Dostoevsky's *White Nights:*Memoir of a Petersburg Pathology

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I write my reveries only for myself . . . and decrepit, I will live with myself in another age as if I were living with a younger friend.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Reveries of a Solitary Walker

Toward the end of his life, disenchanted with worldly engagement and public controversy, Rousseau withdrew into the consolations of the mind, composing a last, ostensibly private addendum to his lifelong confessional discourse that he entitled *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* [Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire, 1776-78]. These Reveries comprise ten "walks" or rambling essays in which Rousseau, struggling to accept his isolation and involuntary status as an outsider to society, devotes himself to recording philosophical reflections and botanical observations without regard for public utility or personal repute. In the Reveries, Rousseau offered readers an influential eighteenth-century rural prototype of the nineteenth-century flâneur, that detached urban spectator and speculator who emerged at the edge of the Parisian crowd in the 1830s and who, like Rousseau, was an idler "out of circulation," abstaining from social relations in order to secure a space for private reflection.¹

As it happens, the Russian translation of Reveries of a Solitary Walker, published by Ivan Martynov in 1802, was cleverly advertised as Rousseau's final, most authentic act of self-revelation, surpassing his earlier renowned Confessions [Les Confessions, 1782].² Although we cannot know when, or even if, Dostoevsky read this later, most extreme of Rousseau's experiments in self-exploration and self-justification, numerous literary historians and critics have noted Dostoevsky's long-standing interest in Rousseau's thought and art. They have a tendency to affiliate the young, politically-minded Dostoevsky before his Siberian exile with the progressive Rousseau of the Social Contract [Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique, 1762] or the sentimentalist Rousseau of The New Heloise [Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse, 1761], whereas a critical divergence from Rousseau can be clearly noted in the older, more conservative Dostoevsky after his exile.³ In any event, Dostoevsky was well aware of the intellectual revolution that the Confessions had brought about by virtue of Rousseau's adamant quest to assert the self's inimitable individuality. Even before his mature influential experiments in confessional narration, the young Dostoevsky instilled in his protagonists a Rousseau-esque fascination with the effort to write oneself into existence and to affirm one's subjective truth.

This fascination is nowhere more on display than in White Nights [Белые ночи, 1848], a gentle, though rueful, evocation of a thwarted high-minded dreamer. Like Rousseau in The Reveries, the first-person anonymous narrator of White Nights complains bitterly of suffering from solitude, abandonment, and friendless isolation. Moreover, both that anonymous narrator and Rousseau fill the present moment's total lack of social interaction with the fullness of a mind's sovereign reveries. Significantly, the impetus for recording and minutely reconstructing past sensations and interior states of mind is provided by an increasing sense of desperation that overtakes both Rousseau and Dostoevsky's narrator fifteen years after experiencing one blissful, transient moment of self-fulfillment.⁴ And each of these rhetorical exhibitions of willed introspection raises the question of whether the act of self-composition can actually engender true self-sufficiency and mental composure.

Rousseau's *Reveries* would have us believe that his act of composition can achieve and sustain the bliss of withdrawal into the abode of the mind's autonomous meditations without regard for others or self-regarding *amour propre*

[literally, self-love; egotism]. Rousseau celebrates his capacity to abstain from, rather than engage with, the world's distractions from self-contemplation:

... I write my reveries only for myself. If in my later days as the moment of departure approaches, I continue—as I hope—to have the same disposition as I now have, reading them will recall the delight I enjoy in writing them and causing the past to be born again for me will, so to speak, double my existence... and decrepit, I will live with myself in another age as if I were living with a younger friend.⁵

His claim, as announced at the beginning of "The First Walk," invites comparison with the dramatized experiment in self-redemption attempted by Dostoevsky's nostalgic narrator. In this essay I will suggest that the young author of *White Nights* was initiating a prolonged polemic with Rousseau by critiquing, sometimes harshly, Rousseau's cult of self and sentiment as manifest in *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. In contrast to critics who find in *White Nights* a tender romantic pathos for the narrator's poetic dreaminess, I will argue here that Dostoevsky was illustrating a Petersburg pathology—specifically, a compulsion to memorialize moments of imaginative perception and to revel in reverie rather than to acknowledge the demands and risks of human relations in the real world.⁶

One of the few revelations of Dostoevsky's state of mind at the moment when he was giving imaginative embodiment to the Petersburg flâneur and sentimental dreamer of *White Nights*—he hardly mentions this narrative in his correspondence—appears in a letter to his brother in early 1847. It confirms his precocious anxiety about the perilous relationship between intellectual refinement and solitary confinement as exemplified by Rousseau's narrator: "The external ought to be equivalent in force to the internal. Otherwise, in the absence of exterior phenomena the internal will take the upper hand to a dangerous degree. Nerves and fantasy will occupy too large a place in existence." ⁷

