testimony quoted above, interprets the world of the Underground Man, and the "gentlemen" he writes to, as representative of Dostoevsky's definition of the "truth" in the binary above. The truth for these characters is "the sum of rationally and evidentially demonstrable propositions independent of human desire and indeed human self-description."[2] Throughout *Notes*, Dostoevsky puts the Underground Man in direct conversation with the reigning deterministic philosophers of the day, typified by Chernyshevsky and his novel *What is to be Done?*, who might have held this view.[3] These thinkers held that once people were told what would make them happy and understood exactly

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[1] Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 2.

[2] Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 2.

[3] Richard Pevear, foreword in *Notes from Underground*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky and trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1993), xiii.

which choices and actions would lead to an ideal life, they would automatically choose such actions. The road to individual happiness and social order ran through a submissive, rational determinism. The Underground Man himself claims to have taken this way of thinking "to an extreme in my life" what others were only willing to take part way.[4] The Underground Man's primary loyalty is to his rational self, resulting in a constant state of hyper-consciousness, the individualized version of the hyper-logical social systems of his day. Yet this hyper-consciousness has led not to happiness, but to a radical awareness of his inner contradictions that render him unable to act. We see these oscillations swirl inside the Underground Man throughout the novel, sending him into states of both frenzy and depression. He is, in Richard Pevear's description, an isolated consciousness in a state of "perpetual dialectic."[5] The Underground Man describes himself as swarming with contradictory elements and "various little itches" that compel him to actively act against his well-being and "profit."[6]

Instead of being capable of self-determined activity, as would befit a traditional novelistic hero, the Underground Man wallows in inertia: "The direct, lawful, immediate fruit of consciousness is inertia—that is, a conscious sitting with folded arms," he claims, later stating that "throughout my life I've never been able to start or finish anything."[7] This inertia is also the result of the Underground Man's lack of moral foundations, another symptom of the age in which he finds himself. "Where are the primary causes on which I can rest, where are my bases?

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[4] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 129

[5] Pevear, foreword, vii, xix.

[6] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 22-23, 28. Profit being the assumed ultimate good of rational utilitarians.

[7] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 17-18.

Where am I going to get them?" he asks.[8] In the philosophical milieu of his day, action is only possible when people take secondary causes as primary causes and therefore act on false pretenses—but because his consciousness makes him aware of this, the conscious man has no rational basis from which to act at all. René Girard says that this lack of first principles is one of Dostoevsky's primary diagnoses of post-Enlightenment culture. "Once we are deprived of transcendental guideposts we must trust our subjective experience. Whether we like it or not, we are little Cartesian gods with no fixed reference and no certainty outside of ourselves."[9] People need guideposts, but such guideposts cannot lie within the system of truth affirmed by rational utilitarians or the Underground Man because such a system reduces the totality and complexity of human experience to "two plus two equals four." This thinking renders human life essentially meaningless and leaves the individual as nothing more than a piano key. Thus, as Rowan Williams says, the "exclusive affirmation of a 'truth' detached from both meaning and will leads to a lethal reduction of what is human, to an ideological or indeed literal violence against the full range of human experience and the reality of human desire."[10]

In addition to inertia stemming from the philosophical milieu he rails against in Part One, the Underground Man's life is characterized by more individual causes of his isolation, particularly pride, spite, and resentment. In his seminal analysis of Dostoevsky's literary vision, René Girard describes the Underground Man's "underground psychology," which is underpinned by underground pride. This pride is "essentially contradictory, self-divided and torn between the

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[8] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 17.

[9] René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, trans. James G. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2012), 83.

[10] Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 29.

