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## The Reverie Genre: Rousseau, Dostoevsky, Eliot, and the Roots of Modern Consciousness

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The Reverie Genre: Rousseau, Dostoevsky, Eliot, and the Roots of Modern  
Consciousness

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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## Introduction: The Reverie

Imagine sitting by a lake. No one else is in sight. Your thoughts are free and time is insignificant. You are in a reverie. You could also be in a reverie when you are thinking about a philosophical conundrum, going over and over in your mind endless possibilities for how a certain social interaction could go or should go or did go, or passively not thinking about anything. What is a reverie? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “a moment or period of being lost, especially pleasantly, in one's thoughts; a day dream.”<sup>1</sup> The English word comes from the French word *reverie*, which the 1762 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* defines as “pensée où se laisse aller l'imagination” (thoughts in which the imagination lets itself go) or, alternatively, “délire causé par une maladie ou autrement” (delirium caused by one illness or another).<sup>2</sup> As you can see, the word carried a mixture of positive and negative connotations. The examples given of the word's usage include “agréable, douce rêverie” (pleasant, gentle reverie) and “Il se plaît dans ses reveries” (He delights in his reveries), but also “Cet ouvrage n'est pas sensé, ce ne sont que des rêveries de malade” (This text is not well thought out, it is only sick dreams). So *reverie* can indicate peaceful meditation or the psychological effects of an illness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives this definition for the Middle English version of the word, which entered English from Middle French around 1350 A.D.: “wild or uncontrolled behavior; wantonness, revelry,” and by the sixteenth century it had come to mean “incoherent thinking, wandering of the mind.”<sup>3</sup> Over the centuries, its

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<sup>1</sup> "reverie, n." *Oxford English Dictionary* Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/164771?rskey=WLgr32&result=>. The word “reverie” is also currently used as a musical term, but for the purposes of this discussion we will ignore that usage.

<sup>2</sup> “reverie, s.f.” *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 4th Edition (1762). Translations by Corinne Tucker.

<sup>3</sup> “reverie, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary* Online.

connotations remained mixed and its definitions varied from “a state of joy or wild delight” to “a fit of fury” or “a[n]...impractical idea or theory; a deluded or unrealistic notion.” The word’s most permanent meaning shared between French and English was that of a daydream influenced by one’s imagination or by an illness, but the word also carried connotations of wildness or joy.

By the time of the Enlightenment, intellectuals feared that reveries could lead to a number of undesirable outcomes due to lack of mental restraint. Terry Castle argues that reveries, as well as several other expressions of the growing eighteenth-century interest in strange or disturbing elements of the supernatural, became more common as an unintended result of the Enlightenment<sup>4</sup> movement’s sometimes excessive emphasis on reason, the physical world, and scientific process.<sup>5</sup> She identifies several other expressions of the “the morbid, the excessive, and the strange” in her collection of essays entitled *The Female Thermometer*, in which she studies the currents of thought that ran beneath the eighteenth century culture’s surface of rationality, stability, and progress. In “Phantasmagoria,” she argues that the cultural shift towards denying the existence of spirits, ghosts, and other supernatural apparitions caused people to internalize the idea of those beings.<sup>6</sup> As a result, thoughts became able to “haunt” people by recurring in their imaginations. Certain thought habits, such as reveries, gave the imagination enough freedom that these haunting thoughts – the replacement for the belief that one could visually see a real ghost – took on their own terrifying agency. In “Spectral Politics,” she

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<sup>4</sup> I realize that the Enlightenment developed in varying forms and at varying times in different European countries; here I am speaking about general trends of thought commonly associated with the Enlightenment.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 143.

describes the more widespread fear among proponents of the Enlightenment that reveries, along with several other mental habits,<sup>7</sup> could produce hallucinations because they allowed the imagination to overthrow reason's weak authority over the mind.<sup>8</sup> Other negative consequences of reveries that Rousseau's contemporaries feared, besides seeing ghosts, included the expression of improper erotic desire, an inability to perceive a clear distinction between the world of living humans and the world of the dead, and the state of separation from and inability to connect with reality due to the intensity of one's focus on the imagined world.<sup>9</sup>

Given the general attitude toward reveries developing among his contemporaries as the Enlightenment philosophy put down roots throughout Europe, Jean-Jacques Rousseau must have known that he was inviting readers to question the morality, rationality, and seriousness of a work entitled *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1778). Yet as he often did, Rousseau confidently and blatantly set aside commonly accepted views on the subject in favor of his own, unique though it may be. He indulged in many of the activities that were warned against because of their propensity to produce reveries – he wandered through gardens examining plants, contemplated issues of philosophy, morality, and the nature and purpose of the universe, spent most of his last years in solitude, and generally allowed his mind to wander where it would. Reveries did result, and he called them a source of “sufficient, perfect, and full happiness, which leaves in the

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<sup>7</sup> Other activities that were thought to contribute to hallucinations included "too much study, brooding over obscure intellectual problems, reading into the night, excessive mourning, and, especially, overindulgence in poetic or erotic fancies" (Castle 175). Later, she lists the more physical (as opposed to mental) activities that some saw as leading to reveries and therefore to the likelihood of seeing ghosts: "too much solitude, sitting in gaudily decorated churches, walking in gardens and terraces (as opposed to along the seashore), opium chewing, corpulence," being hung-over, and "drumming with one's fingers on table tops" (183).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 175.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 56-58, 132-33.

soul no void needing to be filled.”<sup>10</sup> To him, reveries provided freedom from anxiety and painful memories by replacing them with whimsical imaginings, enjoyment of nature’s beauty, or simply an awareness of one’s existence (8, 55).

Although he conveyed an openly positive attitude towards free-floating imagination and contemplation, he did not actually contradict any of the common objections to reveries. In the Second Walk, his complaints about his imagination’s waning power reveal the former effects of his reveries: he complains that he becomes “less intoxicated by the delirium or reverie” than he used to, confirming that his wandering imagination leads to “delirium” (11). He explicitly rejects reason’s guiding influence over his thoughts, declaring instead that he will “let my mind wander quite freely and my ideas follow their own course unhindered and untroubled.” He even admits that he uses reveries as a distraction from the pain that comes thinking about his real experiences (72). Furthermore, he even describes imaginary people whose company he enjoys: in the Eighth Walk, describing the reason for his contentment in solitude, he writes that “following my inclinations and indulging in the affections which attract me, my heart still feeds on the feelings for which it was created, and I enjoy them with imaginary beings who produce them and share them with me, as if these beings really existed” (90). This passage supports Castle’s idea that reveries facilitated the internalization of the idea of ghosts (although it is unclear whether the beings Rousseau describes have any spiritual or non-human qualities or whether they are simply non-existent humans).

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, trans. Russel Goulbourne, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 55. Future references to *Reveries* will occur in the text.



Nevertheless, Rousseau seems unbothered by these consequences of his daydreamings, and his overall attitude towards reveries is distinctly positive. I argue, however, that Rousseau does much more in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* than work for a more positive perception of reveries; I argue that he inaugurated a new genre. Built around mental processes involved in the reverie and around the dreamer who engages in them, this genre, which I will also call a reverie, places central emphasis on the speaker's internal experience and thought life. The dreamer is excessively self-aware and writes as an expression of his constantly churning thoughts. He denies that anyone other than himself will ever read what he has written and therefore does not seem to organize or filter his thoughts in order to make them presentable to an external audience.

Rousseau's attempt to capture his reveries in writing resulted in a type of memoir, autobiographical with respect to the narrator,<sup>11</sup> dedicated to the expression of the his internal experiences. I will begin my study of the reverie genre with Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, which I will compare it to Rousseau's *Confessions*, to which *Reveries* is often considered a sequel, in order to determine the reverie's defining characteristics. Rousseau's reverie also has generic roots in the essay, a literary form that Michel de Montaigne premiered in 1580 with his first collection of *Essays*. I will also comment on the characteristics that, I believe, distinguish a reverie from an essay.

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<sup>11</sup> In *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, this distinction is irrelevant because Rousseau the author is identical to Rousseau the narrator. In other reveries, the author speaks through a fictional narrator. *Notes from Underground*, for example, expresses the Underground Man's reveries, not Dostoevsky's.

Then I will turn to Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), commonly categorized as a confession,<sup>12</sup> and argue that it should more properly be considered a reverie. Written soon after the author's return to St. Petersburg after years of exile and hard labor in Siberia, it expresses many of the author's new and developing convictions regarding human nature, philosophy, and the state of society. Dostoevsky's views, to the extent that they are discernible from *Notes*, are expressed through the persona of the Underground Man, the writer of the reverie, who embodies the philosophies Dostoevsky opposes.<sup>13</sup> *Notes* comprises two parts. In the first part, the Underground Man introduces himself as a solitary, "hyperconscious" former government worker full of fabricated spite and a strange enjoyment of his own degradation.<sup>14</sup> He goes on to express his deep rejection of the dominant culture among contemporary intellectuals who cherished rationality and material comfort as the ultimate goals of human and societal progress, holding instead to an absolute conviction that man must express irrational impulses and that he has spiritual needs that reason and wealth cannot satisfy. In Part II, the Underground Man recounts three episodes from an earlier period in his life that reveal the way his strange beliefs and warped perception of himself and of others shape his personal interactions.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, see Barbara Howard, "The Rhetoric of Confession: Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Rousseau's *Confessions*," *The Slavic and East European Journal*: 25.4 (1981 Winter), 16-32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/307153>.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 415. The Underground Man offers a perfect example of what Olga Stuchebrukhov calls an "idea-man:" a character designed, as are many of Dostoevsky's, as a manifestation of an idea, which interacts with the other ideas as represented by other characters during the course of the novel. See Olga Stuchebrukhov, "'Ridiculous' Dream Versus Social Contract: Dostoevskij, Rousseau, and the Problem of Ideal Society," *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 57 (2007): 101, doi: 10.1007/s11212-007-9025-8.

<sup>14</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground and The Grand Inquisitor*, ed. Ralph Matlaw (New York: Penguin, 1960), 6. Subsequent references will occur in the text.

Allusions to Rousseau and especially to *Confessions* fill Dostoevsky's work. Robin Miller identifies reflections, often purposely twisted ones, of Rousseau's ideas or of episodes from *Confessions* in Dostoevsky's *The Insulted and Injured*, *Crime and Punishment*, "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," and *A Raw Youth*, as well as *Notes from Underground*.<sup>15</sup> Yet many of the Underground Man's statements about himself and his writing project seem to imitate Rousseau's in the *Reveries*. For example, the Underground Man also writes that he will allow his mind to wander and write down his thoughts without organizing them in any orderly way (*Notes* 37). He denies the existence of any audience other than himself but gives the reader reason to believe that, like Rousseau in *Reveries*, he does intend for his work to be read. He identifies himself as a dreamer and gives the reader glimpses of the contents of his warped imaginings (52). Like Rousseau, he comments on his own dreams; but unlike Rousseau, he acknowledges reveries' dangers, which include moral degradation and disconnection from reality (121). By comparing Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, I expect to reach a fuller understanding of the characteristics of the reverie genre and of the connection between the genre and the strange psychological condition of both narrators.

Although Rousseau and the Underground Man share similar experiences of reverie and hyperconsciousness, their responses to their own conditions are strikingly opposed to one another. They agree that reason, science, and wealth cannot satisfy men's souls, but while Rousseau boldly claims to be the source of his own satisfaction (*Reveries* 11), the Underground Man longs for "something different, quite different, for which I long but which I cannot find" either within himself or in the society suffering, according

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<sup>15</sup> Robin F. Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 88.

to his view, from the Enlightenment's influence (*Notes* 35). Exercising his imagination supposedly gives Rousseau endless enjoyment, but the Underground Man says that his dreams, though attractive, cannot permanently satisfy (52). Rousseau claims to enjoy his solitude because it facilitates contemplation and because he has not found other men worthy of his trust or respect (*Reveries* 65, 86), and although the Underground Man believes the same things, he nevertheless acknowledges his desire for reconciliation with those to whom he considers himself superior but finds himself unable relate (*Notes* 62, 73). I propose that one explanation for the difference in their responses is their physical environment: Rousseau finds comfort in nature's beauty, while the Underground Man lives in a "wretched, horrid [room] on the outskirts" of St. Petersburg (5). Also, the Underground Man is a fictional satire created to provide social commentary,<sup>16</sup> while Rousseau simply records his own experiences.

Finally, my third chapter will examine T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1911), which I argue is a modern example of a reverie and part of the link between the reverie mode and twentieth century stream of consciousness technique. Although the poem's structure differs significantly from those of *Notes from Underground* and *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, James Knapp writes that the poem's "structure simply traced the shape of [Prufrock's] thought and feeling, his struggle to gain the freedom of self-knowledge,"<sup>17</sup> mirroring the other reveries' organization and purpose. The contents of Prufrock's meditations differ as well: rather than abstract philosophy or

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<sup>16</sup> In Dostoevsky's footnote to the title of Part 1 in *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky introduces his narrator as "one of the representatives of the current generation" who is himself "imaginary" but represents "persons [who]...not only may, but positively must, exist in our society, considering the circumstances under which our society was in general formed" (3).

<sup>17</sup> James F. Knapp, "Eliot's 'Prufrock' and the Form of Modern Poetry," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*: 30 (1974), 14.

past memories, Prufrock is immersed in the terrifying dilemma of whether to express his romantic interest in a woman he has the opportunity to visit. The poem appears to give the reader access to thoughts Prufrock would be thinking regardless of the readers' presence; like *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, the poem serves as a window into an active mind ostensibly unconcerned with its reader and drifting from calm contemplation to passive observation of surroundings to angst-filled confrontations with memories, questions, and self-doubt. Prufrock has no central message to communicate to an external listener but seems to be trying to reconcile himself to an uncomfortable situation, determine the best action or understand his inaction. So both Prufrock's internal experience and the mode in which he expresses them qualify "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as a reverie along with Rousseau's and Dostoevsky's.