In the spring of that same year, Dostoevsky made a brief appearance as a peripatetic commentator on urban life in the *Saint Petersburg Gazette*. These pieces, collectively entitled *The Petersburg Chronicle* [Петербургская летопись], clearly anticipate his later fictional embodiment of a representative Petersburg voice in *White Nights*. In four journalistic segments Dostoevsky impersonated the manner and mode of a contemporary *feuilletonist* or columnist. As the French name implies, the feuilleton was originally a separate newspaper

enclosure or "leaflet" conveying information and observations about cultural events. By the time this mass-market medium had become the rage in Petersburg in the 1840s, the form implied not only particular content but a particular authorial persona and perspective as well, that of the flâneur. Both spectator and idler, the feuilletonist positions himself as a chatty, erratic perambulator of city sites whose ostentatious inactivity enables him to be a privileged interpreter of the urban system of signs, "a semiologist avant la lettre." Under the guise of informality and randomness, the feuilletonist's rambling observations purport to decode the hieroglyphic spectacle that is the parade of metropolitan life. In his feuilletons, Dostoevsky embraced this narrative figure, employing the witty, half-ironic voice of the chronicler to conduct a withering commentary on the self-censorship of meaningful speech and action in Petersburg, the imperial city of private "circles" ["кружки"] and public silences. Especially in Dostoevsky's fourth and final column (June 15, 1847), he memorably diagnosed what, along with other progressives of his generation, he identified as the endemic malady of Petersburg's meteorological and societal climate—dreaminess [мечтательность] or reverie:

Are there many among us who have found their real vocation?... Then, little by little, there arises what is known as dreaminess in types who are avid for activity, avid for spontaneous living, avid for authenticity but who are weak, feminine, and tender; and finally a man is no longer recognizable as a man but a kind of strange entity of neuter gender—a dreamer. And do you know, gentlemen, what this phenomenon called a dreamer is? It is a Petersburg nightmare, the personification of sin, a mute, mysterious, gloomy and wild tragedy... and we say this not at all in jest.9

In his journalistic role as rival "physiologist" of Petersburg's denizens, Dostoevsky exposed with cutting precision the anatomy of the contemporary body of the Russian urban intelligentsia, stifling in fear, frustration and avoidance. It is precisely this theme—the "nightmare" of dreaminess—though without the sermonizing, that is transposed into the agitated reminiscence penned by the protagonist of *White Nights*. As an author of fiction, however, Dostoevsky functioned more as a psychologist, laying bare the inner workings of the affliction of dreaminess as a Petersburg pathology.

Originally printed in the last number of *Notes of the Fatherland* [*Отечественные записки*] in 1848, Dostoevsky's novella bore a tripartite

title in three different fonts: **WHITE NIGHTS**/A Sentimental Novel/(*From the Memoirs of a Dreamer*) [**БЕЛЫЕ НОЧИ**/Сентименталный роман/ (*Из воспоминаний мечтателя*)], providing, so it seems, a typographical image of the text's mixed genres and messages. From the very beginning, the title alludes to Petersburg's atmospheric confusion of boundaries—between day and night and between the imagined and the actual. The text was also preceded by an epigraph, a truncated final quatrain from a Turgenev poem of 1843, "The Flower" ["Цветок"]: "... Or, was it only fated / To exist for but a moment / As companion to your heart?" It is worth noting that Dostoevsky changed the syntax of the poem from a statement to a question, raising some doubt about the durability of gathered rosebuds, as it were.

What follows is a rather simple story told at length in a highly elaborate and self-conscious literary manner. The opening sentence indicates that the narrator knows he is writing to an educated, mature audience: "It was a marvelous night, such a night as can only really occur when we are young, dear reader."12 It is apparent, then, that whatever tale White Nights unfolds will be in the form of an autobiographical narrative told by its narrator from a temporal distance and with a degree of cautious embarrassment. From the outset, the narrative voice betrays a nervous blend of apology and nostalgia. Appropriately so, for the reader will learn that this extraordinary night is the first of four nights fifteen years in the past, when the narrator's younger self, a twenty-six-year-old Petersburg "dreamer," imagined a romantic affair with a pert young woman named Nastenka whom, by sheer chance, he had rescued from molestation and rendered apparently receptive to his pursuit. On the night of their fourth rendezvous, however, Nastenka's tardy fiancé returns to Petersburg and sweeps her away. Crushed, the dreamer retreats to his dingy room and dreary daily rounds until he finally decides to pen the confessional memoir that reveals who he is, as well as who he was.

The retrospective narrator—who remains nameless throughout—is, inevitably, characterizing his younger self while also exposing his present cast of mind. Much is at stake in this delicate balancing act as the narrator seeks both to re-embody and keep distant his callow youthful self. With gentle irony, the older writer recreates the sensibility of a young dreamer who acts as a Petersburg parody of a Parisian flâneur. After eight years in residence, this stroller of streets boasts of his intimate acquaintance with Petersburg, yet he flees actual contact with its citizens, preferring instead to converse with its buildings.