Self and the Other."[11] Stemming from his considerable intelligence, the Underground Man's pride makes him completely unable to connect in a real and life-giving way with others. Yet, as Williams writes in *Being Human*, a fully formed, healthy sense of personhood is only *possible* in relation to others. Knowing oneself is a "cooperative enterprise" requiring empathy and knowledge of the other.[12] Instead of engaging in life-giving interaction, the Underground Man continually finds himself in a cycle of petty resentments that alternate, in Girard's language of mimetic theory, "between the imaginary omnipotence of the self in solitude and the real omnipotence of the other in society." For those trapped in this cycle of petty revenge, "the other" is defined as "anyone, literally, who happens to cross the hero's path, or stand in his way, or simply look at him with real or imagined irony"—for example, the officer who offends the Underground Man by not taking him seriously enough to fight.[13] We also see this dynamic at the beginning of Part Two, when the Underground Man speaks of his former colleagues, whom he moves from hating to vaunting. This tortured oscillation convinces him he is unable to connect with others because of his singularity: "One other circumstance tormented me then: Namely, that no one else was like me, and I was like no one else. 'I am one, and they are all,' thought I."[14] In

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[11] Girard, *Resurrection*, 18.

[12] Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 59.

[13] René Girard, "Supermen in the Underground: Strategies of Madness—Nietzsche, Wagner, and Dostoevsky," *MLN* 91, no. 6 (1976): 1180. doi.org/10.2307/2907130. I note here as well that the Underground Man displays classic signs of *ressentiment* as defined by Max Scheler, a "self-poisoning of the mind" caused by repressing normal human emotions, such as desire for revenge, envy, and malice. When feelings are not "given adequate expression" the result is often vindictiveness and, particularly apropos, "great touchiness." The final outcome of such repression is, perhaps unsurprisingly given the example in the Underground Man, inactivity—that is, inertia. Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans, Louis A. Coser (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 1994), 4-7.

[14] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 45.

this moment, the Underground Man embodies Girard's observation about the banality of underground pride, which shows up as a desperate need to distinguish oneself from others. "All underground individuals believe they are all the more 'unique' to the extent that they are, in fact, alike," Girard writes.[15] The Underground Man lives in a world completely disconnected from others, lacking an inability to imagine other points of view. In his pride, he imagines everyone else is an inaccessible *all,* and only himself as a distinct individual. According to Prince Mirsky, this exemplifies the way Dostoevsky explores "suffering human dignity" in his novels, which leads to their "inability ever to transcend the limits of the temporal."[16] Taking the temporal as mapping onto the utilitarian version of truth, we can see how the Underground Man's suffering pride further traps him in a constrained version of reality.

The Underground Man's life, cut off by his pride and circumscribed by utilitarian notions of truth, ends up as a life cut off from wholeness; or, in the words of the Underground Man himself, a "living life" or "the whole of life."[17] In Charles Taylor's words, we could say that the Underground Man has committed "the ultimate sin," which is to close the self to grace. Taylor writes, "The person who is closed [to grace] is in a vicious circle from which it is hard to escape. We are closed to grace, because we close ourselves to the world in which it circulates; and we do that out of loathing for ourselves and for this world."[18] This "closure" mimics the closed system of determinism in which the Underground Man lives and which cannot adequately account for

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[15] Girard, *Resurrection,* 21.

[16] D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature from its Beginnings to 1900,* ed. Francis J. Witfield (New York: Vintage: 1958): 258.

[17] Dostoevsky, *Notes,* 28, 125, 126.

[18] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 451.

the totality of human experience. By living in the isolated underground, the Underground Man "seals [his] sense of [the world's] loathsomeness and of one's own, insofar as one is part of it. And from this can only come acts of hate and destruction"[19]—a truth clearly demonstrated by the Underground Man's disastrous interactions with others.

In an echo of Taylor's closure to grace, Williams conceptualizes the life of the Underground Man as a "hellish" one defined by a lack of *reconciliation* between the two terms Dostoevsky set out in his famous letter: Christ and the truth. We've explored how *Notes* might help define Dostoevsky's notion of truth in this statement. But what of Christ? Williams clarifies, first, that for Dostoevsky, despite his use of the term in his letter, Christ is not *outside* of the truth, as if Christ and the truth were two separate, non-intersecting circles one must choose between; Christ is instead *beyond* the truth. Instead of those non-intersecting circles, then, we could instead imagine a small circle, "the truth," as surrounded by the much larger circle of "Christ," representing the fuller picture of reality.[20] In this image, the smaller circle is enclosed by a non-porous border which the fuller version of life cannot penetrate. Life inside this smaller circle is defined by a hyper-consciousness that leads to inaction; the border is the "wall" that defies the man of action. The rational utilitarians trust that happiness is possible within this enclosure of truth; indeed, they believe the smaller circle is all that exists. The Underground Man, full to bursting with "so very many elements in myself most opposite to that," is well aware of the inadequacy of this conception.[21]

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[19] Taylor, *Sources*, 451.