Like *Notes from Underground*, "The Long Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" shares more than form with its predecessors. Rousseau's and Dostoevsky's influences on Eliot's writing are not as explicit as Rousseau's on Dostoevsky, but are undeniable nonetheless. During his few years in Paris between graduating from Harvard and returning there for his graduate study, Eliot studied under Alain Fournier, who encouraged him to read Dostoevsky. Louis Simpson attributes "the breaking down of orderly thought" in Eliot's writing to Dostoevsky's influence.<sup>18</sup> Several scholars point out that Eliot had been reading *Crime and Punishment* in French shortly before writing "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and compare Prufrock to Raskolnikov.<sup>19</sup> Like Prufrock, Raskolnikov wanders through the city, haunted by rambling thoughts and bearing the weight of awful

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<sup>18</sup> Louis Simpson, "T. S. Eliot, or Religion" in *Three on the Tower*, (New York: Morrow 1975), 101.

<sup>19</sup> See Peter Lowe's article, "Prufrock in St. Petersburg: The Presence of Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'" in *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28.3 (2005 Spring), 1-24. Robert Fleissner also mentions Eliot's study of *Crime and Punishment* in his book, *Ascending the Prufrockian Stair: Studies in a Dissociated Sensibility*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 50.

indecision as he faces a dilemma. Prufrock also invites comparison to Raskolnikov when he justifies his current indecision and inaction by saying, “There will be time to murder” (line 28).<sup>20</sup> I argue, however, that studying the relationship between Prufrock and the Underground Man also provides insight into Eliot’s speaker.

During his undergraduate study at Harvard, Eliot studied under Irving Babbitt, from whom he learned a set of literary values that shaped his taste as a critic and his goals as a poet. Babbitt expresses these views in *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1911), where he argues that the Romantic artists and writers (of which he considered Rousseau an archetype) produced inferior art because they considered reason and imagination incompatible.<sup>21</sup> Combined with their confidence in humans’ innate virtue, this belief motivated the Romantics to abandon reason and order in art for the sake of eccentricity, emotionalism, and individual self-expression.<sup>22</sup> Babbitt argues that “disciplined” art, which imitates classical models and depends on both imagination and reason, is far superior.<sup>23</sup> Eliot thoroughly adopted Babbitt’s view, and in a sense shaped his whole career as a response against Romantic (and therefore Rousseauistic) aesthetic principles. His choice to write a poem that shares so many literary features with *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* therefore indicates some unique merit in that generic form, since he was otherwise prone to oppose anything identified with Rousseau. I will argue that the reverie genre best captures the internal experiences of a hyperconscious narrator. Although Prufrock, like the Underground Man, is a fictional speaker, his condition parallels both

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<sup>20</sup> Lowe, “Prufrock in St. Petersburg,” 9; Fleissner, *Ascending the Prufrockian Stair*, 187.

<sup>21</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), 353.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 127.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 353-54.

the Underground Man's and Rousseau's and demonstrates the potential similarity of human experiences across centuries and continents.

## Chapter 1

### The Celebration of Reverie: Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*

In *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Rousseau compares his current writing project both to his earlier *Confessions* and to Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*. I argue that despite these two works' undeniable influence on *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, *Reveries* itself deserves its own category. Montaigne asserts that solitude is ideal for contemplation and purports to record his wandering thoughts. Rousseau incorporates both of those elements into *Reveries*, but he presents his ideas within the overall context of introspection. For Montaigne, although he describes how he reached his conclusions, the ideas themselves are central; in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and other members of the reverie mode, the narrator's internal experience receives the emphasis. When we compare Rousseau's *Confessions* to his *Reveries*, we see a similar distinction. *Confessions* portrays Rousseau as confident of his own identity and determined to communicate his knowledge to the public. *Reveries*, on the other hand, conveys doubt in the accuracy of his own self-perception, reveals internal conflicts, and therefore has no overt intention to present a determined message to an external audience. These distinctions, I argue, earn recognition for the reverie as a separate literary mode.

#### The Reverie Genre

Rousseau has a long history of standing alone against generally-accepted views and practices. Born in Geneva, a stronghold of Protestantism, Jean-Jacques ran away and converted to Catholicism at age sixteen. He tried to develop a unique system of musical



notation<sup>24</sup> and first earned fame among intellectuals by rejecting core principles of the Enlightenment in his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, or *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1750), in which he argued that academic and scientific advancement actually brings moral corruption rather than human progress and refinement.<sup>25</sup> He carried this claim even further in *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, or *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1754). In this essay Rousseau argued that not only the acquisition of scientific and academic knowledge but living in civilized society at all causes degeneration of character, which is most pure when man lives independently in nature.

But Rousseau's intellectual views were not the only distinguishing marks that set him apart from most of his contemporaries; he made unconventional personal choices as well. Having decided in his youth that at age forty he would "end...my efforts to succeed socially and...all my aspirations," in 1752 he resigned from his job and gave up wearing fine clothes.<sup>26</sup> This decision also served as an illustration of his unconventional views expressed in the *First Discourse* – he had written that social prestige and material comforts offered little benefit, and now he chose to live accordingly.<sup>27</sup> Not all his choices reconciled discrepancies between his stated beliefs and his lifestyle, however; having

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<sup>24</sup> Maurice Cranston, *Jean-Jacques: The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712-1754* (New York: Norton, 1983), 157.

<sup>25</sup> Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1754-62* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1991), xiii.

<sup>26</sup> Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Rousseau was often considered a member of the Cynic tradition, referring to those who adhered to the teachings of Diogenes the Cynic (approx. 407-322 BC). This decision withdraw from social prestige is consistent with Diogenes' values. Diogenes scorned societal influence and material comforts and encouraged his followers to seek "absolute physical and intellectual self-sufficiency." David Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 13.

written extensively on education and child-development,<sup>28</sup> Rousseau left all five of his children at the Foundling Hospital in Montmorency with no records of their identities.<sup>29</sup>

Given Rousseau's unconventional intellectual positions and personal decisions, it is not surprising that he also broke many literary conventions as well. Years of expressing of controversial opinions brought him social rejection, intellectual and literary opposition, and eventually political exile. After gradually losing supporters and friends for years, sometimes because of their opposition to his beliefs and sometimes because of personal conflicts,<sup>30</sup> Rousseau found himself in real isolation that led him to self-reflection and autobiographical writings during his last years. The first and most well-known is *Confessions*,<sup>31</sup> written between 1766 and 1770 and published after his death.<sup>32</sup> In 1776, he completed *Rousseau, Juge de Jean-Jacques. Dialogues (or Dialogues: Rousseau, Juge of Jean-Jacques)*<sup>33</sup> and finally *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, on which I will focus as the

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<sup>28</sup> These were the central topics of *Emile* (1762).

<sup>29</sup> Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, 286.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 290; Maurice Cranston, *The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 156-59.

<sup>31</sup> Lionel Gossman, in his article "The Innocent Art of Reverie and Confession," distinguishes among several varieties of autobiographical writing, including confession and reverie. First, he identifies other members of the literary tradition of confession with which Rousseau associates his by choosing that title (60). Two primary works are Augustine's *Confessions* (398 A. D.) and *Confessions du Comte de \*\*\**, by Rousseau's contemporary philosopher Charles Duclos (1741). Gossman argues that Rousseau continues the tradition of confession by attempting to convey essential truths about the self and contribute to general knowledge of human nature in the process (63, 65). He breaks literary conventions, however, with his inclusion of extensive, specific, personal details (61). Lionel Gossman, "The Innocent Art of Confession and Reverie," *Daedalus*, 107.3 (1978 Summer): 59-77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024564>. Rousseau's willingness to provide even inappropriate details about himself provides another point of comparison to Diogenes. Diogenes believed that the task of a philosopher was to "challenge the conventional values, beliefs, and customs of the community" often through "outrageous behavior and jokes" (Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, 14). Rousseau accomplished that task both through his unconventional views and the actions and motivations described in his *Confessions*. Associating him with Cynicism, many of his contemporaries considered him a counterexample to the common image of philosophes as epitomizing social propriety and the Enlightenment values of refinement and rational progress (111).

<sup>32</sup> The first six books were published in 1782; Books Seven through Twelve were published in 1789. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* (New York: Knopf, 1992), xviii.

<sup>33</sup> *Dialogues* serves as a transitional piece between *Confessions* and *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. We will not study it in depth, but it is helpful to note that in it Rousseau seeks to justify himself before the public, an endeavor he began in *Confessions*. "Rousseau" carries on a conversation with "The Frenchman" about Jean-Jacques, who represents Rousseau as commonly perceived by his contemporary intellectuals.

initiating work of the reverie genre. Rousseau began *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* in 1776; they remained unfinished at his death in 1778. Rousseau identified *Reveries* as an “appendix to my *Confessions*” but hints at qualitative differences in content by saying, “that is not the title I give [these pages], for I no longer feel I have anything to say which is worthy of it” (*Reveries* 12). *Reveries* are not the same as his *Confessions*, but they are related. In order to determine the connections and contrasts between these two works, we will first examine certain aspects of *Confessions*.

First, let us consider Rousseau’s purpose in writing *Confessions*. I identify three stated, primary purposes, all of which Rousseau states or alludes to in the Foreward to *Confessions*. These purposes are self-revelation, contribution to the general study of human nature, and self-justification. The latter two flow from the first. He opens Book One with this purpose statement: “I mean to lay open to my fellow-mortals a man just as nature wrought him; and this man is myself. ...I have freely told both good and bad, have hid nothing wicked, added nothing good” (3). He repeats a similar but elaborated idea in Book Four, reminding his reader of his reason for including so much detail:

I strive, everywhere, to lay the first causes quite open, to make you feel connexion of effects. I want to be able...to render my heart transparent to the sight of the reader; ...to speak in such a manner that a single movement shall not pass but he shall perceive it, in order that he may judge himself of the principle which produces it. (158)

In order to accomplish this goal, Rousseau begins a detailed, chronological account of his life. He describes his family, education, travels, occupations, and relationships – both friendships and romantic relationships – and regularly explains his motivations and the emotions that led to or resulted from the actions or circumstances he describes. In order

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“Rousseau” purports to correct the inaccurate views of “The Frenchman” about Jean-Jacques; the work’s underlying message is that the public does not truly know Rousseau and would hold him in higher esteem if they did (Cranston, *The Solitary Self*, 183).

to narrate his life understandably, he gives complete explanations and proceeds in a logical, time-sequential manner so that his intended audience – the public – will easily grasp the biographical information he presents.

Rousseau's Foreward states two additional purposes for *Confessions*, both of which depend on his ability to reveal his character accurately. He charges his readers not to destroy *Confessions* because it serves as "an useful and unique work...a first sketch for that study of men" (2). In other words, he believes that by exposing himself, he contributes material to humanity's quest to understand human nature. Like Augustine, he hopes that his confession will provide some "moral edification" to his readers.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Rousseau hopes that by presenting to the public a more truthful account of his life and character than he believes them to have previously encountered, he will vindicate himself before them. He calls *Confessions* "the only assured monument of my character which my enemies have not defaced" (2), implying that all other representations of himself *have* been damaged and therefore no longer represent him accurately. Their inaccuracy explains the public's poor view of him, Rousseau seems to say, and he strives through *Confessions* to give them a better basis on which to judge him. Rousseau's tone throughout *Confessions* as he comments on his actions confirms that self-justification is his central purpose. For example, he describes stealing a ribbon to give to Marion, a fellow servant in the Vercellis household. When discovered, he blamed her for stealing it and giving it to him (76-78). After a step-by-step summary of his choices to steal the ribbon and to blame her, of the adults' responses, of her pleas with him to tell the truth and of his stubbornness, Rousseau begins to explain the reason for his refusal to take responsibility. He writes, "I little feared punishment, I dreaded the shame

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<sup>34</sup> Gossman, "The Innocent Art of Reverie and Confession," 60.

only; but I dread it more than death, more than the crime, more than the whole world.” He categorizes fear of shame as a “weakness” rather than a true vice, however, and goes on to minimize his wrong-doing. Seeking to avert judgment, he explains, “My age is likewise an allowance it is but just to make. In youth enormous crimes are still more criminal than in an age of maturity; but mere weakness is much less so, and my fault at bottom was very little more.” Although he acknowledges his “fault,” he attempts to diminish the harshness of the reader’s judgment on him by identifying the source of his fear and his attributing his weakness to his youth. *Confessions* is filled with comments of similar tone in which Rousseau explains himself in order to gain a more favorable reaction.

In summary, Rousseau intended *Confessions* to present a complete self-image to the public, an image he hoped would both contribute to the general understanding of human nature and, more importantly to him, exonerate him. This endeavor requires logical organization of content, so Rousseau narrates his life in chronological order. In these three central features – purpose, audience, and organization – *Reveries* differs from *Confessions*.<sup>35</sup> These two works belong to different categories; the confessional mode is widely recognized, and I believe the reverie mode should be as well.

As I discuss the differences between *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and *Confessions*, however, similarities between *Reveries* and Montaigne’s *Essays* will become apparent. Nevertheless, relevant differences separate the reverie mode from *Essays*. Although our primary concern will be with Montaigne’s influence on *Reveries*,

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<sup>35</sup> These three characteristics by which I distinguish the reverie from the confessional mode are all described in Susan Selvin’s article, “Rousseau’s Passage from Confession to Reverie.” *Essays in Literature*, 5.2 (1978 Fall), 239-50.

the Foreward to *Confessions* also invites comparison with Montaigne's opening note "To the Reader"; so by way of introduction to Montaigne, we will begin with this note.