As the older memoirist retraces the steps of the solitary walker before his fateful encounter with young Nastenka, the flights of fancy he once entertained are indulgently (and revealingly) rehearsed. Surveying various architectural features of Petersburg's streets, the young stroller projects a feminine allure onto his favorite objects of attention. For instance, he anthropomorphically recollects the "very cute rosy-pink cottage" who looked so welcomingly at him and glared so proudly at her ungainly neighbors. Her imaginary story ends melodramatically with a sudden shriek—"They are painting me all in yellow!"—that results in an attack of bile directed by the horrified observer against the "villains, barbarians" who have defiled her—no doubt because in Petersburg a "yellow house" [желтый дом] signified a lunatic asylum.¹³ It is not difficult to see in this fantasy male anxiety about seduction and corruption.

A similar feminized fantasy takes the form of an extended conceit comparing the brief efflorescence of a Petersburg spring to the attractive flush of excitement that temporarily lends color to the features of a consumptive girl. Dostoevsky borrowed this passage nearly verbatim from his fourth "Petersburg Chronicle," but he fitted it effectively into the psychological plot of *White Nights*. This recycled version of springtime in Petersburg ends, significantly, with a bitter foretaste of disenchantment:

But the moment passes, and tomorrow, perhaps, you will see again that same brooding, distracted gaze, the same pallid face . . . and even traces of remorse and the numbing ache of vexation over a momentary rapture . . . And you will regret how quickly and irretrievably an instant's beauty has faded and how seductively and vainly it glimmered before you—and regret, too, that there was barely time even to fall in love . . . ¹⁴

Here the features of the frail girl and the depressed male voyeur merge indistinguishably; both show the sickly traces of prematurely withered youthfulness. In this passage, the former Petersburg feuilletonist sounds very much like a fatigued flâneur.

The ensuing reminiscence of the first night's unexpected encounter with a weeping Nastenka is depicted with a light touch that obscures the true import of the event. By and large, the narrator's initial account of his former self is winsome and comic, well befitting a sentimental recollection. The ridiculously shy stroller dares not cross the street to address a then-unknown pensive maiden, a brunette in a "coquettish" black mantilla staring into the murky

waters of the canal, although he realizes that "no matter how timid I am with women, this really was quite an opportunity!" 15 Yet despite ostensible concern for her plight, the dreamy young man is too self-consciously literary to know how to talk to her and is only able to overcome his constraint when he instinctively rushes to protect her from pursuit by a drunken lout.

What follows is a witty dialogue in which Nastenka calms the inexperienced suitor's nervous jitters and slyly keeps him interested, drawing out of him an embarrassing confession of his loneliness and ineptitude. Reassured by his benevolent, bumbling manner, she allows herself to be accompanied by the stranger, and even agrees to meet him at the same hour the following evening: "For now, let it be a secret—so much the better for you; anticipation will make it seem more like a romance." She admits that she has a private reason for appearing again on the embankment and, without revealing it, insists that, although she, too, appreciates having a confidant, he must not fall in love with her! Much as their bodies take turns trembling with nervous excitement, their situations, too, seem parallel: both are wary of engagement and feel alone and abandoned in a city that is for them vacant and silent. The reader might well begin to think they are well-matched.

There are, however, darker strains suggesting otherwise in the tentative relationship that comes into being on that first white night in Petersburg. The narrator's fortuitous meeting with Nastenka has been preceded by three days of aimless wandering in a desperate panic; all the men of substance have scampered off to their country dachas, leaving the rootless dreamer a voyeur utterly deserted, alone and insignificant. Every day he has been cruelly reminded of his lack of status and stature in the eyes of those he observes. The would-be carefree stroller of streets begins to resemble an alienated disaffected intellectual, "a halfsick townsman, practically suffocating within the city walls."¹⁷ No wonder, then, that the first sight of an apparently bereft woman induces in him a nervous crisis of manhood. The older narrator's sentimental reminiscence does not entirely delete traces of suppressed masculine urges; despite the pretense of overt solicitude, he had set out to follow the dark-haired beauty covertly and she had responded by avoiding him. Yet when the unwelcome stalker, his "double," intrudes on the scene and enables the narrator to intervene, that narrator oddly disclaims his own agency: "I bless fate for the excellent knobby stick that just happened to be in my right hand at that time."18 This reluctance to assume

conscious ownership of predatory or aggressive impulses is symptomatic of his profound ambivalence toward replacing furtive imaginings with realized aspirations.

That ambivalence is displayed during his first conversation with Nastenka, which contains some odd locutions revealing anxieties over the sort of man he is. When she recognizes his fluttered state in approaching her, an unknown woman, and allows him to accompany her home, he responds breathlessly: "You will make me stop being shy all at once . . . and, then, goodbye to all my devices." She is nonplussed by this remark; what, after all, is he struggling to protect himself from? He is eager to impress upon her that he is a dreamer "out of the habit of women": "True, one can't avoid coming across two or three women, but what sort of women? They're all such landladies [хозяйки] . . . but I'm making you laugh." This defensive remark about his own fastidiousness even as he ecstatically converses with a real woman elicits her laughter here, but there is a strange mixture of reluctance and impetuousness in the dreamer's wary approach to Nastenka.