[20] Perhaps describing a larger but still bounded circle as "Christ" or "the whole of life" isn't quite right for this metaphor, because it implies yet another closed boundary. But it is helpful for my purposes here.

[21] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 22-23, 28.

It is safe to say that for Dostoevsky, who embraced a religious vision for life, the "Christ" in this image maps to the literal Christian savior and a living God as the ultimate vision of love, grace, and Truth. But, jumping off of the Underground Man's use of the phrase "the whole of life," we can explore the image of Christ in various ways: for example, if the small circle is what is rationally legible, the larger circle can be seen as the individual or collective unconscious. We can read it as the realm of the Underground Man's "various little itches"—human desires, whether well- or malformed. We can also call upon Kevin Aho's discussion of the *daemonic* in relation to the Underground Man to speak to the content of the larger circle. Aho notes that for Dostoevsky, the "emotional wellsprings" that source our "uniquely human capacity for pointless cruelty, violence, or outbursts of rage" are the same ones that "make it possible for us to be loving and tender." These are the parts of us that compel action outside of a narrow notion of rationalism.[22] According to Aho, through characters like the Underground Man, Dostoevsky challenges "biological and mechanistic" accounts of reality by offering representations of humanity who are "torn apart by a host of destructive and violent cravings, but often possess the capacity for integration and redemption, transcending these cravings with acts of tenderness and love."[23] Without access to the *daemonic,* which resides outside our smaller circle of truth, reconciliation—and a path out of the underground—is impossible.

It is clear that to find a way above ground, one must crack the smaller circle, creating porosity so that Christ, however he might be defined, can enter in. How might this be possible? The Underground Man's first instinct—deep isolation—is not the answer. As Girard notes,

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[22] Kevin Aho, "Dostoevsky, Existential Therapy, and Modern Rage: On the Possibility of Counseling the Underground Man" *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 61, no. 5 (2021): 831, doi:10.1177/0022167819852234.

[23] Aho, "Dostoevsky," 832-3.

"detachment" is not an adequate course for moving out of underground pride and into a whole life, because it does not satisfy "the need to unify and communicate"[24]; this sets us up to explore the role the Other plays in reconciliation, which I will explore shortly. For Williams, the answer comes in the form of action: the individual acting in freedom, in direct contrast to a life of inertia. "Certain sorts of action and event open the way to reconciliation, though they still demand of us the labor of making the possibilities actual,"[25] Williams writes. He is not arguing that one can act toward reconciliation out of sheer *will*, somehow manifesting "Christ"—this is impossible, as the Underground Man's will is just as malformed as his consciousness, consisting only of purposeless itches and fueled by spite. Instead, Williams clarifies that Christ "becomes possible because of some event which configures those processes as manifestations of gift or beauty." When the emotional and spiritual impulses that can easily trap us in underground pride are completely transformed by "some event"—that is, events that break through the wall between Christ and the truth—the actions they elicit are elevated from deterministic reactions to acts "of appropriate freedom, recognizing its capacity to act so that there will be reconciliation."[26] Reconciliation comes in the presence of freedom, enacted by a will transformed by Christ.

But I still have not answered my initial question! *How* does the integration of our two circles, which allows for the transformation of an underground life, take place? How is the will transformed and conciliatory action enabled? Through the Underground Man's critical interaction with Liza, I propose that reconciliation is only possible when one recognizes the *unexpected*—we cannot live life without the element of surprise. Whether or not this

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[24] Girard, *Resurrection*, 37.

[25] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* 25.

