

Regarding *L'Esprit souterrain*

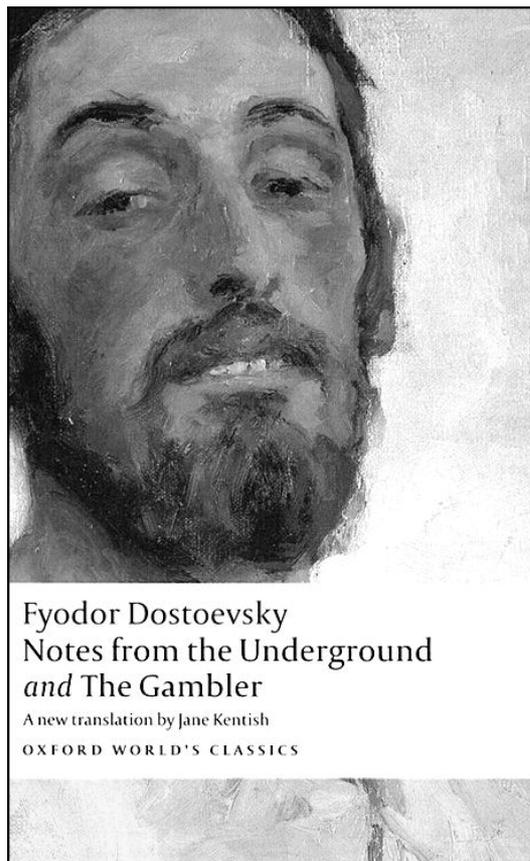
IN NOVEMBER 1938 John Cowper Powys wrote:

But *listen!*—that book '*Memories from Underground*' or—but it has *other* titles in *other* editions¹—I always used in lecturing on D. to *tell the story of it* for I regard it (in short space) as the *deepest* and the *most characteristic* of *all his works!* I used to use the *French Title* for I read it first in French wh. is '*L'Esprit Souterrain*' '*The Underground Mind!*' but again—who knows what the title² in Russian is?....

I got out of it that grand saying about human beings in their deepest depths *not* really aiming at their 'happiness', but *aiming* at their own destruction! & the destruction & contradiction of *all!* and also I got that saying about the *arbitrariness* of the soul & its profound craving—not a very good or resigned, *nor* a very scientific or truth-loving craving, that two and two should make *Five!*³

Why read the book in French? Possibly because he was not aware of an available English translation at the time. So when did he read it? We know that he was on the liner sailing to New York in 1908 when he discovered Dostoevsky and read *Crime and Punishment*, and we may assume that after the shock he received, he would have read in succession the three other major novels, and probably set out to read all the Dostoevsky he could lay his hands on. Although the first English translation was published in 1913⁴, Powys had certainly read the book in French before early 1915 when he finished writing *Visions and Revisions*⁵, published by Arnold Shaw in February that year, and in which the French translation is mentioned precisely under the title *L'Esprit Souterrain*.

The short novel made such an impression that he would still remember its French title over twenty years later. In *The Pleasures of Literature* he even refers to the book by translating the French title into English:



¹ No edition was ever published under this title. A partial list of actual titles would include: *Memoirs from Underground*, *Notes from Underground*, *Memoirs from a Dark Cellar*, *Letters from the Underground*. I will use here the single word *Memoirs*.

² The Russian title is *Zapiski iz Podpolya*, which should be translated as *Memoirs from Underground*, or, according to Nabokov, *Memoirs from a Mousehole* or *Under the floorboards*.

³ Letter of November 21, 1938, *Letters to Sea-Eagle*, ed. A. Head, London: Cecil Woolf, 1996. Powys will come back to this idea in *Dostoevsky*, p.19.

⁴ *Letters from the Underworld*, J.M. Dent, London 1913, tr. C.J. Hogarth. My thanks to Michael Kowalewski for this information.

⁵ *Visions and Revisions*, G.A. Shaw, New York, 1915, p.252.

The most significant in all Dostoevsky, except perhaps the tormented outcries wrung from Shatov and Kirilov in *The Possessed*, is the passage in which in “the Underground Spirit” he speaks of man’s *will* to self-abasement and self-destruction, and of his divine-demonic yearning that “two and two” should make “five” instead of “four”!⁶

But what, however, did Powys actually read in French? The whole of *L’Esprit souterrain* can be found on Internet⁷. It was the very first translation by two Frenchmen, Halpérine and Morice, published in 1886, that is to say twenty-two years only after its publication in Russia, at a time when Dostoevsky was beginning to exert great fascination in France. Ely Halpérine-Kaminsky also translated at least five of Dostoevsky’s ‘minor’ stories, including *The Gambler* and *White Nights*.

The problem is that the Halpérine/Morice translation he read is in fact made up from two different short novels which the translators juxtaposed in order to make the whole more interesting. The first text, called ‘Katya’ was never meant to be part of *Memoirs*. It is narrated in the third person and tells the melodramatic story of Vassili Ordinov, a young man of poor health, and of his unhappy love for an unbalanced young woman, Katerina, who is in the clutches of a mysterious old man, sorcerer or fortune-teller. ‘Katya’ is followed by the text of *Memoirs*, entitled ‘Liza’⁸. A two-page link was inserted by the translators between the two texts, explaining quite incorrectly that the second text is narrated some years later by Ordinov. In fact the two texts written sixteen years apart were completely unrelated.