It is he, not she, who first clamors for a second meeting; indeed, he announces he will return to "this place, at this hour" and explains: "I cannot not come here tomorrow. I am a dreamer; I am so inexperienced with real life that moments like this are so precious I cannot not repeat them in my reveries."21 The syntax here (emphatic affirmation by double negation: "He MOTY HE прийти... не могу не повторять") testifies to the awkwardness of an involuntary compulsion. At the end of the first night, the lonely young man is overjoyed to be behaving like a suitor, but we also learn that he has a habit of ritualizing visits to sites of intense emotion: "I will be happy bringing what has occurred to mind. Already this place is dear to me. And I already have two or three such places in Petersburg."22 As one shrewd observer of Dostoevsky's mapping of topography and gender in White Nights has noted, even at its beginning, the relationship with Nastenka is haunted by the narrator's terror of confinement and his compulsion to run in circles, to fall into "repetitious stasis." ²³ Initially, though, the narrator's "two minutes" with her cause him to gush with hope: "Who knows, perhaps you have reconciled me to myself and resolved all my doubts . . . "24 He relies on her to allay any insecurity about his manhood.

On the second night, a shared torrent of words and tears is unloosed as the newly-met couple agrees to begin again by describing their lives. Although the

two accounts seem to lead to a giddy moment of mutual recognition and understanding, the dreamer narrates his life as an interminable character sketch, while her account is truly a narrative of development and action. The reader, in comparing their stories, has an opportunity to measure what is compatible and what is discordant in the Petersburg relationship Dostoevsky has staged. Most obviously, the theme of confinement links the two lives. In the testimonials provided by the older narrator's memoir, however, his youthful isolation is self-inflicted, while Nastenka is literally "pinned" to her grandmother's skirt and strict guardianship. The young male who is free to walk city streets retreats into solitude, whereas the young female who is actively constrained boldly seeks new human contact.

Even as he begins his autobiographical account, the narrator in the role of Nastenka's new suitor is painfully self-conscious and calculatedly aware of his auditor: "I seated myself next to her, adopted a pedantically pompous posture and began to recite as if following a script" ["словно по-писаному"]. 25 What he recites is a cunning apologia for his life as a dreamer [мечтатель]. His apologia at first protectively cloaks itself as an impersonal physiological sketch of an original Petersburg "type," but it soon collapses into a tortured personal appeal that reaches out uncertainly both for judgment and compassion. Although it is he who accosted Nastenka on the street, he describes himself as a pathetic creature who lives self-enclosed, like a snail or tortoise, in retreat from worldly banter and conversation about the fair sex. He imagines he looks to others like a tormented kitten huddled under a chair in the dark, "where for a whole hour it can at leisure bristle and hiss and wash its aggrieved mug."²⁶ No aspect of White Nights more closely anticipates Notes from the Underground [Записки из подполья, 1864] than the young dreamer's prolix self-analysis with its paradoxical blend of vulnerability, defensiveness, and resentment.

Nastenka, meanwhile, understands perfectly well that his extravagant metaphors are a half-serious means of telling the truth, and that her new acquaintance suffers a strange compulsion to "speak like a book." Unfortunately, her shrewd reading between the lines only intensifies the keen anxiety of his confessional performance. He solemnly begs her not to interrupt the floodgate of his pent-up words as he speaks freely, in a mixture of shame and pride, of his richly fanciful existence of solitary refinement. In one breath, he upbraids the dreamer type of individual for being a "sensuous idler" removed from mundane

life, but then boasts that "he desires nothing because he is above all desires, is everything to himself and is the artist of his own life, creating it by the hour with each new whim."²⁷

When the dreamer finally exhausts the stream of his own rhetoric and realizes how pathetic he must appear, the older memoirist interrupts the reported speech and allows us to glimpse an ugly recoil from this moment of embarrassment: "I remember how desperately I wanted in spite of myself to laugh out loud because I already felt stirring within me a malevolent little demon . . . and I already was regretting that I had gone too far, uselessly spilling what had for so long been festering in my heart...." Here surfaces a nasty impulse of selfmockery to hold at bay the compulsion to confess his hidden inner torment.

At this explosive moment, Nastenka presses his hand and expresses tender concern for the life he has led. Here, in this early work, the reader is spared the furious spite and cruel rejection with which Dostoevsky's Underground Man responds to Liza's profound empathy. Instead, buoyed by Nastenka's tears and her sensible rejection of a life of imaginary gratification, the dreamer voices (with apparent sincerity) penitence for his wasted life of all-consuming reverie. He does admit, however, that he remains the sort of man who has a sentimental penchant for commemorating the dates and revisiting the places of his peak emotional experiences.