Montaigne writes,

I have dedicated [this book] to the private convenience of my relatives and friends, so that when they have lost me (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge they have had of me more complete and alive. If my design had been to seek the favor of the world, I would have decked myself out better. . . . Here I want to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion, without striving or artifice: for it is my own self that I am painting. Here, drawn from life, you will read of my defects and my native form so far as respect for social conventions allows.<sup>36</sup>

This voice makes Rousseau's seem like an echo; although Rousseau claims to undertake a unique project, it is unique only in degree and not in type. His plan to reveal both faults and virtues, both actions and more general components of his character, in order to create for others an accurate way to remember him, seems identical to Montaigne's stated purpose. The only difference Rousseau claims is in the range of his audience. Rousseau addresses all current and future members of the public, while Montaigne targets "my relatives and friends." Although Rousseau does not point out this difference himself, it is also clear that he is unwilling to be restrained by "social conventions."

Following Montaigne's opening note are three volumes' worth of essays on a wide variety of topics with such diverse titles as "Our emotions get carried away beyond us," "On the custom of wearing clothes," "On smells," and "Observations on Julius Caesar's methods of waging war." They cover Montaigne's views on social, personal, experiential, historical, philosophical, literary, and religious matters. They vary in length and seriousness. Each one, however, has one or a few central ideas that the author hopes

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<sup>36</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. and ed. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin Books, 1987), lix.

to communicate to his readers by means of explanation and example. He weaves relevant information about his experiences, practices, and beliefs together with these ideas, but they, rather than he, receive primary attention.

The defining distinction between Rousseau's *Reveries* and his *Confessions* and Montaigne's *Essays* is *Reveries*' tendency to highlight the speaker's internal experience over his actions or impersonal ideas. Montaigne wanted to give his friends and family a means of remembering him after his death, and Rousseau in *Confessions* wanted to create a "monument of my character" that his opponents could not destroy. But in *Reveries*, Rousseau says that he writes not for current or future readers but for his future self. He hopes that as he ages, "reading [my reveries] will remind me of the pleasure I have in writing them and, by thus reviving the past for me...I shall live with myself in another age, as if living with a younger friend" (9). Comparing this statement and Montaigne's and Rousseau's about *Essays* and *Confessions*, respectively, reveals both *Reveries*' connection to its two predecessors and the change that has occurred within Rousseau since writing *Confessions*. Cranston refers to Rousseau's "turn[ing] his attention inward," and Rousseau seems intent to block out any thoughts his relationship to society.<sup>37</sup> Selvin argues that this is not merely a different writing style but evidence of a real psychological change;<sup>38</sup> therefore, it colors his writing on the most basic level.

While Rousseau's inward shift captured in *Reveries* was real, it was not complete. That is, it is not entirely accurate to say that he became "concerned solely with myself" as he apparently intended to (*Reveries* 7). In the Seventh Walk, he claims to find the greatest pleasure when he can "forget myself" in reveries focused on the natural world (74). He

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<sup>37</sup> Rousseau wishes to completely separate himself from fellow human beings (67, 74-75), but he seeks to replace lost social connections with a connection to the natural world.

<sup>38</sup> Selvin, "Rousseau's Passage from Confession to Reverie," 240.

conducted extensive botanical studies during the years in which he wrote *Reveries* (1776-78),<sup>39</sup> studies that showed extended attention to plants' physical structure and beauty. In the reverie mode of writing, however, he presents even that external focus in a way that makes it seem like a form of introspection: he describes his botany in terms of his motivations for undertaking it, the pleasure he finds in it, and its soothing effects on his mind. Although in actuality he spent a great deal of attention on the external world during that time, his record of botanical study in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* reflects reverie mode's focus on internal experiences.

This inward focus of *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* distinguishes it from *Confessions* and *Essays*. Each of *Reveries'* ten essay-like sections, entitled "First Walk," "Second Walk," etc., contains a record of his thoughts during that walk, emphasizing the internal action of his thoughts, memories, and imagination, rather than external action or events. He alludes to or recounts past events, but only within larger musings about philosophical questions or about his own personal development. In the Fourth Walk, he references the incident with Marion, discussed earlier as presented in *Confessions*. A comparison between the two accounts reveals the differences of genre between *Confessions* and *Reveries*.

When Rousseau relates the story of the stolen ribbon in *Confessions*, he carefully describes the actions, in order, of each person involved. He includes his own thought process ("She was present in my thoughts; I excused myself on the first object offered") and emotional reactions ("my heart was racked") as they correspond to the actions he describes (78). He explains the internal and external causes of the situation and describes

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<sup>39</sup> Rousseau's botanical studies actually began in 1762 and were practiced intermittently until his death. Alexandra Cook, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Botany: The Salutary Science* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 2012), 1.



its effects on his memory and his conscience. Then he claims to have said all he has to say and that he wishes to speak of the incident no more. In *Reveries*, on the other hand, he alludes to the incident within the context of his reflections on the definition and morality of lying. He gives no detailed account of the theft and subsequent confrontation, but refers to the whole encounter as “an awful lie I had told when I was very young” (33). He does not even mention Marion’s name until he returns to the topic in a passing reference nine pages later (42). As in *Confessions*, he describes the “remorse” he experienced following his lie and calls the lie a “product of false shame,” carried out because of fear rather than malice (33). After a single paragraph, however, he moves on to describe the memory’s affects on him, which include “inspir[ing] in me a horror of lying” (34). He does not mention the event in order to present a complete account to an external audience, but because it was “the first thought that came to me as I started to reflect” on the topic of contemplation that he chose for his walk that day (33). All the details he includes relate to his own internal experience and are presented as they occur to him, without showing evidence of forethought regarding the order or extent of explanation.

The differences in the two accounts of his adolescent crime reflect differences present throughout the two works. *Confessions* presents an organized history of his life; *Reveries* presents an evolving record of current thoughts. Rousseau describes the latter as “a faithful record of my solitary walks and the reveries that fill them when I let my mind wander quite freely and my ideas follow their own course unhindered and untroubled” (11). The essays follow Rousseau’s train of thought; they have no other organizing principle. Recurring themes tie them together, but the essays could occur in any order

without altering the overall effect; they do not fit into a single unified structure. Within each Walk, one central theme often blends freely into other topics as one thought leads to another within Rousseau's mind. This lack of organization, or rather, organization according to the narrator's train of thought, is one defining characteristic of a reverie.

Again, the reader familiar with Montaigne's *Essays* will see marked parallels with *Reveries*. I use the term "essay" to describe Rousseau's Walks, because, used in a loose, non-specific sense, the term captures their form well. Both Rousseau's Walks and Montaigne's *Essays* are relatively short, non-narrative, non-informational<sup>40</sup> sections, distinct from one another but not holding unique places in a larger, overarching structure. Furthermore, Montaigne names a similar connection between thought and writing that motivates Rousseau's *Reveries*. In "On Idleness," Montaigne recognizes the phenomenon that Rousseau demonstrates: when one separates oneself from society and allows one's mind to wander wherever it will, it goes to strange, unpredictable places.<sup>41</sup> Montaigne compares the unrestrained mind to a "runaway horse" and cautions that it is prone to fall into "madness" or "raving lunacy." Curious though disapproving as to where his mind might go, he ends the essay, "so as to contemplate at my ease [my thoughts'] oddness and strangeness, I began to keep a record of them, hoping in time to make mind ashamed of itself." Again, when compared to Montaigne's statements about his own writing project, Rousseau's sound like echoes.

Montaigne's influence on Rousseau is also evident in Rousseau's attitude towards his own thoughts. Both Montaigne and Rousseau are deeply affected by the use of their

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<sup>40</sup> By this I mean that they are not intended to be solely impersonal, factual "non-fiction" in the modern sense of the word; they do not contain historical records or abstract explanations of philosophical concepts, for example.

<sup>41</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 30-31.

imaginations. Montaigne writes that "I am one of those by whom the powerful blows of the imagination are felt most strongly. Everyone is hit by it, but some are bowled over."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Rousseau calls himself a "sensitive soul" and implies that his sensitivity makes him more prone to reveries than most (92). Rousseau's opinion that the best consequence of his exile is his discovery that isolation is conducive to reflection and reverie also shows the influence of Montaigne's perspective (24). Montaigne argued that it is right to separate oneself – sometimes physically and always emotionally – from commitments and relationships outside oneself in order to allow oneself to think.<sup>43</sup>

While the influence of Montaigne's *Essays* on Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* are undeniable, the genres remain distinct. Montaigne wrote in order to capture his ideas; Rousseau captures the process by which his ideas were formed. *Reveries* celebrates the author's experience of day-dreaming and the pleasure it brings him; *Essays* skims briefly over the author's experience to the content of his thoughts. Each essay leads the reader to a final conclusion; the Walks do not. These differences highlight the essential characteristics of the reverie genre.

Similar distinctions separate *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* from the confessional mode. Rousseau's new inward orientation affects each defining characteristic: its purpose, its audience, and its organization. Rousseau writes that in *Reveries* he will "resume the painstaking and sincere self-examination that I formerly called my

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<sup>42</sup> Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 109.

<sup>43</sup> Montaigne describes this principle in "On Solitude," but echoes of it are present in "To philosophize is to learn how to die" as well. In the former, he explains that simply withdrawing physically from busy situations will not produce peace unless one can also prevent one's mind from wandering back to the people and responsibilities external to himself, which his body has left. He suggests that people should practice purposely entering solitude and thinking as though he had no connection to anyone or anything outside himself (268-70).

*Confessions*” (7). This seems to imply that both works take on the same task. The way the author goes about it in each work, however, differs. In *Confessions*, he confidently declares that “I know my heart” (3). Self-revelation, therefore, comes as a straightforward step of communicating the truths he knows about himself. Ten additional years of life, however, weakened Rousseau’s confidence in his self-knowledge and showed him that some of his motives and internal characteristics remained hidden even from himself. At the beginning of his Fourth Walk, he writes that he has concluded that “the *Know Thyself* of the Temple at Delphi was not such an easy maxim to follow as I had believed in my *Confessions*” (33). He repeats this sentiment in the Sixth Walk, where he says, “the real and essential motives of most of my actions are not as clear to me as I had for a long time imagined them to be” (60). This search for a deeper understanding of his motives takes place within a larger endeavor to understand his own character and the way it has changed over time. This purpose contrasts with that of *Confession*, where he intended to give the public an accurate and complete image of himself, of which he believed himself to be in possession.<sup>44</sup> In *Reveries*, he turns inward to make his *own* image of himself more accurate and complete.

Again, Rousseau’s statement of purpose in *Reveries* somewhat mirrors Montaigne’s, which communicates curiosity about where his thoughts would go if they wandered undirected and his desire to record what he discovered. The underlying attitude towards his thoughts and towards himself, however, differs. Montaigne recorded his thoughts “hoping in time to make mind ashamed of itself” for wandering in such strange

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<sup>44</sup> Susan Cauley Selvin, “Rousseau's Passage from Confession to Reverie,” *Essays in Literature*: 5.2 (1978 Fall), 239-50.

ways.<sup>45</sup> He values orderliness, restraint, and reason. Throughout his essays, he presents himself according to those principles; he seems comfortable with his identity and calmly explains his thoughts. Rousseau, on the other hand, overtly cherishes the wild unpredictability of his imagination. A pulse of discontentment with many parts of his life characterizes Rousseau of the *Reveries*, but letting his mind wander freely seems to always bring him joy. That is one reason for calling this genre the reverie genre, because it celebrates reveries.

Rousseau lacks Montaigne's self-composure, however, and carries out his "self-examination" with a tone of yearning for resolution. As in *Confessions*, he keeps his sight set on his goal of gaining a deeper understanding of himself, as though it could fill some of the emptiness in his soul. In the Seventh Walk, he describes his new interest in botany. After giving several reasons for his attraction to the study of plants, he complains that these explanations, though he fully believes them,

[do] not tell me why this inclination attracts me nor what charm I can find in a fruitless study which I pursue without learning anything useful. . . . Now, this is a bizarre thing that I would like to explain to myself; it seems to me that, once fully explained, it could cast some new light on the self-knowledge which I have devoted my final days of leisure to acquiring. (70)

He has a rational explanation for his interest in plants, but it does not satisfy him. He confesses a deeper uncertainty about his attraction to it, as though it points to a larger portion of his inner desires that he does not yet understand. Neither Montaigne nor Rousseau in *Confessions* acknowledges a lingering, unsettling uncertainty about one's ability to understand oneself; this tension characterizes the reverie writers.

The narrators of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the other two works that I argue form part of the reverie

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<sup>45</sup> Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 31.

genre, share Rousseau's uncertain, self-questioning attitude. The Underground Man, Dostoevsky's narrator, bursts out in the middle of his tirade about the strange enjoyment he finds in his own degradation and hopelessness, "But enough. Bah, I have talked a lot of nonsense, but what have I explained? Can this enjoyment be explained? But I will explain it! I will get to the bottom of it! That is why I have taken up my pen" (*Notes from Underground* 8). He is frustrated at his own emotions and hopes that writing will help him make sense of the chaos inside him. Prufrock, Eliot's narrator, begins the poem with a dilemma about whether to visit a certain social gathering, but by the end he is lost in questioning about his own identity.

We have seen that one purpose of reverie writing is to facilitate the writer's process of improving his understanding of himself. Another related but less overt purpose in writing a reverie is justify oneself in one's own eyes. In *Confessions*, Rousseau intended to vindicate himself before the public, and at first glance *Reveries* may seem to aim at the same goal. The tone of self-justification lingers, and occasionally he slips into full self-defense. For example, after blaming others for losing the character qualities which originally attracted his love, he acknowledges that perhaps he too has changed more than he should. He adds, though, "What sort of character could withstand a situation like mine without changing?" (*Reveries* 64). Even when he does so, however, he seems to be trying to convince *himself* that he is right. The evidence he uses to argue that he is not at fault for losing the joy he used to find in doing good for others is based on his internal experiences and would not be particularly convincing to a skeptical reader. After saying that he has found that even his attempts to do good often result in harm, he

says this to comfort himself: “I know that, whatever the effect of my good deed may be, I will still be able to take credit for my good intention” (64). He attempts to confirm that he is right on the basis of something of which he feels confident – his “good intention” – but gives no externally visible evidence of that good intention. If his primary goal in *Reveries* is to reconcile *himself* to himself, however, rather than earn the approval of his readers, he has no need to confirm his good intention through external evidence, because he is already convinced of his good intentions – or so he claims. Recall that earlier in the Sixth Walk, however, he questions the extent to which he truly knows his own motives. Then, he begins an internal discussion of the nature of his natural inclinations and the reasons for which he does not always follow them. In this context, his statement that “I know...I will still be able to take credit for my good intention” seems to state the degree of certainty that he wishes he had rather than that he actually has. If he were truly convinced of the purity of his motives, he would treat that as an assumption on which to base further conclusions, rather than a statement to be explicitly affirmed and repeated. So both the evidence he uses to confirm that statement and the fact that he feels the need to state it at all point to the self-directed nature of his self-justification in *Reveries*.

