

Title: Physical Resurrection in Notes from Underground

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Abstract:

When the Underground Man visits Liza, he describes a dead prostitute come back to life, trapped in her watery grave: “Nothing but filth and mud, however you knock at your coffin lid at night, when the dead arise, however you cry: 'Let me out, kind people, to live in the light of day!’” (Dostoevsky 91). Despite Dostoevsky’s well-known spiritual obsession with resurrection, potential implications of this nightmare vision for his religious thinking remain largely unexplored. In early Christian theology, resurrection is not the soul’s ascension to heaven, but the physical reversal of death and spiritual transformation, on earth, of the body, inseparable from the soul. This paper explores what that might mean for Dostoevsky’s understanding of the relation between body and soul in life.

To do so, it examines the parallels between the literally underground prostitute and the UM. He remarks to Liza that prostitution is the selling of body and, therefore, soul, hinting that this may be true, to a degree, of all work. He emphasizes her debt-slavery, and next day he nervously hurries to clear his own debt—by borrowing money elsewhere. Indeed, he characterizes relationships in general as either transactions or violence, which, this paper argues, is profoundly related to his crushing anxieties about the intrinsic (or contingent) value of his physical, bodily existence.

Dostoevsky scholarship, which overwhelmingly focuses on the UM’s anti-rationalist polemic or Bakhtinian dialogic self-conception, has largely neglected the UM’s neurotic obsession with his body. Reading Notes through this image could illuminate the connection between the UM’s bodily anxieties and the theological dimension of the work, and perhaps clarify whether and how Dostoevsky sees the body as a potential site of spiritual revival.

Cited:

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. Notes from Underground, the Grand Inquisitor. Translated by Ralph Matlaw, E.P. Dutton, 1960.