[26] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* 25, emphasis mine.

is a sufficient condition for existential wholeness, Liza's presence in the novel makes it clear that surprise is indeed a necessary condition for a "living life," which I will explore in a moment. For Williams, the preeminent unexpected act in Dostoevsky's literary oeuvre is not found in Liza, but in Christ's kiss of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Grand Inquisitor epitomizes the small circle of truth, a closed system of reality. He sees the larger circle of "Christ" as a phantom, but he recognizes that people need hope that such a larger circle exists, so he offers them a false version of "miracle, mystery, and authority."[27] The people then have the illusion of wholeness, while the Inquisitor himself takes on the so-called burden of knowledge that there is nothing beyond the truth as he understands it; he instead leans painfully against the wall of reality, accepting that it borders nothingness.

But then, the act of surprise: Christ's kiss suddenly bursts through these borders,[28] undermining the Grand Inquisitor's insufficient worldview. The kiss represents "the freedom to refuse the argument over power and tragic necessity"; it is the unexpected act, the surprise that creates a "crack" in the wall between the limited circle of truth and the wholeness encompassed in Christ. "The unexpected," Williams writes, "*has broken in."*[29] Alyosha, by kissing Ivan in an echo of Christ's kiss of the Grand Inquisitor, performs a similar unexpected reversal. Surprise becomes the vehicle through which Alyosha refuses Ivan's argument—an argument that would "put him beyond Alyosha's understanding and love," while simultaneously enabling him to accept Ivan himself.[30] This

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[27] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 257.

[28] As memoirist Mary Karr writes in *Lit*: "Once you allow even that sliver of possibility, that crack of light, it's not long before the stone rolls away from the tomb."

[29] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* 31, emphasis mine.

[30] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* 31

unexpected act reverses the assumptions of both Ivan and his literary creation, expressing the transformative potential of Christ beyond the truth.

By emphasizing the reconciliatory act in *The Brothers Karamazov* as providing Dostoevsky's answer to underground pain and isolation, Williams follows Girard, who also sees resurrection from the underground only actualized in *The Brothers Karamazov.* But, as many critics have pointed out, the reconciliatory act of love is present in the Underground Man's interaction with the prostitute Liza. Perhaps this oversight is because Liza's influence does *not* in fact resurrect the Underground Man; despite her example and offering of love not tied to power or twisted desire, the Underground Man does not suddenly have the capacity for a living life after their encounters. However, her presence is proof that Dostoevsky has more to offer in terms of elucidating the possibility for existential wholeness than Part One's musings on the Underground Man's tortured individuality, despite *Notes from Underground* being written during 1864, his so-called "terrible year."[31]

We first meet Liza in a brothel. When the Underground Man first notices Liza, he describes her "straight dark eyebrows and serious, as if somewhat astonished, eyes."[32] It is

[31] Walter Kaufman, among others, names the Underground Man as the proto-existentialist, even writing that *Notes* was "the best overture for existentialism ever written." Indeed, as Malpas says, he is a model of modern individual consciousness whose "very existence is rendered uncertain and ambiguous" by his lack of moral foundations, themes taken up by later existentialists. Yet even the hyperbolic Kaufman admits Dostoevsky is no existentialist and has little desire to leave us with his protagonist in the underground; for me, the presence of Liza in the novel provides sufficient evidence that Dostoevsky's religious vision was already quite mature when writing *Notes*, and the Underground Man was far from his author's model for existential wholeness, despite the character's radical and necessary critique of utilitarian systems that denied individual particularity and agency. Walter Arnold Kaufman, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: New American Library, 1956), 14; Jeff Malpas, "Existentialism as Literature" in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 297.

[32] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 86.

appropriate that we first see her eyes as a conduit for astonishment, as Liza's relentless gaze throughout the story works as a metaphor for the porosity needed in the barriers we construct between Christ and the truth. Her astonished eyes are also a symbol of the human connection required for existential wholeness, the desperate need to break through isolation and truly be seen to have a fully formed sense of self. As already noted, personhood cannot be fully developed in isolation. Consciousness is relational; our own point of orientation "takes for granted that there are other points of orientation."[33] Even imagining the entirety of one's own body requires accepting that there are other points of view—points of view that are mediated by the eyes, the gaze from one to the other.[34] An atomized self (resulting from the application of hyper-rationalist thinking) or isolated self (resulting from underground pride) is not a whole self.