Since Rousseau has turned inward since writing *Confessions*, it makes sense that his intended audience has shifted as well. As he introduces his writing project in the First Walk, he compares it explicitly to Montaigne’s *Essays*, saying, “My task is the same as that of Montaigne, but my aim is the exact opposite of his: for he wrote his essays entirely for others, whereas I am writing my reveries entirely for myself” (9). Rousseau may exaggerate to say that Montaigne had no self-interest in writing *Essays*; if nothing

else, Montaigne expressed curiosity at seeing where his mind would go if he let it run freely. Nevertheless, Rousseau's point stands: Montaigne explicitly addresses his *Essays* to external readers, just as Rousseau himself had done in *Confessions*. Reflecting his different goals in writing *Reveries*, Rousseau claims that his only audience is himself.

Some of *Reveries'* content, however, gives us reason to doubt whether he truly intended for no one but himself to read them. He repeatedly and bitterly refers to his persecution and rejection by society. Although these references occur in the third person rather than the second, they are so numerous and their tone so vindictive or resentful that one must wonder whether he does not secretly hope that they will read what he has written about them. For example, his opening paragraph states,

The most sociable and loving of human beings has by common consent been banished by the rest of society. In the refinement of their hatred they have continued to seek out the cruelest forms of torture for my sensitive soul, and they have brutally severed all ties which bound me to them. I would have loved my fellow men in spite of themselves. Only by ceasing to be men have they succeeded in losing my affection for them. (3)

This opening passage seethes with accusation. Vindicating himself, he places all blame on "the rest of society" for rejecting him, isolating him, ceasing to merit his love, and even "ceasing to be men." It is possible that this passage simply constitutes the expression of pent-up emotion, but the frequency with which he accuses those who banished him, as well as his tone, indicate that although he refuses to address his readers directly, he hopes to be "overheard," as Gossman says.<sup>46</sup> *Notes from Underground* and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" contain similar conflicts between their stated audience and the implied readership. So while critics may reach different conclusions about whether Rousseau, as well as Prufrock and the Underground Man, truly intend to

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<sup>46</sup> Gossman, "The Innocent Art of Confession and Reverie," 67.



write for others or only for themselves, the ambiguity of audience distinguishes these works from *Confessions* and *Essays* and marks one of the defining characteristics of the reverie genre.

Finally, *Reveries* differs from *Confessions* in terms of organization. Given *Reveries'* purpose, audience, and emphasis on the author's internal experiences of thought and imagination, each Walk is organized simply according to the progression of his thoughts. That is, they do not seem organized at all. This free-flowing structure stands in contrast to *Confessions*, which proceeds in strictly chronological order. In this respect Rousseau seems to imitate Montaigne, who intended to record his wildly wandering thoughts.<sup>47</sup> Rousseau writes in *Reveries* that he will create "a shapeless account of my reveries," where "I shall say what I have thought just as it came to me" (8). Both *Essays* and *Reveries* have a meandering, unpredictable quality, but each individual Walk seems more convincingly unplanned and truly in the same form as the thoughts originally appeared than the essays do. The reader can identify themes and topics in each Walk, but the walk itself seems not to have any definite beginning or end, but rather to represent an excerpt from an ongoing thought process. Each essay, however, is united by a central idea or message. Tangents, anecdotes, and subordinate ideas are woven into the mixture, but by the end of each essay, Montaigne has presented his readers with a conclusion or moral. The path to that conclusion may meander, but upon reaching the conclusion the reader can see the connection between earlier components of the essay. *Reveries* lack this appearance of having been reshaped to lead readers to a chosen idea.

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<sup>47</sup> Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 31.

*Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, therefore, differs significantly enough from *Confessions* and *Essays* that it merits its own generic title: the reverie. *Confessions* itself broke many literary conventions associated with the genre of a confession,<sup>48</sup> and some consider it the first true autobiography.<sup>49</sup> Rousseau himself considered it unique. He introduces it as “hitherto without precedent” and is confident that it “will never have an imitator” (*Confessions* 3). *Reveries* takes one step further from literary conventions by shifting from a focus on the author’s life events and the development of his character to his subjectivity, taking the processes of thought, memory, and imagination, and not only their contents, as its subject.<sup>50</sup> The emphasis on the self and the imagination characteristic of the Romantic movement in literature, of which Rousseau was a prominent figure. The reverie is intended to benefit the writer rather than the reader and in fact denies the existence of any reader other than the writer. It expresses the author’s uncertainty about his own identity and his self-knowledge and endeavors to increase the accuracy of his understanding of himself. Furthermore, the process of writing facilitates the use of his imagination,<sup>51</sup> preserves pleasant memories for future enjoyment (*Reveries* 8), and distracts him from his pain. He claims to find positive “pleasure of conversing with my soul,” but also engages in reveries because “the habit of turning in on myself eventually made me insensible to my suffering, and almost made me forget it altogether” (7, 11).

Yet letting his mind roam entirely unrestrained also brings him suffering, because his mind sometimes turns outward instead of inward, remembering his rejection by

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<sup>48</sup> Gossman, “The Innocent Art of Confession and Reverie,” 61.

<sup>49</sup> Cranston, *The Solitary Self*, 180.

<sup>50</sup> Juliet Flower Maccannell, “The Post-Fictional Self: Authorial Consciousness in Three Texts by Rousseau,” *Modern Language Notes*, 89.1 French Issue (1974 May), 580.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2907326>.

<sup>51</sup> Selvin, “Rousseau’s Passage from Confession to Reverie,” 247.

former friends as well as opponents and dwelling on his isolation. Although he claims to have found a “sufficient, perfect, and full happiness” in reveries (55), a tone of sadness nonetheless persists and even grows over the course of *Reveries* whenever Rousseau talks about his separation from society. So he finds his reveries worthy of celebration but insufficient to produce true peace.

### Hyperconscious Dreamers: Rousseau, the Underground Man, and Prufrock

Rousseau’s self-doubt exemplifies not only a personal characteristic but a feature of the reverie mode. Surprising similarities among the narrators of *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, and Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” point to the necessity of studying them in relation to one another. As represented in these reveries, each narrator experiences variations of what the Underground Man calls “hyperconsciousness.” This takes multiple forms, which I divide into two categories. The first, hyperconsciousness, is a heightened awareness of something outside oneself, such as human nature or principles that govern the universe. Hyper-*self*-consciousness, on the other hand, entails an inward focus; it come in the form of intense introspection, fear of one’s appearance before others, and self-absorption that squelches one’s ability to see life from another’s perspective.<sup>52</sup> Each form of

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<sup>52</sup> My descriptions of hyperconsciousness and hyper-self-consciousness are based on the narrators as represented in these specific works. No literary representation can fully capture a human being, however, and it is unlikely that these negative characteristics were consistently and completely true of Rousseau, the only one of the three narrators who is not a fictional character. The reverie writing can highlight one component of what is true about him at the expense of components; for example, as we discussed earlier, although he spends considerable time and energy studying botany, the reverie portrays him as primarily focused on his own internal experience. The hyperconsciousness I attribute to Rousseau, then, is more rightly attributed to the image of him presented in *Reveries*, which represents the man himself but does not necessarily include complete biographical detail.

hyperconsciousness or hyper-self-consciousness leads to some type of inability to or lack of desire to act, resulting in paralysis of the will.

Rousseau first reveals hyper-self-consciousness in a way we have already mentioned: he speaks with authorial self-awareness in *Reveries* by commenting explicitly on the nature and purpose of his writing project. In his First Walk, for example, he says, “These pages will in fact be merely a shapeless account of my reveries. They will often be about me, because a reflective solitary man necessarily thinks about himself a lot” (8). Juliet Maccannell identifies similar meta-writing in *Preface to Narcissus* and *Confessions*, where Rousseau likewise uses no narrative mask but speaks directly to his audience and, in *Preface to Narcissus*, even defends his earlier writings.<sup>53</sup> Rousseau writes as the author, not a created narrator within the written work and confined to the imagined world.

Dostoevsky parodies this authorial self-awareness. The Underground Man describes his “notes” almost identically to the way Rousseau describes *Reveries*. Rousseau wrote that he would create “a shapeless account of my reveries...[and] all the strange ideas which come into my head as I walk” (8). The Underground Man imitates him: “I don’t wish to be hampered by any restrictions in compiling my notes. I shall not attempt any system or method. I will jot down things as I remember them” (*Notes* 37). The Underground Man explicitly describes his plan for his writing project, just as Rousseau did. He identifies its intended form – unrestricted, lacking system or method, just as Rousseau’s was “shapeless.” They share the same organizing principle: none except the order in which thoughts appear in the writer’s mind. They take the same central subject: the author himself. Rousseau predicts that his thoughts and therefore his

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<sup>53</sup> Maccannell, “The Post-Fictional Self,” 580.

writings will “often be about me,” and the Underground Man echoes in a comment disjointed from its preceding introduction to himself and his life circumstances, “incidentally, what can a decent man speak about with the greatest pleasure? Answer: about himself. Well, then, I will talk about myself” (6). Finally, they claim the same audience; in this parallel, Dostoevsky gives his narrator more extensive and ironic satire. Rousseau claimed to write “entirely for myself.” The Underground Man, like Rousseau, compares his writing to a confession made to the public – Rousseau’s, in fact, just as Rousseau compared his to Montaigne’s. Following this comparison to *Confessions*, the Underground Man adds, “I, however, am writing for myself, and wish to declare once and for all that if I write as though I were addressing readers, that is simply because it is easier for me to write in that way. ...I shall never have readers. I have made this plain already” (37). The extent to which he elaborates on this point after having spent the entire first section addressing the “gentlemen,” anticipating their questions and criticisms and even dedicating paragraphs to what he believes they will say, indicates that he does not expect to be taken seriously. This is satire. And he continues:

But here, perhaps, someone will take me at my word and ask me: if you really don’t count on readers, why do you make such compacts with yourself – and on paper too – that is, that you won’t attempt any system or method, that you will jot things down as you remember them, etc., etc? Why do you keep explaining? Why do you keep apologizing? (37)

Saying that “*perhaps*, someone will take me at my word” (emphasis added) indicates that in general he does not expect to be taken at his word. He is an exaggerator and expects others to be aware of this. That the Underground Man does not expect others to take him seriously reflects Dostoevsky’s view of Rousseau,<sup>54</sup> also an exaggerator, whom Dostoevsky seems to imply is not considered entirely trustworthy. Rousseau may not

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<sup>54</sup> Miller, *Dostoevsky’s Unfinished Journey*, 87.

have been as aware of this situation as the Underground Man was, however. The Underground Man's questions could be directed at Rousseau, like a retrospective attempt to make him understand how others perceive him. The Underground Man does not borrow Rousseau's exact words, but his choice to "jot things down as [I] remember them" and rejection of "any system or method" applies equally to Rousseau. Throughout his essays, Rousseau consistently "explains" his reasons for holding certain beliefs or taking certain actions. Apologizing, on the other hand, does not have an obvious antecedent in Rousseau's writing, for Rousseau repeatedly affirms his confidence in his own innocence and purity.

The Underground Man gives a few answers to these questions (which are at least superficially directed at himself) before presenting another objection to the claim that one could write purely for oneself. He challenges himself, "What precisely is my object in writing? If it is not for the public, then after all, why should I not simply recall these incidents in my own mind without putting them down on paper?" (37). His answers satirize Rousseau even more than the questions did. In answer to the first set of questions, he gives this reason: "I am simply a coward." No explanation follows, but the answer seems consistent with Dostoevsky's view of Rousseau.<sup>55</sup>

In answer to his question about his reason for recording his thoughts at all, he responds, "I purposely imagine an audience before me in order to conduct myself in a more dignified manner" (37). A paragraph later, he repeats, "somehow it is more dignified on paper. There is something more impressive in it." These answers give two veiled criticisms of Rousseau. First, if the Underground Man himself perceives the need to act "in a more dignified manner," he must on most occasions, or at least when he is

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<sup>55</sup> Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey*, 87.

alone, not act in a sufficiently dignified manner. Perhaps Dostoevsky wishes to call to the reader's mind Rousseau's strange paranoia of others plotting against him. Towards the end of his life, having experienced some real persecution and imagined much more, Rousseau frequently assumed malicious intentions where none existed and responded irrationally to perceived threats.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps Dostoevsky considered Rousseau's desperate attempts to regain public approval, his expression of strange ideas, or his decision to dress in Armenian clothing undignified. In any case, it is an unflattering stab at Rousseau. Second, these two answers allude to Rousseau's artificially high self-esteem and deep commitment to his own honor in that he is concerned even with dignity in his own eyes. This concern reveals his uncertainty with his own identity, as discussed earlier. If he had full confidence in his own honorability, he would not need to work so consciously to maintain it. These allusion and responses *Notes* confirm Dostoevsky's awareness of and opposition to Rousseau and his works. He never mentions *Reveries* explicitly the way he mentions *Confessions*; but these and other parallels, to be discussed in the following chapter, strongly imply his awareness of the work. But even if he truly had not read *Reveries*, the similarities between the two works would become even more striking and even more directly attributable to the genre itself.