Nastenka's story, by contrast, is told with refreshing directness and wily self-awareness. We are told that when her lessons ended at age fifteen she became restless and was protectively pinned to her blind grandmother to prevent unsupervised wandering. But, at seventeen, she learned, with the collusion of a male lodger upstairs and his offer of tickets to Rossini's opera *The Barber of Seville*, to slip out from grandmother's control under the guise of cultural enrichment. Although Grandmother had banned racy European sentimental novels in which young ladies are seductively courted and abandoned, she allows the lodger to alleviate her boredom by reading aloud from reputable works by Scott and Pushkin. Gradually, the book traffic between upstairs and downstairs leads to an intimate connection; it is on the staircase that the blushing girl and the cultivated lodger begin their romance. In Dostoevsky's construction of Nastenka's story, we perhaps can glimpse an allusion to art's power to liberate, as well as confine, the imagination. In any case, when the obviously infatuated lodger mysteriously ceases to pay attention to her and

suddenly announces his departure for Moscow on "business," she summons the boldness of Pushkin's Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin* [Евгений Онегин, 1823-31]; she climbs the stairs to offer her heart and suggest an elopement. At the time she is relating this story, her fate still seems precarious and the reader will probably, along with Grandmother, anticipate the worst. Nastenka has her suitor's pledge to return in a year with the intention to marry her, if she agrees. But as she finishes her story, he is already days late and has sent no letter for her.

Nastenka's awkward situation is revealed in her testimony on the second night, and her enigmatic behavior adds a new level of intrigue. Having offered her moral support to rehabilitate the dreaming narrator, she seeks reciprocal aid from him. At the end of her tale, she lowers her head and rather prettily bursts into tears, evoking in her distress an offer of rescue. It turns out, however, that she does not need a romantic hero to rush into confrontation with her laggard lover; instead she wants a literary advisor, an educated ally to give counsel regarding an effective appeal she might write. With her wits about her, Nastenka explains she need not lose time composing a letter, for, like Rosina in *The Barber of Seville*, she has already prepared one. Conveniently, she has also found in her new companion a Figaro substitute to deliver it in her stead! Dostoevsky thus engineers a comic temporary resolution to the heroine's dilemma and, in the process, demonstrates how, in an alert mind, a fictional prototype can promote worldly action as well as induce unworldly reveries.

But the giddy conspiracy hatched on the second night leads directly to the psychological complexity and moral complications that overtake the retrospective narrator's "sentimental novel." Both the weather and the narration abruptly turn murky. The description of the "third night" begins oddly with a depressing evocation:

Today was dreary and rainy, without a ray of hope, like my impending old age. Such strange thoughts oppress me, such dark sensations, such vague questions crowd in my head, and I have neither the strength nor the will to resolve them. . . . Today we shall not meet.²⁹

Disruptively, the narrative technique of using the present tense thrusts the reader into a strangely intense recollection. This obfuscation of temporal borders is soon matched, in the account of the delayed third night, by suddenly permeable emotional boundaries in the narrator's account of his renewed

encounter with Nastenka. Even as he fondly recollects her childish effusion of joy in finding a heartfelt sympathizer, unseemly notes of grievance intrude: "How she made up to me, lavished attention on me and inspired and soothed my heart! How coquettish was her happiness! And I . . . I took it all at face value." A freshly felt resentment impinges on this long past sentimental recollection. And no wonder. The longer the co-conspirators are forced to sustain their mutual dependency without a resolution of Nastenka's suspended love affair, the higher the sexual tension mounts. Unaccountably, the missing suitor is neither heard from nor seen and his absence provides a harsh test of the romantic altruism—or voyeurism—in which the dreamer indulges.

As for Nastenka, her gratitude for the "brotherly" sentiments she has aroused in the narrator soon yields to more complicated feelings of guilt and yearning. She cleverly deduces the self-sacrificial nature of the dreamer's chivalry and clearly both desires and fears more openness in his protestations of fidelity to her. But he suddenly becomes self-protective and even a bit sadistic, reminding her that the arranged rendezvous hour with her lover has struck and passed, although he immediately regrets his cruelty: "I right away repented that I had frightened her, had forced her to count the hours and I cursed myself for this attack of malice." Nastenka, for her part, struggles with pride and humiliation, wishing to show off her acquisition of a devoted friend and expose her tardy lover as the less deserving of the two suitors: "Why isn't he you?" Things become more and more curious as the reticent admirer continues to encourage her faith in her lover's return, even as she is striving to bring the dreamer closer to a recognition of his emotional investment in her.