The Underground Man's life of spite and resentment is directly tied to his lack of living relationships—instead of being shaped into a whole person by a community of loving others, he interacts with people via an absurd power play that he always loses, or in a fantasy world inspired by his years reading Romantic literature. As he lies in the brothel with Liza, we can see this disconnect from the living, breathing world of "bodies and blood" when he preaches to her about happy marriages, despite his utter lack of experience with such a relationship. She rightly notes after his sermonizing, "It's as if you … as if it's from a book."[35] Liza, although she hesitates in her rebuke, recognizes the essential gap between flesh-and-blood reality and the Underground Man's imaginary worlds. Instead of offering the Underground Man a personhood-forming gaze, the books that have formed his companionship are merely "literary rarefactions of actual life …

[33] Williams, *Being Human,*10-11.

[34] Williams, *Being Human,*10-11.

[35] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 98.

inconsistent with the full testimony of multifaceted reality."[36] The Underground Man's Romantic literary youth (and, it is worth noting, the lack of a loving parental gaze in his childhood) becomes yet another representation of a diminutive version of truth cut off from the whole of reality. Yet throughout their relationship, Liza consistently *sees* the Underground Man—not the literary counterfeit version of a protagonist he seeks to portray. After once again "bookishly" lecturing her on the grim future she may have as a prostitute, the Underground Man notes that she "had light brown eyes, beautiful eyes, alive, capable of reflecting both love and sullen hatred."[37] Though naive, Liza through her open eyes detects the illegible, swarming, and contradictory parts of life that make up a whole person.

Yet, because of his spite and ill-formed self, the Underground Man is not fully capable of receiving this gaze. For example, when the Underground Man first encounters Liza's eyes in the brothel, he describes them as "utterly alien"; the thought of her potential insight into his life gives him "a heavy feeling." He describes her persistent gaze as "somehow unnatural" and giving him "an eerie feeling."[38] By not lowering her gaze, she acts outside of the Underground Man's limited comfort zone, setting the stage for her to surprise him. She is not prepared to act in accordance with the Underground Man's formulaic literary vision or twisted versions of love and power. This dynamic is fully realized when the Underground Man and Liza meet a second time.

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[36] Nicholas Terrell, "Soap Bubbles and Inertia: The Underground Man's Dependence on Rhetoric, Narrative Frameworks, and Skepticism as a Syndrome of Secular Idealism," *The Dostoevsky Journal* 7 (2006): 18, doi.org/10.1163/23752122-00701001.

[37] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 105.

[38] Dostoevsky, *Notes,* 88. I didn't have room for it in this paper, but I feel the conversation about the "gaze" in *Notes* is woefully incomplete without an exploration of the staring match between the Underground Man and his erstwhile servant Apollon—whose very name evokes healing and beauty. I have yet to come across a discussion of Apollon's sanctimonious gaze that so disturbs the Underground Man, and alas, this paper too falls short.

At the end of their time in the brothel, the Underground Man gives Liza his address, in an effort to yet again enact a Romantic literary script. In this moment, he desires to be the hero, the protagonist capable of action; yet this vision of action is hemmed in by his truncated version of reality. It is only when Liza finally appears at his apartment, living her own illusion that the Underground Man might save her through his love, that Dostoevsky finally reveals a pathway to bursting the Underground Man's circumscribed notions of the truth. Liza finds the Underground Man in a low moment. Though in a state of real humiliation, the Underground Man is also hyper-conscious of the situation and seeks to mediate it rationally. For example, he asks her for water, then says, "I murmured in a weak voice, conscious, however, within myself, that I was quite well able to do without water and not to murmur in a weak voice. But I was *putting on a show,* as they say, to preserve decency, though the fit was a real one."[39] He oscillates between a real state of internal distress and an external posture, never quite reconciling one with the other, displaying a somatic mismatch between mind and body that I will explore shortly.