Rousseau's self-awareness is not limited to his narrative voice within the written text; he also purposely analyzes himself in order to reach a more accurate understanding of his own character and motivations. This was one of his originally-stated purposes in beginning this writing project; in his First Walk, he says that "I am devoting my last days

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<sup>56</sup> For example, when he could not find six-months' worth of letters that he had misfiled, he assumed that they had been stolen in order to be replaced with incriminating documents that would associate him with an attempt to assassinate the king during the time period in which the letters were written. Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 462.

to studying myself” and to “painstaking and sincere self-examination” (7). Specifically, in the Sixth Walk, for example, he notices that he often walks along a certain roundabout path and “sought in myself the reason why” (59). Upon discovering the reason,<sup>57</sup> he realizes that in many cases “the real and essential motives of most of my actions were not as clear to as I had for a long time imagined them to be” (60) and begins a more thorough process of self-contemplation that, among other things, “alters considerably the opinion that I for a long time had of my own virtue” (61). Rousseau’s continual self-analysis constitutes one form of hyper-self-consciousness that distinguishes the reverie writer from the writer of a confession or an essay, who recall and recount but do not gain additional insight through the process of writing.

The comments that demonstrate Rousseau’s authorial self-consciousness also allude to the other two forms of his hyper-self-consciousness and hyperconsciousness. First, he shows excessive concern for other people’s opinions of him. He fears their criticism, and disapproval both crushes his spirit and sparks expressions of prideful indignance. This is an excessive form of self-consciousness. Second, Rousseau’s paranoia, mentioned above, could be considered hyper-sensitivity to details of events and of people’s words and actions, which he interprets as composing a secret plots against him. The term hyperconsciousness does not fit this phenomenon exactly, however, because “consciousness” implies an awareness of something that actually exists; the conspiracies that Rousseau believes exist against him are the products only of his own

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<sup>57</sup> He realizes that he avoids a certain intersection because he dislikes feeling obligated to give money to a boy who begs at that corner (*Reveries* 59).



imagination. This too, has parallels in the ways the Underground Man and Prufrock interpret their interactions with other people.

Some of Rousseau's fear of criticism and rejection finds reasonable cause in his experiences. He had earned literary fame through many of his early writings, and Maurice Cranston describes him as not only a "literary celebrity" but a "cult figure" by 1761, following the publication of *Julie*.<sup>58</sup> As his writings became more controversial, however, many fellow philosophers or supporters whom Rousseau considered his friends began to turn away from him. Frederick Grimm began to circulate criticism of Rousseau in his uncensored newsletter, some aimed at the ideas Rousseau presented and some at Rousseau himself.<sup>59</sup> Voltaire joined him in publishing personal attacks.<sup>60</sup> His *Discourse of the Origins of Inequality*, published in 1755, had sparked strong opposition, receiving criticism for godlessness, giving an unfavorable representation of humans and undercutting the legitimacy of owning property.<sup>61</sup> Opposition from those who usually disagreed with him did not disturb him as much as the increased rejection by his friends:<sup>62</sup> Mme. D'Epainay, hostess of a salon he had attended and a former supporter, worked together with Grimm and Denis Diderot to compose an epistolary novel presenting an intentionally false and damaging image of Rousseau.<sup>63</sup> In 1762, state opposition was added to Rousseau's social and literary rejection to solidify his isolation when the Paris parlement ordered *Emile* to be burned and issued an arrest warrant for Rousseau. Geneva, to which Rousseau initially fled, reached the same conclusion

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<sup>58</sup> Cranston, *The Solitary Self*, xi.

<sup>59</sup> Cranston, *Jean-Jacques*, 310.

<sup>60</sup> Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, 278.

<sup>61</sup> Cranston, *Jean-Jacques*, 306-09.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 310.

<sup>63</sup> Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques*, 273-74.

although for different reasons; both *Emile* and *Social Contract* were censored and burned, and Rousseau exiled on pains of being arrested and tried if he ever entered the city again.<sup>64</sup>

We have already seen that Rousseau opens his First Walk with a complaint about having “by common consent been banished by the rest of society” (*Reveries* 3). He calls that banishment “the cruelest forms of torture for my sensitive soul.” This summary leaves out his contributions to the process of severing ties but reveals the extent to which he values and craves people’s support and approval by the distress their rejection causes him. He continues, “they have heaped upon me insults, disparagement, mockery, and shame, but these are no more capable of being increased than of being relieved; they are as incapable of making them any worse as I am of escaping them” (4). But he explains that by piling as much opposition onto him as possible, so that it is “[in]capable of being increased,” they have actually given him a way to find peace. If he ever hoped to regain their favor, he explains, he would live in constant “fear and...the anxiety of hope” (5); but by giving him reason to believe that they will never accept him back, they have taught him to choose resignation and freed him, supposedly, from his endless search for their approval. In order to find peace without social acceptance, however, Rousseau must entirely shift his values. The drastic conditions required to make him give up his quest for acceptance reveal the depth with which that desire is ingrained in his heart.

The Underground Man and Prufrock suffer from this same unhealthy dependence on others’ opinions. Prufrock’s poem revolves around his dilemma about whether to visit a woman in whom he is romantically interested. Fear of others’ responses to an unexpected, improper, and perhaps unrequited expression of his emotion inhibits him,

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<sup>64</sup> Cranston, *The Solitary Self*, 6.

however. His thoughts about what he will wear and say are interrupted by this terrifying, paralyzing speculation: “[They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!’] / My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin – / [They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’] / Do I dare / Disturb the universe?”<sup>65</sup> The responses he imagines from the other socialites destroys his confidence. Although he compiles a proper outfit and describes it as “firm,” “rich and modest,” and “simple,” implying strength and propriety, his attempts to present himself acceptably are just as unsuccessful as Rousseau’s attempts to repair his damaged image. In his imagined scenario, others pay no attention to Prufrock’s clothes, commenting instead on his growing baldness (41) and “thin” limbs (44). He tries to portray respectability and confidence, but they see weakness and loss of youthfulness and attractiveness. Prufrock’s inability to win approval from others even in his imagination mirrors Rousseau’s rejection, as does the corresponding fear. Just as Rousseau chooses to resign himself to withdrawing from society, Prufrock too responds to the imagined criticism with the cry of uncertainty, “Do I dare / disturb the universe?” that indicates crushed confidence and withdrawal from the idea of attending the social gathering.

The Underground Man, too, fears people’s rejection. At the beginning of Part II, when he introduces himself as of twenty years prior to Part I, he writes,

My life was even then gloomy, disorganized, and solitary to the point of savagery. I made friends with no one and even avoided talking, and hid myself in my corner more and more. At work in my office I even tried never to look at anyone, and I was very well aware that my colleagues looked on me... with a sort of loathing. (39)

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<sup>65</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in *Selected Poems* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1936), 11-16. lines 41-46.

His confidence that others “looked on [him]...with a sort of loathing” eliminates his interpersonal interactions with his co-workers as much as possible. Their apparent disapproval prevents him from trying to “[make] friends,” moving about freely in the office, speaking, or even make eye contact. He does not fear doing something that will cause others’ disapproval as much as he is certain that others already disapprove of him and therefore refrains from interacting with them as much as possible. Describing his lack of confidence in the office, the Underground Man realizes, as he considers men with ugly faces or smelly uniforms who do not seem nearly as fearful as he is, that “I very often looked at myself with furious discontent, which verged on loathing, and so I inwardly attributed the same view to everyone” (40). The Underground Man’s awareness of his self-disdain allows him to understand that he has no basis for assuming that others that others “loathe” him except that he loathes himself. He imagines that others must see him the way he sees himself, projecting his own opinions onto others. Similarly, although he is drawn to Liza, claims to have had “real feeling” for her (102) and momentarily forgets himself long enough to offer to help her (97), he ultimately resists actually beginning a relationship because he fears being seen as weak and poor (102). He imagines that if she came, she would primarily notice poverty and dishonor,<sup>66</sup> and he fears and hates her because of what he imagines she will think rather than because of anything she has actually done.

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<sup>66</sup> This is what the Underground Man fears: “‘What if she comes,’ I thought incessantly. ‘...H’m! it’s horrid that she should see how I live for instance. Yesterday I seemed such a – hero to her, while now, h’m! It’s horrid, though, that I have let myself sink so low, the room looks like a beggar’s. And I brought myself to go out to dinner in such a suit! And my oilcloth sofa with the stuffing sticking out. And my robe, which will not cover me! What tatters. And she will see all this” (102). Liza would appreciate his help regardless of condition of his furniture, but the Underground Man is unwilling to risk damaging the formerly “heroic” image he believes her to have of him. Notice that this belief – that “Yesterday I seemed such a – hero to her” – is also an assumption.

If projecting one's self-perception onto others leads to excessive sensitivity to opinions that may not truly exist, all three of our narrators experience this false hyperconsciousness. Rousseau, however, takes it to an extreme. The Underground Man imagines little more than others' attitudes towards him; Rousseau believes that all of society is conspiring in a secret plot against him. After witnessing public responses to a rumor of his death, described in the Second Walk, he concludes that a "general conspiracy" must be forming against him (*Reveries* 19). In fact, he believes that not only all mankind but "Heaven" too stands opposed to him, because he finds the "universal consensus...too extraordinary to be purely coincidental" and too successful to be accomplished only by "wicked men." The details of the conspiracy are not clear from the *Reveries* but biographers provide more specific accounts. One of the more tragic examples of Rousseau's paranoia and its consequences comes from his conflict with David Hume, who generously allowed Rousseau to live with him in England after Rousseau's exile from Paris and Geneva. Rousseau's suspicions began, not without some reason, when he found that Hume often opened his mail and had inquired into his financial affairs. Hume intended to prevent unwanted communication from the mainland and to acquire more patronage for Rousseau, but Rousseau interpreted these actions as invasions of privacy.<sup>67</sup> As his fear grew, however, Rousseau began to draw strange conclusions from less suspicious activities. When he misattributed a mocking letter to Jean le Rond d'Alembert and Hume confirmed Horace Walpole had indeed written it, Rousseau concluded that all three men must be plotting against him.<sup>68</sup> Then he began to interpret Hume's tendency to stare blankly into the distance and his lack of emotional

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<sup>67</sup> Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 418-19.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 420-21.

expressiveness as “insidious” and indicative of malicious intent.<sup>69</sup> Rousseau eventually left Hume’s household; their mutual trust was destroyed.

Rousseau’s propensity to draw false conclusions from relatively minor actions forms another sort of hyperconsciousness. This hyperconsciousness differs from the other two sorts of self-consciousness (self-referencing comments by the author about his own writing and self-analysis, discussed in the previous two sections) in that he is not the explicit object of his attention. His paranoia motivates him to observe *others’* actions and to draw conclusion from them. Nevertheless, this hyper-consciousness reveals a deep self-centeredness in that it depends on the belief that the every member of society whom he imagines to be complicit in the plot is both deeply aware of him and feel strongly enough about him to put considerable effort into forming this plot. The conviction that everything and everyone opposes oneself is only a negative variation of the belief that all of life revolves around oneself.

Notice that Rousseau’s paranoia comes from his tendency to let his mind wander freely, without reason’s restraint. The reveries he celebrates in *Reveries* result in joyful calm; but his irrational fears also result from reveries. So his paranoia confirms his contemporaries’ fears that reveries would lead to false beliefs about reality.<sup>70</sup>

### Cycles of Isolation

Each form of self-consciousness or hyperconsciousness produces its own form of inaction. Inaction in turn results in a form of isolation. Given his view of human nature as most pure when separated from society’s influence, as well as the emotional exhaustion

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<sup>69</sup> Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 423.

<sup>70</sup> See discussion of common fears about reveries during Rousseau’s time on page 4 of the Introduction.

that must result from his persistent and irrational fear, Rousseau finds this isolation comforting to some extent. Rousseau's inaction, isolation, and responses to both reveal the effects of reveries on his life and character.

Rousseau's conviction that a plot existed against him caused him to withdraw from society as much as possible. He writes of this tendency to refrain from interacting with people in the Sixth Walk: he says that those who "control my fate" have so carefully crafted his circumstances that every apparent opportunity to do something beneficial only hides "a trap laid for me" with an inevitably "harmful" result (*Reveries* 64). Because of his belief, he says, "I refrain from acting at all.... No doubt I go too far, because I avoid any opportunity to act, even when I see that only good can be done." He explains that he resists taking action because "I am sure that I am not being allowed to see things as they really are." His paranoia directly causes his inaction. It also provided justification, at least in his own eyes, for severing relationships and blaming others for his situation. Damrosch writes about Rousseau's explanation of his missing letters<sup>71</sup> that "this bizarre story...explained his feeling of undeserved and perpetual isolation, and it gave him a way to project his gnawing sense of guilt onto agents outside himself, with a...sense of loss, grief, and undeserved suffering."<sup>72</sup> So Rousseau's paranoia not only prevents him from interacting with other people but solidifies his condition of isolation by convincing him that he has no reason to want to reconnect with those who caused his suffering.

His hyper-self-consciousness leading to self-absorption and his desire to end all involvement in society also leads to inaction in that he believes himself to be free from all

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<sup>71</sup> See footnote 56 on page 36 for an explanation of this incident.

<sup>72</sup> Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 462.

social responsibility.<sup>73</sup> Blaming his isolation on society, he practices isolation by turning not only his actions but his thoughts inward on himself. There are no traces of *Confessions*' social orientation; in *Reveries* he asserts that "it is now my duty and desire to be concerned only with myself" (7). This commitment to accept no duty outside himself would not necessarily require separation from society and withdrawal from productive work, but in Rousseau's case it does. He admits that all his interesting activity is now internal, saying, "my body has nothing to do, [but] my soul remains active, still producing feelings and thoughts, and its inner moral life seems even to have increased with the death of all earthly and temporal interests" (8). So we see that reveries create more reveries: paranoia makes him fear personal connections, and lacking these, he denies any responsibility to other people. Without relational duties, he easily justifies his inward focus and contents himself with activity of the soul and not of the body.