It is astonishing that such a hybrid book could have been produced. But at the time it did not incur any criticism, and seems to have been ignored by later translators and commentators. Only recently did I find a precise reference to it in an article discussing the difficulty of translating Dostoevsky.⁹ Powys in *Dostoevsky* shows no surprise either not to find ‘Katya’ with its third person narrative when reading *Memoirs* in English:

Memoirs from the Underground is a revelation of the power of the lonely, self-existent, unpropitiated human mind. The hero of the story, who speaks all the way through the book in his own person, defies everything and in this very defiance he possesses and enjoys everything.¹⁰

and in fact even mentions Ordinov

... liberty based on absolute *free will*... to choose pain and unhappiness and hardship rather than security and comfort, absolute in its power to choose—as did Ordinov in *Memoirs from Underground*—our own destruction...¹¹

whereas Ordinov does not appear in *Memoirs*. Was he in fact still remembering the French version? He tells us that French was not his forte at Sherborne¹², but he may have been much more fluent in his understanding of it than he let

⁶ *The Pleasures of Literature*, Cassell & co, London, 1938, pp.100-1.

⁷ <http://www.ebooksgratuits.com/newsendbook.php?id=1887&format=pdf>

⁸ ‘Katya’ corresponds to *The Hostess* (1847), and the original title of ‘Liza’ is *The Underground* (1863).

⁹ *Magazine littéraire* 495, mars 2010, ‘Un démon pour la traduction’ [Devilishly difficult to translate] by Pierre Assouline, p.72.

¹⁰ *Dostoevsky*, p.85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.136-7.

¹² *Autobiography*, Colgate Univ. Press, 1967, p.113.

believe. After all, he made a splendid job with his translations in *Rabelais* (even if Phyllis also played her part).

What we must underline is that as usual, his *flair* for literature did not fail him here either. Nietzsche had been one of the first to understand the depth of *Memoirs*, which, overwhelmed, he read in 1887 during one of his stays in Nice, also in the Halpérine/Morice version, and was delighted to read it in French. Since then, *Memoirs* has attracted the notice of innumerable critics, fascinated by the description the anonymous ‘anti-hero’ gives of himself. The underground is in fact the symbol of an inward looking world, the negation of objective reality. Imprisoned in this world, the character in the story, reduced to a voice, claims his right to being irrational, of denying rationality. For, as the Hungarian writer Laszlo Földényi referring to Dostoievsky wrote: “Rational liberty is not liberty. What is rational is always limited; whereas liberty is unlimited.”¹³

In *Visions and Revisions* Powys makes a comment on Dostoievsky’s “queer people”, which is also a reflection of his own tendencies:

[They] derive an almost sensual pleasure from being abominably treated. (...) It is this type of person who, like the hero in ‘L’Esprit Souterrain’, deliberately rushes into embarrassing situations; into situations and among people where he will look a fool—in order to avenge himself upon the spectators of his folly by going deeper and deeper into it.¹⁴

He probably still alluded to *Memoirs* when in *Autobiography*, he evokes a strange state of mind in which he finds sensual pleasure in not being understood. He adds:

Like the unlucky young man in one of Dostoievsky’s shorter stories I have lashed myself up into such a frenzy of zanyism that I feel as if I were making love to some eternal zanyishness in the heart of the cosmos.¹⁵

which irresistibly reminds one of the anonymous narrator of *Memoirs*

... being highly conscious of having once again done a nasty thing that day... I would gnaw... and suck at myself until the bitterness finally turned into some shameful, accursed sweetness, and finally—into a decided serious pleasure! Yes, a pleasure, a pleasure! I stand upon it.¹⁶

The narrator is an astute analyst of his own feelings. Showing at the same time utter derision for the Socratic “Know thyself” and hostility towards both himself and the others around him, he also shows his dependence on them. In his soliloquy he applies expert knowledge in examining his complex and distorted personality. As an eminent French Dostoievsky specialist remarks¹⁷, through his discourse the narrator expresses the will to exist, but that will is ceaselessly coming up against the void, mediocrity, reason. “He is as broken as his line of reasoning is.” Dostoievsky’s free man is one who is in revolt not only against society, but also against himself, not only today, but tomorrow and for all eternity.

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¹³ Laszlo Földényi, ‘Dostoievsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts into Tears’, *Common Knowledge* - Vol.10, Issue 1, Winter 2004, pp.93-104.

¹⁴ *Visions and Revisions*, G. Arnold Shaw, New York, 1915, p.252.

¹⁵ *Autobiography*, p.452.

¹⁶ Dostoievsky, *Notes from Underground*, Vintage Classics, New York, 1994, tr. R. Pevear & L. Volokhonsky, p.8. A highly valuable translation.

¹⁷ Georges Nivat, *La poétique du fragment chez Dostoïevski*, Revue des Etudes slaves, 1998.