These oscillations trap the Underground Man in his small version of truth, one further compacted by being "so used to thinking and imagining everything from books, and to picturing everything in the world to myself as I had devised it beforehand in my dreams."[40] Here, the full implications of the Underground Man's malformed life of spite, pride, and isolation are on display. So when he is confronted with Liza, in her naivety, in her simplicity, in her desire to be loved and to connect, his state of being closed-off to the whole of reality does not prepare him for her response to his debasement. "At first," he says, "I didn't even understand this strange circumstance." Liza, acting in a way he cannot anticipate, *surprises* him: "What occurred was this: Liza, whom I had insulted and crushed, understood far

[39] Dostoevsky, *Notes,* 119, emphasis in the original.

[40] Dostoevsky, *Notes,*123.

more than I imagined. She understood from it all what a woman, if she loves sincerely, always understands before anything else—namely, that I was unhappy." After this revelation, Liza, whom he has belittled, frightened, and insulted, "suddenly rushed to me, threw her arms about my neck, and burst into tears."[41] In this moment, Liza's free act of embrace is the unexpected element that breaks into the Underground Man's circumscribed world. In response, the Underground Man "broke into such sobbing as had never happened to me before."[42] J.A. Jackson, among others, notes this moment as critical to "the way out of the underground" by enabling "existential freedom from bondage."[43]Joseph Frank also notes that this moment is essential for understanding Dostoevsky's conception of existential freedom. When Liza rushes to the Underground Man, "she illustrates that 'something else' which his egoism will never allow him to attain—the ideal of the voluntary self-sacrifice of the personality out of love."[44] This "something else" can be aligned with surprise, with the unexpected—something that exists beyond the Underground Man's enclosed assumptions about reality and must break in. Liza had every reason to respond with scorn to the Underground Man; scorn was the only reaction he could conceive of, at least. But when she reverses his expectations by voluntarily giving him love despite his utter lack of worthiness, she opens the door to Taylor's grace reaching into the underground.

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[41] Dostoevsky, *Notes,*123.

[42] Dostoevsky, *Notes,*123.

[43] J. A. Jackson, "Freedom and Otherness: The Religious Dimension of Dostoevsky's 'Notes from Underground,'" *Religion & Literature* 43, no. 3 (2011): 184. For context, Jackson takes a Girardian reading of the scene, pointing out the "positive mimesis" of the Underground Man imitating Liza's tears is also critical for the possibility of resurrection.

[44] Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: the Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986), 345. https://hdl-handle-net.twu.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb09134.0001.001.

Further confirming the transformational nature of Liza's self-emptying embrace is the way it facilitates a rare representation of somatic wholeness for the Underground Man. From the moment the Underground Man writes "I am a sick man…I am a wicked man," Dostoevsky gives somatic expression to the Underground Man's conflicted inner life. This is common in Dostoevsky's novels, where characters have a habit of falling feverish in response to their interpersonal situations. In the *allishness* of his consciousness, Underground Man consistently ignores the ways his body speaks and is unable to integrate the knowledge from his body with the knowledge in his mind—yet another example of a lack of reconciliation. This disconnect represents a Cartesian scission between the mind and the material. As noted before, we see this when the Underground Man pathetically asks for water, a moment in which he both knows "the fit is real" and that his asking for water is performative. In this same scene, we see this splintered relationship when, after Apollon leaves the room, the Underground Man begins yelling "'I'll kill him, I'll kill him!'" He is "in a perfect frenzy, and at the same time with a perfect understanding of how stupid it was to be in such a frenzy." His mind removes itself from his body by standing a step away from the scene, assessing his actions and responses and devaluing his physical responses.[45] The deep divide between his sensual and rational worlds echoes his oscillating, unreconciled inner state.

This lack of somatic integration makes it all the more notable that the result of Liza's surprise embrace is that the Underground Man breaks "into such sobbing as had never happened to me before …" Mediated by the unexpected act, for the first time the Underground Man's body aligns with the truth of his existential condition: "namely, that I myself was unhappy."[46] The

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[45] Dostoevsky, *Notes,* 119.

