Notes on Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

What is Psychological Complexity?

Why revisit "Notes from Underground" now? First, because the psychology of the first part, in particular, is so complex that it continues to evade readers. I know I did not understand much of what the narrator was proposing when I first read “Notes from Underground” in high school or college, and I was curious how much sense it could make to me now. In particular I wondered if it could be a model for psychological complexity in contemporary fiction.

Second, it is interesting to consider a book as influential as this while thinking of at least some of the many authors that influenced it and were influenced by it. For me that very crowded field raises questions of reading: how is it possible to comprehend an authorial voice, or a narrator’s perspective, in a book that is the confluence of so many writers’ voices?

I put these two interests as questions for contemporary writing.

1. What is psychological complexity in a novel? And how might "Notes from Underground" be exemplary of such complexity?

I dimly recall from my first reading of “Notes from Underground” in high school or college that I couldn’t quite put myself in the narrator’s place: I couldn’t understand how he reasoned, or feel things the way he did. In part that’s a theme of the book, but the imaginary “gentlemen” who are addressed throughout do understand what the narrator is saying, even if they think his ideas are ridiculous. I remember I didn’t even understand why the “gentlemen” would laugh or object or argue (as the narrator supposes) at certain points. There were many tell-tale signs that I was not fully understanding the personality that was being presented to me.

It turns out I wasn’t alone. There is still an active literature on what Dostoevsky intended, and what his principal concepts are meant to signify. I think a fair number of conscientious readers still have difficulty understanding the narrator’s psychological state and his beliefs, and in distinguishing those from the author’s.
(Several recent scholars just propose the narrator is identical to the author.) “Notes from Underground” has, in this sense, an exemplary psychological complexity. It might even represent a certain limit of complexity for the novel. (In that respect it is significant that the book’s first part departs from the novel form in the direction of the political or psychological treatise, as if the novel form weren’t sufficient for the ideas.)

Two remarks on the secondary literature before I continue. An example of the kind of misunderstanding I think still exists in the literature is Alina Wyman’s essay “The Specter of Freedom: ressentiment and Dostoevskij’s Notes from Underground” (Springer Verlag, online, 2007). She mentions scholars who connect the theme of resentment in “Notes from Underground” with Nietzsche’s ressentiment, but she prefers Max Scheler’s Nature of Sympathy (1954), which “sees the origin of this moral malady in the perversion of Christ’s teachings rather than in His original message, as Nietzsche does.” (Nietzsche would have hated Scheler! The very idea that ressentiment can be remade into a gateway to Christian faith, or that “the most effective preventive remedy against ressentiment” is forgiveness, go against the entire diagnosis of Christianity in Nietzsche’s account.) Wyman is interested in proposing the author of “Notes from Underground” as a Christian apologist: the text, she writes, “turns our attention to the ‘costs’ of the Christian ideal: in a world exposed to the ultimate horizon of desire through Christ, those lacking the serenity of faith may be doomed to the merciless torment of ressentiment.” But surely this is not in “Notes from Underground”: it can be read, retrospectively, back from Crime and Punishment, but that is a reading from the outside—from above ground. The narrator has both the philosophic bent of Ivan Karamazov and the "Smerdyakovism" of Smerdyakov in "The Brothers Karamazov"—that is, a pointless perverse systematic evil—but little of Alyosha’s redemptive spirituality. ("Smerdyakovism" comes from an excellent piece by Kostica Bradatan, Los Angeles Review of Books, July 31, 2014.)

In the earlier literature, “Notes from Underground” seems to have been itself underground. (Perhaps someone who knows the history of the reception of individual Dostoevsky texts can help me with this.) Scholars were interested in Dostoevsky’s politics and his Christianity, and “Notes from Underground” did not fit those themes. “Humility is the first and foremost virtue for Dostoevsky,” according to George Strem (Russian Review, January 1957), who only mentions “Notes from Underground” once, in passing. It makes sense that Marmeladov, in Crime and Punishment, “seeks self-debasement with an almost masochistic abandon, for it is his way of atoning... for his sins,” Strem says, but that kind of explanation wouldn’t work with “Notes from Underground.”

So what constitutes psychological complexity in this text? It isn’t the anti-utopian polemic, which has been well studied; and I hope it isn’t the narrator’s tendency to claim things he’s said aren’t true, because iterated self-doubt exists much more extensively in Beckett. Complexity could be said to be the effect of the different concepts Dostoevsky has his narrator introduce, one after another, in the form of
a philosophic treatise—but for me, enumerable concepts are not in themselves a source of complexity, even though they become complex when their connections begin to appear.

Here are two proposals for how complexity arises.

First, complexity appears when the first numbered section moves quickly through five or six propositions: the narrator is spiteful; he knows he is neither spiteful nor even embittered; he knows he cannot actually have any qualities; he asserts that “intelligent” people can never have qualities (they can never “become anything”); and finally, that nineteenth-century men “must and morally ought” to be “characterless.” Those are all different states of mind, and they are not presented as simultaneously present in the narrator’s mind: they aren’t successive insights, but views on a problem that might recur, in any order. This is the fourth of William Empson’s seven types of ambiguity: a complicated state of mind that is revealed by a number of mutually contradictory or incompatible ideas, which are not all present in the author’s mind at any one time. If the exposition here—which is typical of the first part of “Notes from Underground”—is understood as a partly randomly ordered succession of thoughts that are themselves never fully present in the narrator’s mind, then there is no possibility of fully understanding the ideas proposed in the text, and also, at the same time, no possibility of achieving an orderly partial understanding.