A dreadful rain-soaked day passes without a meeting, though the dreamer, despite being forewarned of Nastenka's absence, ritually observes the hour of their first and ensuing appointments. The "fourth" and final night thus occurs on the fifth day, subtly reinforcing the structural repetition of mismatched expectations in the text. Significantly, the fourth meeting begins with a symmetrical recurrence of the initial encounter. Nastenka hangs despondent in a flood of tears on the railing of the embankment, providing a final opportunity for heroic rescue. Before long, the young narrator is awash in tears in response to her cruel sense of abandonment. With excruciating slowness, both seem on the verge of acknowledging a new attachment beyond mutual commiseration. Although she never forswore her love for the former lodger, the moment seems

opportune for an evolving relationship based on a sense of kinship and compassion. And, astonishingly, the narrator's suppressed emotions overflow, as he finds himself in an ironic reversal: "At first it was simple, Nastenka, but now, now I'm exactly like you when you went to him with your little bundle, but worse because he didn't love anyone then, but you do." 33 Yet this admission of susceptibility to romance is inauthentic, because the narrator quickly withdraws from the prospect of entanglement in a burst of ludicrous apologies and evasions. He assures Nastenka that his protestation of love is impossible, inadmissible because she only pities him, and even if she were not to drive him off, he would go away voluntarily. What he prefers to being a supplicant, a genuine suitor, is the fantasy of being a phantom lover:

Listen, my friend, for you are after all my friend... what matters is that I'd love you so well, so well that even if you loved him and continued to love him whom I don't know, my love would not be noticed as a burden. You'd only be aware of feeling every minute that next to you there beats a very grateful, ardent heart...³⁴

The incorrigible dreamer imagines a virtual future as a spectral bridegroom haunting the chambers of his true love's heart.³⁵

Despite these indications of an unsustainable romance, Nastenka and her reluctant suitor permit themselves the illusion of a fresh start. They begin to act out a repetition fantasy in which the dreamer will replace the lodger in Grandmother's attic. But when he dares suggest they go see *The Barber of Seville*, she refuses, seeming to recognize the folly of replaying her initial romance with an understudy.

While accompanying her home, reality intrudes in the form of an *eros ex machina* denouement. The delayed lover returns and Nastenka reverses her previous opinion of the dreamer: "If only *you* were he!"³⁶ With this final twist of the plot, Dostoevsky plays fast and loose with literary expectations and performs a quick *volte face* that aborts the developing sentimental affair and, in the spirit of Pushkin's "The Stationmaster" ["Станционный смотритель," 1830], parodies the standard female seduction plot by making a male dreamer the true victim of delusion.³⁷

White Nights concludes with a dismal morning's awakening that lingers on for fifteen years as a lifetime hangover. The narrator reproduces her

plangent farewell letter, in which she regrets the injury of their mutual delusion, begs forgiveness, and vows to remember gratefully the "sweet dream" of their open-hearted affection. Innocently, she imagines their compassionate friendship will be everlasting. But the narrator offers no response to her plea. Instead, he recalls how, in the dim prospect of that distant morning, "I saw myself as I am now, fifteen years on, growing old, in the same room, just as lonely." His valedictory message to Nastenka is hardly a benediction. Dostoevsky scripts final words that give us a true measure of the character and his pathology:

As if I would recall my resentment, Nastenka! Or would cast a dark cloud across your bright untroubled happiness, or would inflict misery on your heart with my bitter reproaches, stinging it with hidden pangs, making it beat anxiously in your moment of bliss. That I would crush even one of those tender blossoms which you wove into your dark curls as you approached the altar with him . . . oh, never, never! May your sky always be bright, and your sweet smile always be radiant and serene, yes, and may you be blessed for the moment of bliss and happiness you gave to another lonely, grateful heart! My God! One whole moment of bliss! Is that not sufficient for a man's entire life?³⁹

Surely, given the sheer intensity of this rhetorical flourish, the jilted narrator protests too much; he imagines too vividly fantasies of revenge and cannot successfully exorcise his lasting resentment or recover from the enduring grievance he nurtures. Dostoevsky's *White Nights*, the Petersburg memoir of a "sentimental affair," is finally a confessional monologue that stagnates in its own pathos; it is a precursor text that anticipates the dire solipsism of later Dostoevskian antiheroes.

Yet the text's final paragraph does pose an intriguing question. It reminds the reader of the ephemeral bliss of the epigraph's plucked flower, and it also looks ahead to one of those eternal questions that Dostoevsky spent a lifetime contemplating: Can a single cherished memory of something noble and good suffice to resist the temptation of despair?⁴⁰

Not surprisingly, there are many conflicting critical interpretations of *White Nights*. It is commonly regarded as a somewhat anomalous early work, reflecting a kinder, gentler, more charming and more sentimental example of the young Dostoevsky's socially-aware portraits of Gogolian losers and "poor

folk."⁴¹ Other readers, however, are more attuned to Dostoevsky's critical perspective on мечтательность and the work's formal resemblance to *Notes from Underground*.⁴² It is, indeed, remarkable how early in his career Dostoevsky employs the form of the literary monologue to implicate lofty rhetorical posturing in a humiliating confessional reminiscence.