Rousseau's focus on contemplation and self-analysis further motivate him to seek isolation in order to avoid distraction. Again echoing Montaigne, Rousseau writes that "the work that I was undertaking could only be accomplished in absolute isolation; it called for the kind of long and undisturbed meditations that the tumult of society does not allow" (24). This desire for solitude shows Montaigne's influence on his perspective; in "On Solitude," Montaigne taught that solitude is the proper context for self-contemplation.<sup>74</sup> In order to find "absolute isolation," even on the solitary Ile de St. Pierre, he liked to row out into the middle of the lake and float there in a boat, or to find a

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<sup>73</sup> Rousseau's confidence that it is right to reject all social responsibility reflects the influence of Montaigne's views, expressed in *Essays*. In "On Solitude," Montaigne teaches that after living a full and busy life, man should "live at least this tail end of life for ourselves" and "bring our thoughts and reflections back to ourselves and to our own well-being" (271). It also forms another similarity between Rousseau and Diogenes, who considered society and ease to be corrupting temptations that would distract men from a much superior independence (Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* 13).

<sup>74</sup> Montaigne adds, however, that physical withdrawal is insufficient for true peace; one must also discipline one's mind to withdraw its attention from social concerns (268-69).



spot in the woods to sit and think (52,54). Walking, thinking, and studying nature become his primary occupations as he prioritizes reveries over all other people and actions.

### Evaluating the Reverie-Filled Life

Rousseau does not consider inactivity itself to be a problem, however. It facilitates his reveries, and isolation caters to his bitterness towards those who rejected him. Rousseau claims also to enjoy the isolation necessary for his meditation and which originally prompted him to begin *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. He describes himself as a “solitary contemplative who love[s] to lose [himself] altogether in the charms of nature and to meditate in a silence unbroken by any sound other than that of” birds and running water (49). In addition to the fact that reverie requires solitude, which would likely be enough of a reason for Rousseau to love it, he also believes that his very nature includes a desire for solitude. As he begins the Fifth Walk, which describes part of his cherished time on the Island of St. Pierre, he calls the island “wonderfully situated for the happiness of a man who likes to live within defined limits,” and refers to his “natural inclination” to live in such a small area. He wishes he could have stayed forever on the island where he could lose contact with “the mainland” and “[live] in a way so compatible with my nature” (50). This desire to live among plants and animals rather than people also reflects his belief that man is pure in solitude but corrupted in society.<sup>75</sup>

In Rousseau’s references to his isolation, however, it is impossible to miss the tone of sadness, loss, and sometimes bitterness that accompany them. On a small scale, on any individual day, he genuinely does seem to enjoy periods of solitude. But on a

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<sup>75</sup> Rousseau explains this view in his *Second Discourse*. It is also summarized in Cranston’s chapter on the discourse in *Jean-Jacques* (294-306) and alluded to Rousseau’s Sixth Walk (*Reveries* 61).

larger scale, Rousseau's political exile, social rejection, and severing of many personal ties understandably produce painful emotions. As mentioned earlier, Rousseau calls self-contemplation "the only pleasure that my fellow men cannot take away from me" (7); while he affirms this pleasure's sufficiency, he also implies that men *have* taken away every other pleasure – primarily that of benevolent society. The first sentence of *Reveries* expresses the pain he feels at his isolation: "So here I am, all alone on this earth, with no brother, neighbour, or friend, and no company but my own. ... In the refinement of their hatred they have continued to seek out the cruelest forms of torture for my sensitive soul, and they have brutally severed all the ties which bound me to them" (3). Earlier, we discussed this passage as evidence of Rousseau's dependence on others' acceptance for his confidence and identity, a form of hyper-self-consciousness. On a simpler level, however, it simply indicates his understandable sense of loss and sadness. In the Ninth Walk, as he nears the end of his life, he gives a more open expression of his loneliness. He exclaims, "Oh, if I could still enjoy a few moments of pure, heartfelt affection... if I could still see in people's eyes the joy and satisfaction of being with me... I would no longer be obliged to seek among animals the kind looks that I am now refused by human beings" (97-98). His early Walks affirmed the sufficient joy he found in exercising his imagination; after his imaginative power began to fade, he turned to the study and enjoyment of nature (75-77). By the Ninth Walk, however, Rousseau acknowledges, as one would expect, that animal and plant kingdoms cannot satisfy his soul's desires.

Although they eventually let him down, Rousseau's reveries receive stronger praise than any other source of happiness he finds. His reveries come in many forms. We

have discussed “the pleasure of conversing with my soul,” or focused introspection, and he affirms that “it is only in myself that I find solace, hope, and peace” (7). In the Fifth Walk, he describes a more passive version of reverie, in which he simply clears his mind and allows his physical surroundings to make impressions on it. He writes that as he sits by the edge of the water,

the sound of the waves and the movement of the water, gripping my senses and ridding my soul of all other agitation, plunged it into a delicious reverie.... The ebb and flow of the water and its continuous yet constantly varying sound, ever breaking against my ears and my eyes, took the place of the movements inside me that reverie did away with and were enough to make me pleasantly aware of my existence, without having to take the trouble to think. From time to time there came to mind some slight and brief reflection on the instability of this world, the image of which I saw in the surface of the water: but soon these fragile impressions faded away... (54).

In this state of reverie, the ideas that occur to him from his observations of his surroundings mirror ideas that he already had, namely, “the instability of this world.” This is another example of his tendency to interpret his surroundings as reflections of his interior state. In this case, however, he distinguishes between thought and awareness; he experiences a state of consciousness that allows him to receive impressions but requires no internal initiative. Later in the Fifth Walk, he describes still another state, in which he seems even less attentive to his surroundings. He claims that one who can lose all awareness of time, of “deprivation or enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear” and perceive only “our existence” has found “a sufficient, perfect, and full happiness, which leaves in the soul no void needing to be filled” (55). It seems that in this celebrated state of reverie, not even the waves’ motion would capture his attention.

The reverie genre is partially characterized by this emphasis on mental states. In this it differs from *Confessions*, which primarily highlights the author’s life and character,

and from Montaigne's *Essays*, which focuses on the author's ideas. *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* captures the variety of mental processes that compose Rousseau's internal activity, including active self-analysis, as in the Sixth Walk, contemplation of philosophical topics such as the nature and value of lying in the Fourth Walk, passive states of impressionability approaching unconsciousness, and truly subconscious processes of which Rousseau was at least temporarily unaware (such as his habit of choosing a certain road in order to avoid a beggar). A century before Freud's work on the subconscious, *Reveries* offers uncommon insight into the levels of consciousness that exist within one mind. This is one contribution of the reverie genre. It is not stream of consciousness technique, which attempts to express even sub-linguistic mental processes in language.<sup>76</sup> By describing the existence of varying levels of consciousness and using language to follow the author's flow of thoughts, however, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* serves as a predecessor to stream of consciousness writing.

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<sup>76</sup> I am borrowing Lawrence Bowling's definition of the stream of consciousness technique, which will be more fully discussed in Chapter 3. Lawrence Bowling, "What is the Stream of Consciousness Technique?" *PMLA*: 64:5 (June 1950), 341.

## Chapter 2

### Reverie Corrupted: Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*

When Dostoevsky returned from exile in Siberia to St. Petersburg in 1860, he returned to a culture saturated in Romanticism's effects. Despite Russian radicals' adamant rejection of Romantic ideals during the 1840s,<sup>77</sup> Romanticism had influenced literary and philosophical culture so profoundly that its values or reactions against them continued to define much of Russian thought well past the official end of the Romantic period. For example, Rudolph Neuhauser identifies the utopian socialism popular in the 1840s as a version of romantic idealism that survived in a different form after the end of the Romantic period.<sup>78</sup> Conversely, while Romanticism had sought a philosophy of life that would bring "all aspects of human experience" into purposeful unity, Romanticism's successors felt that they had inherited a world in which a painful disconnect separated reality from the Romantic ideal.<sup>79</sup>

Rudolf Neuhauser argues that both Romanticism's influences and reactions against it culminate in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.<sup>80</sup> It embodies the qualities for which Russian intellectuals of the 1860s criticized the recently-ended Romantic period. Neuhauser writes that Romanticism came to be seen as "excessive development of man's sensibilities and reflective capabilities to the detriment of his emotional balance, and eventually to a loss of the sense of the proper relationship between the subjective

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<sup>77</sup> Rudolf Neuhauser, "Romanticism in the Post-Romantic Age: A Typological Study of Antecedents of Dostoevsky's Man from the Underground," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 8.3 (1974 Fall), 335.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 335-36.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 337.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 333, 343-45.

world of thought and emotions, and the objective world of concrete sociopolitical existence;”<sup>81</sup> this description could with complete accuracy be applied directly to *Notes from Underground*. The narrator, the Underground Man, is both an idealistic dreamer<sup>82</sup> and a scathing critic of dreamers who hope for utopian socialism,<sup>83</sup> as Dostoevsky himself had.<sup>84</sup> He loses himself in dreams of his own heroism and chivalry,<sup>85</sup> as the Romantic tradition would encourage, but also experiences moral repulsion at the completeness of his failure to meet those ideals in real life (7). His character is shaped by Romanticism but simultaneously constitutes evidence of its harmful effects.

Dostoevsky considered the influx of Western philosophy and culture into Russia to be a corrupting influence, and the Underground Man embodies the effects of that corruption. In his introduction to *Notes from Underground*, Ralph Matlaw describes the link that Dostoevsky intends to create between the Underground Man’s inability to respond to reality because of his hyperconsciousness and the influence of modern Western thought.<sup>86</sup> Matlaw names Hegel, Rousseau, Kant, and Schiller as primary contributors to the philosophical and literary trends that infiltrated Russia from the rest of Europe and indicates that Dostoevsky implicitly blames the influence of the West for creating the conditions that drive the Underground Man to reveries and their destructive

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<sup>81</sup> Neuhauser, "Romanticism in the Post-Romantic Age" 336.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 344.

<sup>83</sup> The Underground Man believes – and it seems that in this case he speaks for Dostoevsky as well – that men crave independence and self-assertion so strongly that they will never live only according to reason and self-interest. Therefore, he considers man incapable of ever achieving utopia. *Notes from Underground* 19-21.

<sup>84</sup> Dostoevsky was arrested in 1848 along with the other members of the Petrashevsky Circle, an intellectual group advocating reforms in service of utopian socialism. Dostoevsky was neither as radical nor as committed to the group as were many of its members, but he supported basic socialist ideas. See Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, 136-42, 159.

<sup>85</sup> Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 52-54.

<sup>86</sup> Ralph E. Matlaw, Introduction to *Notes from Underground and The Grand Inquisitor* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, trans. Ralph E. Matlaw, (New York: Penguin, 1960) xvi-xvii.

consequences.<sup>87</sup> Matlaw describes Dostoevsky's perspective on the connection between Western Romanticism and what I refer to as reveries: "striving for a vague ideal, surrendering oneself to pleasant meditations and feelings, seeking refuge in a supersensory realm resulted in the blunting of immediate reactions and responses to actual things, and escape into daydreaming, meditation, fancy."<sup>88</sup> For Dostoevsky, the *Underground Man* serves as an argument for *pochvenichestva*, a political platform meaning "return to native soil" and proclaiming the need to protect Russia from Western influences.

If *Notes from Underground* is both a product of and Dostoevsky's protest against such large scale cultural and literary trends, why do I argue that that it bears Rousseau's imprint specifically? Even more specifically, why should we study it in relation to *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*?

Evidence that Rousseau stands out as one of the primary figures with whose literature Dostoevsky's converses comes, among other things, from the biographical similarities between Rousseau as presented in *Confessions* and various characters in Dostoevsky's novels.<sup>89</sup> Robin Miller lists *The Insulted and Injured*, *Notes from*

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<sup>87</sup> Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 7; Matlaw, Introduction, xvi-xvii.

<sup>88</sup> Matlaw, Introduction xvi.

<sup>89</sup> For example, Robin Miller discusses the parallels between Stepan Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1872) and Rousseau as presented in *Confessions*. Miller describes Stepan as "sentimental, timorous, middle-aged," and "preoccupied with imagined conspiracies and persecutions" (87). Like Rousseau, Stepan depends on a woman to whom he is not married for emotional and financial support (95-96). Stepan gives away his children and later in life adopts a new style of clothing to represent a change in his philosophy. Nikolai Stavrogin is also a parody of Rousseau; he began writing his personal statement at age fifty-three, the same age at which Rousseau began writing *Confessions*. After completing his personal statement, Stavrogin intends to hand it out to many people but changes his mind and decides instead to entrust it to a monk to do with it what he will. Stavrogin's actions seem to be inspired by Rousseau's failed attempt to place *Dialogues* on the Altar at Notre Dame and subsequent attempts to give it to acquaintances and then any passer-by who would accept a copy (89). See Robin Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey*

*Underground, Crime and Punishment, The Idiot, "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man,"* and *A Raw Youth* as all containing “both polemic and parody directed at Rousseau.”<sup>90</sup> Critics who study Rousseau’s influence on Dostoevsky most often discuss *Confessions*.<sup>91</sup> Some compare Dostoevsky’s work to *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*.<sup>92</sup> The emphasis on *Confessions*, including in the study of *Notes from Underground*, is not without reason. In fact, *Notes from Underground* demands comparison to Rousseau's *Confessions* by mentioning the work explicitly in the text. Nevertheless, the Underground Man draws the same distinction between *Notes* and *Confessions* that Rousseau drew between *Reveries* and Montaigne’s *Essays*; this provides one of the reasons for which I categorize *Notes* as a reverie. I argue that we must study *Notes from Underground* in conjunction with *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* specifically because it too employs the reverie mode, more so than the confessional.<sup>93</sup>

### *Notes from Underground: Another Reverie*

The Underground Man draws both parallels and contrasts between himself and Rousseau. Before mentioning Rousseau’s name, the Underground Man echoes the claim with which Rousseau opens *Confessions*. Rousseau had written, "I will lay open to my

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(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 87-104. Tanya Mairs discusses Prince Myshkin as a parody Rousseau in “Rousseau and Dostoevsky – the Hidden Polemic,” *Ulbandus Review*, 2.1 (1979 Fall), 146-59.