[46] Dostoevsky, *Notes,* 123.

Underground Man isn't merely stating that he is crying more *passionately* than ever before (with all of his antics, we might suppose he has sobbed dramatically more than a few times in his life); instead, the novelty of the moment is his mind-body integration. We see this hinted at in the next line, as this integration allows him to, despite all his radical honesty, admit for the first time a kernel of reality that has thus far lain outside the walls of the truth he had allowed himself to acknowledge: "They won't let me … I can't be … good!" After this moment of whole, unadulterated truth is released, the Underground Man once again falls on the sofa and cries for a "quarter of an hour in real hysterics," as opposed to the self-conscious fit he'd had earlier.[47] Thus, mind-body integration becomes another layer in Dostoevsky's vision for spiritual integration: a sign of the possibility of reconciliation that can derive from an unexpected act.

After all these heroics on the part of Liza—her tremendous gaze! Her capacity for the unexpected act! Her vulnerability and self-giving love!—it would be tempting to read her as a mere manic pixie dream girl, the "redeemed prostitute"[48] whose sole purpose is to facilitate a man's transition to a life of wholeness. The trouble with this interpretation, however, is the fact that this moment of integration for the Underground Man is just that: a moment. "The hitch was that the hysterics did have to end," the Underground Man tells us.[49] This is the "hitch" in so many transformations: they cannot take place without a critical moment, but the moment is simply the start of the journey out of the underground—a journey the Underground Man ultimately rejects. After the critical moment of integration, the Underground Man writes that "I

[47] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 124.

[48] Pevear, foreword, xi. Pevear, among others, notes how Dostoevsky is intentionally satirizing the redeemed prostitute trope in Western literature.

[49] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 124.

began little by little, remotely, involuntarily, but irresistibly, to feel that it would be awkward now to raise my head and look straight into Liza's eyes."[50] Despite the opportunity presented to him, the Underground Man's damaged psyche cannot bear a full acceptance of Liza's eyes, to match her vulnerability and openness and thus begin the restoration of his personhood by accepting her love. So instead, he returns to his old spites; his own eyes gleam "with passion," thus displaying his reversion to an underground state. By reembracing the *allishness* of his consciousness, he chooses to continue seeing the non-rational parts of life through the lens of his internal corruption, his state of underground pride. When Liza once again responds with love, embracing him "rapturously and ardently," the Underground Man takes full advantage of her, giving her "the final insult"—sleeping with her and attempting to pay her for it.[51] He attempts to reaffirm her own underground circumstances of prostitution and condemn her to the same unhappiness that consumes his own life. But here is where Liza transcends her manic pixie status: when offered money that will symbolically trap her underground, she once again acts outside of the circumscribed version of truth available to the Underground Manby rejecting his roubles. As Emily Lehman writes, "By being in similarly demeaned circumstances while still retaining humanity, Liza bears witness to the possibility of morality: her vulnerability and humility open channels of human connection the existence of which the Underground Man is precommitted to denying."[52] By proving she can act unexpectedly, Liza shows herself to be

[50] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 124

[51] Dostoevsky, *Notes,* 124, 125.

[52] Emily Lehman, "Demons and the Heart in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought & Culture* 26, no. 4 (2023): 66, doi:10.1353/log.2023.a909169.

willing to undertake her own journey out of the underground.[53] In choosing not to reject the Underground Man and at the same time reject his debasement of her (we remember Alyosha's response to Ivan), Liza becomes a conduit for transformation—for both the Underground Man *and* for herself.