How does one manage to separate the sensibility of the older narrator from the mentality of the young dreamer, let alone detect the implicit perspective of Dostoevsky himself? Attentive readers agree that the primary narrator's reminiscence fabricates in diary form a chronological reproduction of his younger self's encounter with the one meaningful relationship of his life. But that act of reminiscence is retrospectively composed for publication and the perspective of the mature writer is always implicit and at times made explicit. Readers are given the formidable task of locating the boundary between these two temporally distinct experiential selves and mapping their relationship to one another. One recent interpretation holds that the mature memoirist depicts his younger self's ludicrous sentimental affair and records the dreamer's embarrassed attack on imaginative fancy in order "paradoxically to depict himself as the positive hero of his own story" by virtue of writing's "power to sublimate the adversities of everyday life into art." ⁴³ In this reading, Dostoevsky simultaneously enables the narrator's artistic transcendence of an early disenchantment and anchors it solidly in mundane "real life" experience. In the reading I have offered, I argue that the older narrator is more like his former self in stubbornly adhering to ritual returns to *lieux de mémoire*, to sites of imaginative fulfillment—a congenital malady, it could be argued, of Petersburg intellectuals, those dreamy denizens of the "most abstract and premeditated city in the world" that incubated Dostoevsky's Underground Man.44

Like the Rousseau of the *Reveries*, Dostoevsky's solitary unattached dreamer and memoirist has willfully retreated from engagement with others and the world but, unlike Rousseau's flâneur, Dostoevsky's narrator makes a futile attempt to exist contentedly in a prolonged soliloquy with himself. In this regard, *White Nights* may be read as a premonitory sign of Dostoevsky's mature critique of Rousseau's influential cult of sensibility, as well as a preliminary sketch for Dostoevsky's later novel-length portraits of the tragic pathology of interminable self-consciousness.

Endnotes

- 1 The full range and richness of the flâneur character type is best surveyed in the compilation of essays edited by Tester. Derived from the verb *flâner* (to ramble), the noun originally carried the taint of a malingerer, but as a literary referent it came to denote a strolling spectator of the modern metropolis. In Baudelaire's later variant, in such works as *Les Fleurs du Mal* [*The Flowers of Evil*, 1857], inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), the flâneur is a poet-journalist who seeks to merge his solitary self into the transitory spectacle of urban life. Unlike the introspective, intensely self-analytical narrator of Rousseau's *Reveries*, Baudelaire's street-walking poet is "a *kaleidoscope* equipped with consciousness," acutely aware of the constant shock of novel sensations while immersed in, but separate from, the crowd (Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 175).
- 2 Barran points out that Martynov's prolix title, *Philosophical Solitary Walks* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or His Final Confession, Written by Himself . . . in which Are Portrayed the True Character and Authentic Motives for the Deeds of This Famed Genevan Philosopher, gave prominence to Rousseau's latter-day withdrawal into self-sufficient introspection (227).
- 3 Fink offers a succinct and judicious review of this extensive literature, drawing attention to Dostoevsky's much-noted animus toward the deceitful rhetoric of Rousseau's *Confessions*, as well as Dostoevsky's attraction to Rousseau the social visionary and proponent of an innate "natural goodness" corrupted by societal inequalities and the resentments they breed. Any neatly chronological account of Dostoevsky's disenchantment with Rousseau is belied by the resurgence of utopian strains in as late a work as "Dream of a Ridiculous Man" ["Сон смешного человека," 1876].
- 4 Rousseau writes, in part, to reconstitute the serenity he enjoyed while exiled in Switzerland on St. Peter's Isle in the middle of Lake Bienne. He strives fifteen years later to recreate in writing the mental freedom of uninterrupted introspection and precise observation unconstrained by compelling duties or desires. Huet captures well the radical extent of Rousseau's willed abstention from reciprocal relations in order to achieve the sovereignty of solitary subjectivity. As she explains, "when the love of