<sup>90</sup> Miller, *Dostoevsky’s Unfinished Journey*, 88.

<sup>91</sup> For example, see Tanya Mairs, “Rousseau and Dostoevsky – the Hidden Polemic,”; J.M. Coetzee, "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky," *Comparative Literature*: 37.3 (1985 Summer), 193-232. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1771079>; Miller, *Dostoevsky’s Unfinished Journey*, 87-104; Howard, "The Rhetoric of Confession." Olga Stuchebrukhov also comments on the disproportionate emphasis on studying Rousseau’s *Confessions* in relation to Dostoevsky’s work. She examines the influence of Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* in “‘Ridiculous’ Dream Versus Social Contract,” 103.

<sup>92</sup> For example, see Olga Stuchebrukhov, “‘Ridiculous’ Dream Versus Social Contract” and Hilary Fink, "Dostoevsky, Rousseau and the Natural Goodness of Man," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*: 38.3 (2004), 273-87.

<sup>93</sup> For a discussion of *Notes from Underground* as following the confessional tradition, see Barbara Howard, "The Rhetoric of Confession."



fellow-mortals a man just as nature wrought him; and this man is myself. ...I have exposed myself as I was, contemptible and vile some times; at others, good, generous, and sublime.”<sup>94</sup> The Underground Man almost repeats after him: "I want to try to experiment whether one can be perfectly frank, even with oneself, and not take fright at the whole truth” (*Notes* 36). Then, as if acknowledging that he has just imitated *Confessions*, he explicitly compares his own writing project to *Confessions*. He repeats a well-known criticism of Rousseau, saying, "Heine maintains that true autobiography is almost an impossibility, and that man is bound to lie about himself. He considers that Rousseau certainly told lies about himself in his confessions, and even intentionally lied, out of vanity” (37). Then he affirms Heine’s judgment and claims his own likeness to Rousseau: “I understand very well that sometimes one may, just out of sheer vanity, attribute regular crimes to oneself, and indeed I can very well conceive of that kind of vanity.” To the common reader, it is not immediately obvious that “vanity” would cause a writer to “attribute regular crimes to oneself.” One would expect the opposite. So with this statement the Underground Man claims a strong and strange similarity of character to Rousseau of the *Confessions*.

Nevertheless, the Underground Man expects to be taken seriously when he undertakes the same task that he and Heine agree was impossible for Rousseau. Why would he expect his readers to believe that he can do what Rousseau could not – that is, to “be perfectly frank...and not take fright at the whole truth”? The Underground Man answers this question by claiming one of the characteristics that distinguishes Rousseau’s *Reveries* from *Confessions* and *Essays*. Rousseau wrote that Montaigne "wrote his essays entirely for others, whereas I am writing my reveries entirely for myself” (*Reveries* 9).

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<sup>94</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions* 3,4.

The Underground Man writes, "Heine judged people who made their confessions to the public. I, however, am writing for myself" (*Notes* 37). Apparently, the Underground Man considers the audience important for his ability to speak truth; he hopes to speak honestly to himself but doubts that he or anyone can be fully open with others.

The Underground Man's claim that he is writing for no external audience is surprising because throughout Part I, he has spoken directly to "the gentlemen," anticipating their reactions, addressing the arguments he expects them to have, and answering the objections he expects them to make (4). But here, when he stops explaining his beliefs in order to describe his writing project and its purpose, he says that "if I write as though I were addressing readers, that is simply because it is easier for me to write in that way. It is merely a question of form, only an empty form – I shall never have readers" (37). But the "gentlemen" substantially facilitate his ability to communicate. By speaking to them, he shows us how he expects that others perceive him. For example, when he describes the ongoing conflict within him between conjured "spite" and opposing impulses that he smothers, he turns to the gentlemen and says, "Well, are you not imagining, gentlemen, that I am repenting for something now, that I am asking your forgiveness for something? I am sure you are imagining that" (5). This false conversation allows the Underground Man to express a component of his consciousness – the part that constantly monitors or imagines how others see him. In section eight of Part I, the conversation seems to become more real, as the words he expects the gentlemen to say have quotation marks around them.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, their

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<sup>95</sup> This section begins, "'Ha! Ha! Ha! But after all, if you like, in reality, there is no such thing as choice,' you will interrupt with a laugh. 'Science has now succeeded in analyzing man to such an extent that we know already that choice and what is called freedom of will are nothing other than –'" (24). Then the Underground Man interrupts his supposedly non-existent readers in order to respond.

arguments are not invented concoctions of unrelated ideas; they summarize popular philosophical arguments of Dostoevsky's contemporaries.<sup>96</sup> The Underground Man's extended dialogue with proponents of real views seems to overshadow the weight of a single claim that he will not have readers.<sup>97</sup>

Nevertheless, given the Underground Man's character, it is also likely that he would create realistic but imaginary listeners within his own mind simply for his own benefit. Rudolph Neuhauser, Olga Stuchebrukhov, and Richard Peace talk about the Underground Man's audience as imaginary figures.<sup>98</sup> The Underground Man is so controlled by fear of others' opinions of him that he may create imaginary observers and objectors and practice answering them in his mind in order to assure himself that he would be able to defend himself were he to interact with real people with the same reactions. At the same time, his intense self-awareness and self-absorption block his ability to perceive others' reactions to him objectively, so it makes sense that the gentlemen's emotional responses to him – their confusion, frustration, and disdain – reflect the Underground Man's own self-perception.

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<sup>96</sup> The gentlemen tell him that science will eventually allow us to predict all of men's choices by determining what is in their best interest and making those interests known to them. Assuming men always act rationally and according to their own interests, even the exercise of their "so-called free will" will become predictable (24-26). This is Chernyshevsky's view, expressed in his novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), and to which the Underground Man also summarizes and responds to in section seven (19-24).

<sup>97</sup> It is important to keep in mind, however, that unlike Rousseau in *Reveries*, the Underground Man is a created character. Furthermore, *Notes from Underground* contains two layers of narrative. The outer layer contains the author's opening footnote and ending comment about the Underground Man and his "notes" (3). The inner layer, written by the Underground Man about his views and his life, compose the bulk of the novel. Only this inner layer, fictionally written by the Underground Man, is a reverie, and the correspondence between the beliefs of the gentlemen, who exist on the same narrative layer as the Underground Man, and those of Dostoevsky's contemporaries does not imply the Underground Man expects his "notes" to be read. Dostoevsky undoubtedly expected that the novel as a whole would have an audience other than himself and intends to present his readers with an argument against his philosophies.

<sup>98</sup> Neuhauser, "Romanticism in a Post-Romantic Age," 344; Stuchebrukhov, "'Ridiculous Dream' versus Social Contract," 36.

The Underground Man's readers are neither clearly identified as real people nor wholly fictitious. The text gives reason to question (but not definitive evidence against) the narrator's claim that he will have no readers. Therefore, I argue that *Notes from Underground* employs the reverie mode. It captures the narrator's internal conflict between a desire to communicate and a fear of personal connection.<sup>99</sup> Part I resembles a philosophical essay, using the term generally; but "reverie" more accurately describes it than "essay" because the tension within the Underground Man and his own doubt in what he says are just as central to the overall meaning of the text as are the content of his ideas. By giving a voice to the opinions he expects others to have of him, he reveals his own character flaws along with his philosophical views.

In the last section of Part I, the Underground Man asks twice why he writes "as though I were addressing readers" (37). His answer also provides insight into his reasons for writing notes at all, and these reasons correspond to Rousseau's in writing *Reveries*. He hopes that writing will release internal tension, allow him to reach a more acceptable self-image, and provide resolution to some of the conflicting impulses that he finds within himself and does not understand. The accomplishment of each goal provides him with some internal benefit; the reverie is not primarily design to communicate anything to or accomplish anything in relation to the public.

The Underground Man begins his response to the question about why he writes as if to the gentlemen like this:

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<sup>99</sup> The gentlemen actually point out this aspect of the Underground Man's character. They tell him, "you doubtlessly mean to say something, but hide your real meaning for fear, because you lack the resolution to say it, and only have a cowardly impudence" (*Notes* 36).

Incidentally, there is a whole psychological system in this. Or, perhaps, I am simply a coward. And perhaps also, that I purposely imagine an audience before me in order to conduct myself in a more dignified manner while I am jotting things down. There are perhaps thousands of reasons.

...why should I not simply recall these incidents in my own mind without putting them down on paper?

Quite so; but yet it is somehow more dignified on paper. There is something more impressive in it; I will be able to criticize myself better and improve my style. Besides, perhaps I will really get relief from writing. Today, for instance, I am particularly oppressed by a certain memory from the distant past. ...For some reason I believe that if I write it down I will get rid of it. (37-38)

We have already examined portions of this passage in the previous chapter, where I pointed out satires of Rousseau below the surface of the text. But the same passage also highlights characteristics of *Notes* that show that it itself is a reverie.

First, although he does not explain exactly what he means by this, he acknowledges that a “psychological system” underlies the way he writes. That is, some internal motivation or need prompts his writing. At least one instance of this internal motivation is his desire to find “relief” from an oppressive memory and his hope that writing will give him that relief. Both of these statements demonstrate characteristics of the reverie mode: that writing flows from the writer’s internal experience and that the written product exists for the writer’s benefit. Communication is not its primary purpose.

Second, the Underground Man writes in order to create a more acceptable self-perception. He repeats this idea twice, first in answer to the question about why he speaks to the gentlemen and then in answer to the question of why he writes at all. Writing, he says, will make him to “conduct myself in a more dignified manner” and create something “impressive.” His underlying desire for self-improvement mirrors Rousseau’s intent to justify himself in his own eyes by writing *Reveries*. Although the Underground Man claims he only seeks to “improve my style,” that is, his writing style, the novel’s

tone and earlier passages indicate that it is really his character that he wishes to “improve.”<sup>100</sup> This is not merely an attempt to win others’ approval; he seeks to fulfill a deep need to accept himself. An earlier statement confirms this desire and its self-directedness: he writes that “the whole work of man seems really to consist in nothing but proving to *himself* continually that he is a man and not an organ stop” (29, emphasis added). In context, the Underground Man uses this statement to explain that men take irrational actions in order to convince themselves of their ability to make independent choices, an ability that Dostoevsky saw as essential to being and feeling fully human.<sup>101</sup> The Underground Man’s position reveals his underlying uncertainty of his own identity and his lack of self-confidence, both of which characterize reverie writers. His attempt to improve his self-image through writing confirms that reveries are written for the writer’s sake, not the readers’.

Finally, as in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, a search for deeper understanding of oneself accompanies the process of self-justification. The second explanation the Underground Man offers for writing to the gentlemen is that “perhaps, I am simply a coward.” He cannot even claim cowardice with confidence; he seems totally unsure of his own identity and wonders whether some internal, inexplicable part of his character makes him write the way he does. But his inability to pin-point his own motivations frustrates him and calls to mind Rousseau’s realization that “the real and essential motives of most of my actions are not as clear to me as I had for a long time imagined them to be”

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<sup>100</sup> For example, when he describes his irresistible tendency to take actions that he hates, he is frustrated by the resulting “hyperconsciousness of one’s own degradation; it was from feeling...that it could not be otherwise; that you no longer had an escape; that you could never become a different person” (7-8). His lament that he could “never become a different person” indicates that he deeply desires internal transformation.

<sup>101</sup> Through his experiences in Siberian prison, Dostoevsky became convinced that in order to retain their sanity, humans needed to exercise their independence and assert their innate dignity (Frank 215).

(*Reveries* 60). Rousseau responds with self-investigation aimed at perfecting his self-knowledge, and the Underground Man states a similar reason for writing his notes. Early in his discussion of his inner torment, he describes the experience of understanding good but only being able to do evil. Somehow, he finds “shameful accursed sweetness” in his inability to do good, and that “sweetness” morphs into “real positive enjoyment” of his predicament (*Notes* 8). A few paragraphs later, he bursts out, “But enough. Bah, I have talked a lot of nonsense, but what have I explained? Can this enjoyment be explained? But I will explain it! I will get to the bottom of it! That is why I have taken up my pen.” He writes in order to “explain” the strange experiences and conflicts he finds within himself. He hates what introspection shows him and responds just like Rousseau: he writes. The result is a reverie.

Finally, *Notes from Underground*'s organization qualifies it as a reverie as well. It follows no logical or chronological sequence but follows the twistings and turnings of the Underground Man's mind. His thought process controls his writing; it is primarily an expression of his internal experience. The Underground Man recognizes this characteristic of his writing, and in doing so he echoes Rousseau again. He writes that “I don't wish to be hampered by any restrictions in compiling my notes. I shall not attempt any system or method. I will jot things down as I remember them” (37). Compare his statement to Rousseau's: “my mind wander[s] quite freely and my ideas follow their own course unhindered and untroubled,” resulting in “a shapeless account of my reveries. ...I shall say what I have thought just as it came to me” (*Reveries* 11, 8). Either Dostoevsky purposely imitates Rousseau, or the nature and content of the Underground Man's writing

project demand the same form as *Reveries*. In either case, *Notes* seems much more like a reverie than a confession or an essay. *Notes* appears to have been spontaneously created and shows no evidence of a narrator pausing to consider how to best communicate ideas to a reader. The narrator calls himself as a “babbling” (17), a term that connotes rambling, nonsensical speech and calls to mind the original meanings of the word “reverie.”<sup>102</sup> So in organization as well as purpose and audience, *Notes from Underground* matches *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and displays characteristics of the reverie mode.