Liza's time in the underground is, in Girard's terms, a mere transition on the way to her "resurrection," not an irreversible condition, further confirming Ann Astell's contention that *Notes* contains the "symbols of transcendency" signaling that Dostoevsky's conversion as a writer did not need to wait until *The Brothers Karamazov*.[54] In this way, Liza also becomes a counterpoint to the Underground Man's inertia while representing the role that agency and choice play in one's ability to live an existentially whole life. Her self-determined action in the novel "strikes at the roots of the Underground Man's entire project of self-justification" presenting "a sign that cannot be ignored: the Underground Man cannot persist in his life with her unless he changes his life, and he is unwilling to do so."[55] The Underground Man's inability to let the unexpected elevate his agency from merely acting on impulse to acting *toward* reconciliation is what ultimately condemns him. Playing off Bakhtin's famous theory about the Underground Man, our narrator represents a new version of a protagonist not simply because of his polyphonic interiority but because of his *choice* to remain inert and, in the critical moment, settle for an anamorphic version of peace: "I longed to be left alone in the underground. 'Living life' so crushed me, unaccustomed to it as I was, that it even became difficult for me to

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[53] Lehman, "Demons," 65.

[54] Girard, *Resurrection*, 73; Ann Astell, "The Writer as Redeemed Prostitute: Girard's Reading of Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground," *Religion and Literature* 43, no. 3 (2011): 189.

[55] Lehman, "Demons," 66.

breathe."[56] Instead of seeking true freedom, he settles for a life of conscious sitting with folded arms.

At the end of *Notes,* the Underground Man writes that "a novel needs a hero, and here there are *purposely* collected all the features for an anti-hero, and in the first place, all this will produce a most unpleasant impression, because we've all grown unaccustomed to life, we're all lame, each of us more or less."[57] The unpleasant impression he leaves is true enough for most readers. But in this statement, he implicates not just himself or his gentlemen interlocutors but all of us in his underground position. We are turned off by the Underground Man not (just) because of his unpleasantness, but because we too often settle for less than a living life: a life of existential wholeness, defined by porous borders between "Christ" and the "truth" where surprise can sneak in and bring us back above the floorboards we hide beneath; a life free from the spite and resentment that plagues the Underground Man's interpersonal relationships; a life not ruled by the whims of desire but by true freedom with the potential for reconciliation between mind and body, between inner and outer expressions of the self, and between individuals. As a person who has often felt isolated by my own hyper-consciousness, who has made it a habit of privileging my mind at the expense of my body, and who has been known to preponderize morally or sit with folded arms, I take implications of the Underground Man's life to heart, particularly recognizing the critical importance of openness to surprise. As I get older, I can better appreciate the moments that remind me that the whole of reality—and of my own capacity for action—is much larger than I can grasp and that the walls of truth I've rigidly constructed are indeed porous. I experienced this lesson a few years ago, after telling my sister that I wished I

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[56] Dostoevsky, *Notes,* 126.

[57] Dostoevsky, *Notes,* 129, emphasis in original.

could be sick for a bit—I was home with a toddler and newborn and was desperately tired. I just wanted to be a little sick, so I could rest without responsibility, but not suffer *too* much. A bad head cold perhaps? The next morning, my face started to droop and I ended up in the ER for a possible stroke. In the end, it didn't end up being an emergency—but I was able to stay in the hospital overnight and read a book. By myself. It was much more original than what I had planned for myself. As I wrote at the time, "Here I was: living out an absurd answer to a slipshod prayer, a night alone—in the ER. It was the kind of surprise that makes me grateful I don't usually get what I ask for, because my imagination could never match what kooky reality God comes up with." How terrible to live in a world ruled by gods who never surprise us, who fit in our categories, who remain subject to our truncated truths, who run into the same walls we do. When I read about Liza, about her spontaneous embraces and her rejection of the Underground Man's demeaned roubles, I can see the potentiality of the unexpected seeping into the Underground Man's world. Which leads to the question that looms over any reading of this book: Where is the Underground Man now? Does he ever emerge? Or did his response to Liza doom him irrevocably?[58] If we take our anti-hero's word in Chapter 10, he may very well still be talking, talking, talking, as paradoxically hyper-conscious of and disconnected to reality as ever.[59] But, we remember one fact: the Underground Man listens from the crack in the floorboard. And as long as there's a crack, the light can get in.

[58] Frank, *Dostoevsky,* 345. This is Joseph Frank's estimation.

[59] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 35.

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