- self is no longer moderated by the opposite movement of pity, Rousseau can at last feel liberated from any impulsive move toward the other" (126).
- 5 Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 8. Quotations of Rousseau come from the Butterworth translation. I have adjusted the translation where necessary.
- 6 See, for instance, the defense of Romantic мечтательность [dreaminess] and incorruptible idealism present in the readings of White Nights by Mochulsky (93-98) and Frank (343-47). For Proskurina, Dostoevsky's primary aim is to depict a chastened sentimental idealist, but without repudiating the ennobling value of reverie: "Thus the verdict against foolish futile dreaminess is combined with delight and astonishment aroused by the creation of an invented world at the whim of the imagination" (133).
- 7 Dostoevsky, Полное собрание сочинений, 28 (1):138; 1:148. Quotations from the Complete Collected Works are cited by volume and page number. The additional reference here is to the Ardis English language edition of Dostoevsky's letters; subsequent additional references are to comparable pages in Magarshack's English translation for the convenience of readers who do not know Russian, but all the translations here are mine.
- 8 Burton, *The Flaneur and his City*, 2. See Fanger, 135-37, for an account of Dostoevsky's attraction toward the popular, garrulous form of the feuilleton.
- 9 Dostoevsky, ΠCC, 18:32. The ideological thrust of Dostoevsky's feuilletons is best summed up by Frank: "The Petersburg chronicler, throughout his seemingly casual *causerie*, conveys all the smoldering frustration undoubtedly felt by the progressive intelligentsia of the mid-1840s at their social-political helplessness" (237).
- 10 Little has been made of this curiously hydra-headed title. Translators have a difficult time capturing the ambiguity latent in the word роман, which signifies both a novel and a love affair; the border between what is literary and what is experiential being, of course, permeable. In an 1860 reprint Dostoevsky removed some of the narrator's vapid lachrymose phrases and added a virtual catalogue of his reading in sentimental and romantic European writing (see 2:485), thus underlining the literary origins of the dreamer's imaginative life.

- 11 Turgenev, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, I:29. My translation is literal, but refers to the masculine gender of "flower" ["цветок"] as "it."
- 12 Dostoevsky, ΠCC, 2:102: 147.
- 13 Ibid., 2:103; 148.
- 14 Ibid., 2:105; 151-2.
- 15 Ibid., 2:106; 152.
- 16 Ibid., 2:109; 158.
- 17 Ibid., 2:105; 151.
- 18 Ibid., 2:106; 153.
- 19 Ibid., 2:107; 154.
- 20 Ibid., 2:107; 155. The term "landlady" is, indeed, peculiar, for хозяйка covers a range of meanings from housewife to hostess, and one translator (Magarshack, 1968) even refers to these ladies as "mercenary" (155). Later, Nastenka teases the narrator by asking how he knew she was worthy of a relationship and not just another *khoziaika*. Apparently, strictly contractual relations with ladies do not count as actual relationships.
- 21 Ibid., 2:108; 156.
- 22 Ibid., 2:109; 159.
- 23 Andrew, Narrative, Space and Gender, 45.
- 24 Dostoevsky, ΠCC, 2:110; 160.
- 25 Ibid., 2:112; 161.
- 26 Ibid., 2:113; 163.
- 27 Ibid., 2:116; 167.
- 28 Ibid., 2:117; 169.
- 29 Ibid., 2:127; 182-3.
- 30 Ibid., 2:128; 183.
- 31 Ibid., 2:130.
- 32 Ibid., 2:131; 187.
- 33 Ibid., 2:134; 192.
- 34 Ibid., 2:135-6; 193-4.
- 35 Surely there is an ironic evocation here of Pushkin's well-known double-edged love lyric of 1829, "Я вас любил" ["I loved you"], when, bidding adieu, the poet declaims less than sincerely, "I would not have you feel the least regret . . . I loved you with such purity, such passion / As may God grant you to be loved once more" (Translation from Arndt, 94-5).

- 36 Dostoevsky, ΠCC, 2:140; 188.
- 37 In this respect, "White Nights" is both dissimilar and similar to the melodramatic ending of Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* [Бедные люди, 1846]. The beloved woman rests comfortably in the arms of a devoted lover, unlike poor Varvara in the grasp of Bykov, yet the pathos of Devushkin, who has lost his one and only correspondent, is similar to the plight of the abandoned dreamer who has only his reiterated "romance" for company.
- 38 Dostoevsky, ΠCC, 2:141; 201.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 To leap far ahead in Dostoevsky's career, the redemptive potential of a remembered moment of self-overcoming is invoked prayerfully in Alyosha's sermon to the boys at the conclusion of *The Brothers Karamazov* [Братья Карамазовы, 1880], yet its efficacy is called into question at the end of "Dream of a Ridiculous Man."
- 41 Both Passage (73-81) and Terras (30-39) see Dostoevsky's narrator as the literary offspring of E.T.A. Hoffmann's self-ironizing dreamers, but emphasize that Dostoevsky's eulogy to romantic daydreaming is performed with a warm pathos that Hoffmann and Gogol lack. Frank, too, perceives a note of redemption in the elegiac tenderness with which the brief moment of romantic bliss is cherished (346-47) and Fanger (169) agrees that the dreamer is portrayed in the most sympathetic of lights.
- 42 Holquist elucidates the work's generic relationship to the *roman-feuilleton* and the "physiological sketch," while also illuminating rhetorical and structural similarities to the later *Notes from Underground* (37-43).
- 43 Rosenshield, "Point of View and the Imagination," 195.
- 44 5:101. See Nora: "A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time becomes a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of a community" (I:xvii). Dostoevsky's Petersburg dreamer fabricates a private site of memory around the embankment bridge to which he ritually returns at the ten o'clock hour; for him, the city of his solitary promenades contains innumerable markers of recollected emotion and recurring fantasy.

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