Second, it is psychologically complex when, in the second numbered section, the narrator says he is firmly convinced that “every kind of consciousness” (including, by implication, the five or six states of awareness of spite and character in the opening numbered section) is a “disease.” That is, on the face of it, a condemnation of anything the book might contain: but before he can develop the thought, he says he will “leave it… for a minute,” and he poses a question to the reader: why is it, he wants to know, that when he is most susceptible to feeling “the sublime and beautiful” (in scare quotes in the English, as if he doubts them altogether), that he finds himself also capable of the most “ugly” thoughts and actions? A reader will want to guess the answer is spite, because that is the quality the narrator introduced in the opening section: but what makes this complex is not that spite is the wrong answer, but that the question has occurred to the narrator at all, especially just after he has made his claim about consciousness. As the section develops, it turns out that self-loathing, bitterness, and an overly intense awareness of degradation can become sources of pleasure, and that theme is the one that ends up being developed in the short novel that is part two of “Notes from Underground.” But again, that isn’t in any obvious way an answer to his question about how ugly sentiments arise from the possibility of “the sublime and beautiful,” and it isn’t clearly related to the opening idea about consciousness and disease. The ideas are all related, and it is possible to just read through this and the following sections, noting the themes and concepts: but the narrator’s way of thinking here is, I think, extremely difficult to follow. It has an illogic (really, almost a sort of dementia) that is different in kind from the themes that are being proposed, and that contrast—between ideas that are individually
problematic and connections between them that are difficult to grasp—is a second source of complexity.

Neither of these two sources of complexity seems to bother the scholars I have read, who are more interested in resentment, spite, divided consciousness (see Aileen Kelly, in Slavic Review, summer 1988), character, cleverness, cowardice, pride, boredom and ennui (section 5), laziness (section 6), perversity (section 7, for example), utopias, and so forth. The secondary literature seems mostly concerned with philosophemes, constrainable concepts, and political and religious positions. Those can be extracted from the text and discussed individually. But the text itself is of another order. It is, I think, a model of psychological complexity even for the contemporary novel.

As an appendix to this sketch I want to register skepticism about another common reading, which has it that "Notes from Underground" is a record of endless thinking, structureless meditations, wandering directionless ideas and impressions. The more I read the book, the less I see of that. It is very tightly structured by an intense desire to make sense. It's a matter of how much energy and attention a reader can bring to bear.

2. How is it possible to read a book that is the confluence of so many writers' voices? Can such a book be read, or is it more a matter of listening on simultaneous conversations?

Some of the voices that echo in the book are philosophers' voices. Schopenhauer is present whenever the narrator speaks about his will, blind will, the will of the masses. Nietzsche is anticipated—not only his readings of Dostoevsky, but his criticism of Schopenhauer—whenever the narrator speaks of overcoming or resentment (more on that later). This book was clearly important to Kafka: the underground man is continuously shivering, blushing, hypersensitive, insecure, haunted. I also think of Kafka when I laugh, nervously, at the outrageous self-destructive things the narrator says, especially toward the end when he uses a sequence of what might be called the world’s worst pick-up lines on a woman he ends up rejecting anyway. I don’t think Musil would have been possible without the underground man’s “characterless” life. Poe is in the background of passages about the narrator’s “cave,” and his haunted life. Freud comes to mind whenever the narrator wonders how much of his life can ever be understood, and when he speaks against reason and rationality. I hear Thomas Bernhard (I mean of course Dostoevsky’s influence on him) whenever the narrator rants and rages in unstoppable pages of prose. (“In the next room two gloomy, angry-looking persons were eating their dinners in silence.... one could hear... nasty little shrieks in French: there were ladies at the dinner. It was sickening.”) And I hear Gombrowicz’s Ferdydurke in the narrator’s reminiscences of his abysmal school experiences. And then of course there are the utopian philosophers Dostoevsky was writing against, and the Russian, English, and French contemporaries he was outdoing. The book is crowded with voices.
I wonder if the only way to read such a book is as a palimpsest, or as a Bakhtin-style dialogue. The very presence of so many voices, however, makes the search for the author’s voice more pressing. The tendency, I think, is for the author’s voice to be forced into a void: it appears as the opposite of all the other voices, or as the remainder when the other voices are subtracted. (I would note in passing that this problem cannot be adequately resolved by reading the book as a conversation among many writers’ and philosophers’ voices. That kind of reading gives up on the pressure the text itself has exerted on history. It would not be an echo chamber if its author’s voice had not been so strong.)

For me, Dostoevsky’s voice comes out most strongly when I consider the architecture of the text. It has a famously odd structure: the first part is a philosophic treatise in a confessional mode (that anticipates, for example, Nietzsche’s later books), and the second is a short novel or a long story that appears, inevitably, to illustrate the first part. This strange double structure—philosophy undermined by a confessional voice, confessional novel undermined by philosophy—appears, by default, as Dostoevsky’s own. I also hear Dostoevsky in the entangled flow of his thoughts, which isn’t the same as any of the writers I’ve mentioned: but I am aware that if I were to write at length on that trait, my analysis would appear as the opposite of whatever models, precedents, and standards contrast against it. In my search for something that might count as Dostoevsky’s voice in “Notes from Underground,” I also think of his other novels (an unavoidable, if only partly legitimate, way of approaching the problem), and biographies such as the stupendous book by Lenid Typskin (www.goodreads.com/review/show/430697550). This search becomes even more of a conundrum when I realize that the problem of finding the author’s voice is very common, because it happens in every weak or average novel, written by a mediocre author whose voice is the sum total of her influences. Here, where Dostoevsky’s voice was the opposite of anything weak or undefined—it was enormously influential as a voice, and continues to be—the number of authors influenced by the book creates a facsimile of the same problem. I do not have a good answer to this second problem.