### Dreaming Underground: Hyperconsciousness Gone Wrong

Rudolph Neuhauser calls the Underground Man the “culmination of the romantic dreamer of the 1840s.”<sup>103</sup> Earlier, he lists several characteristics for which Russians in the 1830s and 40s criticized European romantic literature; the Underground Man displays nearly all of them. Among the characteristics Neuhauser lists are “bookish[ness],”<sup>104</sup> being “divorced from reality,”<sup>105</sup> “dreaming and...a nebulous imagination...a lack of ability to cope with life;...and a life in seclusion.”<sup>106</sup> These criticisms of romantic literature appeared decades before Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground*, but it seems that they could not be more accurate if they had been specifically describing the Underground Man. Yet I argue that he is not *purely* a product of the romantic tradition.

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<sup>102</sup> See Introduction, page 3.

<sup>103</sup> Neuhauser, “Romanticism in the Post-Romantic Age,” 348.

<sup>104</sup> Multiple times, the Underground Man calls himself or is called “bookish” (*Notes* 91, 96-97, 119).

<sup>105</sup> The Underground also uses this phrase. Towards the end of his notes, he complains that they were not worth writing because all he has accomplished is to “[show] how I have ruined my life by morally rotting in my corner, through lack of fitting environment, through divorce from reality.... We are so far divorced from it that we immediately feel a sort of loathing for actual ‘real life,’ and so cannot even stand to be reminded of it” (121).

<sup>106</sup> Neuhauser, “Romanticism in the Post-Romantic Age,” 339. These characterizations of Romantics come from Alexander Herzen’s essays criticizing German Romantic literature. Herzen wrote his essays during the 1830s and 40s.



Understanding *Notes from Underground* as a reverie allows us to see components of the Underground Man's experience that Rousseau and Prufrock share. The Underground Man is the first of these three to use the term "hyperconsciousness," but the mental tendencies to which the term refers existed before him, as the striking similarities between his character and Rousseau's show. The Underground Man experiences reveries in an urban environment, unlike Rousseau, and his reverie highlights reveries' harmful effects on the dreamer. So although the Underground Man's psychological corruption partially reflects flaws in his physical, sociological and philosophical environment, Dostoevsky also illustrates the dangers of immersing oneself exclusively in one's own mind and imagination.

Ironically, dreaming counteracts many of the purposes for which the Underground seemed to be writing his notes. He claims to seek a more accurate understanding of himself, but dreaming leads him to self-deception instead. He alludes to a deep discontent with his character and a desire to "improve" himself, but elsewhere he acknowledges that imagining himself as a hero, as he tends to do, destroys his motivation to seek real change. The gentlemen pointed out that he seems to be trying to communicate with them but too afraid of real connection to do so successfully. His reveries significantly worsen his ability to create strong connections with people, leading him instead to self-absorption and an inability to relate to real people. Dostoevsky highlights these negative consequences of isolation and overreliance on one's imagination; but the exaggeration of these effects in the Underground Man reveals their presence in Rousseau as well.

First, the Underground Man's dreams produce an inflated, unrealistic self-image. At the beginning of Part II, he describes an incident in which he attempted to assert his equality to an officer who, years earlier, had lifted him out of his way during a billiards game (45). The Underground Man tries to revenge his wounded pride by bumping shoulders with this man on the street instead of stepping to the side, as one would do for a social superior, and in preparation for this high-stakes action, he buys a beaver collar to attach to his coat (51). Afterwards, he begins to describe his dreams and says that in them "I had no resemblance to the gentleman who, in his chicken-hearted anxiety, put a German beaver collar on his greatcoat" (52). He *was* that man; but in his imagination, he bears "no resemblance" to the way he acts in reality. Likewise, when he dreams about Liza between their first and second encounters, he imagines himself as her "savior" (104). During their actual interactions, however he only crushes her hope and self-esteem even further by confirming through his attitude and actions that she exists to serve men's desires – whether physical desires or the desire to assert emotional or social superiority. In both cases, exercising his imagination results in self-deception.

The Underground Man acknowledges that the self he imagines is much more imposing, strong, and honorable than he is in reality. Rousseau also holds an unrealistically high view of himself but shows no signs recognizing that he does not meet his own ideals. As he thinks about himself he concludes that "my heart has been purified in the crucible of adversity, and when I examine it carefully I find hardly a trace of any guilty inclinations" (*Reveries* 8). He considers himself perfect and upright – perhaps not innately so, but to have reached that state through purifying trials. This, too, seems like a

form of self-deception; but unlike the Underground Man, Rousseau does not realize that his self-image results from a confined perspective and not an objective self-evaluation.

Even to the limited extent to which the Underground Man does know his own failures, however, his dreams keep him from fighting the vices he sees in himself. He imagines himself as a pure, beneficent, honorable, imposing hero (52), and the “contrast” between that self-image and his actual character produces a mixture of “contradictions and sufferings, of agonizing inward analysis, and...torments and pin-pricks” (53) that prevent him from becoming bored with himself. He finds strange pleasure in analyzing the difference between himself and his ideal and therefore traps himself in cycles of self-analysis that produces no real change.

Finally, the Underground Man’s dreams make him even less capable of healthy relationships. First, this results from his taking imagined actions as substitutes for real ones. The life he imagines for himself seems to him more immediate and potent than his real life, so he contents himself with imagined experiences instead of seeking to live up to his idealistic principles. In the same revelation of his dream world described above, he writes, “what love I felt at times in those dreams of mine! ...though it was fantastic love, though it was never applied to anything human in reality, yet there was so much of this love that afterward one did not even feel the impulse to apply it to anything in reality” (53). His reveries are so strong that they obliterate his desire to take comparable actions “in reality.”

The Underground Man knows that his mind’s creations are *not* reality but chooses to settle for them (although he does not speak as though he believes himself to be choosing the lesser of two options). This sentiment resembles Rousseau’s discussion of

his resistance to obligation in the Sixth Walk. He claims that if he had been able to live apart from society, “free, unknown, and isolated, as I was meant to be, I would have done only good: for I do not have in my heart the seeds of any harmful passion” (*Reveries* 66). In “civil society,” however, which creates “irritation, obligation, and duty,” he feels “the yoke of necessity or men, [and] I become rebellious, or, rather, stubborn, and am then incapable of doing good” (67-68). In other words, in his ideal, pre-social world, he believes he would exercise perfect love and benevolence. Like the Underground Man, he considers himself a potential moral hero, corrupted by his environment and not his own nature. Both contemplate love as an ideal and convince themselves that contemplating it is enough and they need not carry it out.<sup>107</sup>

When he does attempt to interact with real people outside of his imagination, he is so self-absorbed that he does them no good. Throughout a seventeen-page conversation with Liza, he continually turns the topic back to himself and his ideas. He begins by asking her questions, and he pretends to care for her well-being and to give her advice. But he acknowledges that “the sport in it attracted me most,” and his primary purpose seems to be convincing her of ideas that he considers important (*Notes* 87). Following brief moments in which he begins to notice her emotions or to realize that she may want to speak, he seizes control of the conversation again to focus it squarely on himself. He comes close to allowing her to share her life story when she questions his assertion that it must be better it is to live in one’s father’s home than to live at a brothel. But before she

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<sup>107</sup> For Rousseau, the supposed justification for his failure to act benevolently in real society is his “independent nature” (*Reveries* 67). This line of reasoning reveals a belief in moral determinism similar to the Underground Man’s – that is, that in any given circumstance, someone with a given character only has one possible action.

can explain her experiences, he fears that he “was flattering her” and redirects the conversation: “See, Liza, I will tell you about myself.”

The Underground Man realizes losing himself in his own imagination and perspective distances himself from the actual world, and that disconnect results in “moral rot” (121). His moral rot causes emotional harm to those with whom he attempts to interact. Even worse than his persistent self-centeredness is his pretense of care, expressed for his own amusement and hiding his hatred. When Liza comes to visit him as he instructed her to, he openly tells her that he came to her to release his anger against the men he had gone to dinner with. He tells her, “I had been humiliated, so I wanted to humiliate; I had been treated like a rag, so I wanted to show my power. That’s what it was, and you imagined I had come there on purpose to save you, didn’t you?” (113). Because he dreams of himself as a benevolent hero, however, he expresses this desire to humiliate and to demonstrate his power by pretending to feel compassion for Liza, encouraging her to seek a better life, and even implying that he might help her escape the brothel. Once she comes to visit him and he is somewhat more free from the compulsion to manipulate, he speaks to her more honestly. As he presents the real contents of his heart on the night he spent with her, he tells her that by the time he returned home, “I hated you already because of the lies I had told you. Because I only like to play with words, to dream in my mind, but, do you know, what I really want is that you would all go to hell” (114). His hatred and lack of concern for her as a fellow human being are harmful enough, but it is his romantic reveries that cause him to create a lofty, apparently beneficent exterior to cover his hatred, inspire some degree of trust, and make the destruction of her hopes even more painful. Reveries provide a temporary escape or

create a temporary disguise for violent emotions that build up towards real experiences and people; when the reverie fades, the dreamer explodes.

Finally, reveries have corrupted the Underground Man's perception of reality so much that even if he wished to improve his interactions with real people, he no longer finds himself easily able to understand them. When Liza understands more than he expected her to about his motivation for pretending to care for her, he is shocked and writes, "I was so accustomed to think and imagine everything from books, and to picture everything in the world to myself just as I had made it up in my dreams beforehand, that I could not even take in this strange circumstance at once" (115). This comment confirms that his dreams are entirely unlike reality and influence his actions more than real experiences do. When reality does not match his imagined version, he does not know how to react. He embodies the harmful effects of reveries and self-contemplation that Dostoevsky's contemporaries feared. Joseph Frank writes that "high-flown Romantic ideals and attitudes are denounced as leading to a debilitating withdrawal from the world and the cultivation of a self-satisfied attitude of exalted contemplation."<sup>108</sup> Both Rousseau and the Underground Man perfectly fit this description.

*Notes from Underground* further develops the reverie mode that Rousseau began with *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. Beyond its formal characteristics, it centers on the narrator's internal experiences, especially those of his wandering mind, philosophical contemplations, and exaggerated imagination. Rousseau claims to find pleasing peace and delight in his reveries, but the Underground Man, while he too finds them attractive, is much more aware of their destructive power. Examined next to the Underground

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<sup>108</sup> Frank, *Dostoevsky* 105.

Man's exaggerated example, Rousseau too shows signs of the effects of trusting his imagination and free-floating mind. As their contemporaries feared, reveries led both writers elevate subjective opinions or emotions to the position of concrete truth, to reach strange philosophical conclusions, and to lose touch with reality. Neither writer's culture encouraged reveries; but insight into similar human experiences (as well as Dostoevsky's familiarity with Rousseau's writing, I believe) resulted in similar literary methods of capturing those experiences.

In the previous chapter, I used the terms "hyperconsciousness" and "hyper-self-consciousness" to describe Rousseau's philosophical contemplation, self-analysis, fear of others' opinions, and paranoia. Rousseau has varying reactions to different components of his hyperconsciousness; he enjoys exercising his imagination and examining his soul but is clearly tormented by continual effort to monitor his appearance before others and maintain vigilant suspicion of them. Dostoevsky and the Underground Man have no such mixed feelings; the Underground Man calls hyperconsciousness a "disease" (6).<sup>109</sup> Being a created character, unlike Rousseau of *Reveries*, the Underground Man serves as Dostoevsky's means of offering social critique; his exaggerated and destructive hyperconsciousness is a criticism of the society that produced it.<sup>110</sup> Specifically, it reflects

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<sup>109</sup> Notice the connection to one of the original French definitions of "reverie:" "délire causé par une maladie ou autrement" (delirium caused by one illness or another). ("reverie, s.f." *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*.) According to this definition and the Underground Man's statement, both hyperconsciousness and reveries are active, highly imaginative but unhealthy states of mind produced by some sickness. The Underground Man also claims to be physically sick (3), and his refusal to see a doctor echoes Rousseau's scorn for medicine (*Reveries* 74).

<sup>110</sup> The Underground Man himself seems to believe that his psychology is the result of his own character, but in Dostoevsky's opening note, he identifies the narrator as an "imaginary" character who represents the "current generation" of people who "positively must exist in our society, considering those circumstances under which our society was in general formed" (3). In other words, Dostoevsky attributes his narrator's

on the new form of loneliness that exists in cities. Rousseau was isolated and lost in his own mind while living on a barely-inhabited island or rural estates; he was alone in his loneliness. In the urban environment, however, the Underground Man finds isolation amidst crowds of people. His loneliness and unattractive physical environment combine with his self-awareness and contemplation of ideals to intensify his desire for something beyond having his physical needs met. He tells his listeners, “I will not accept as the crown of my desires a block of buildings with apartments for the poor. . . . Destroy my desires, eradicate my ideals, show me something better, and I will follow you” (34). He finds his “ideals” and “desires” unaddressed by society’s materialism. His frustration fuels the novel’s social critique of a society primarily concerned with scientific progress. Furthermore, these “apartments” epitomize urban isolation: they contain many people but separate them from one another. The Underground Man’s hyperconsciousness expresses itself differently than Rousseau’s because of his different setting, but nevertheless his experiences strongly parallel Rousseau’s.

The Underground Man’s description of hyperconsciousness includes components that I categorize as hyperconsciousness and as hyper-self-consciousness. That is, it gives him a heightened awareness of factors both internal and external to himself. First, he explains his “hyperconsciousness of one’s own degradation” (8). This form of hyper-self-consciousness results from his awareness that the more he understands ““all the sublime and the beautiful,”” ideals to which he aspires, the more he feels compelled to do “hideous things” (7). His intense sense of failure and inability to live up his ideals make

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faults to sociological conditions that shaped him. See Richard Peace, *Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 3.



him ashamed of himself. But, paradoxically, as he becomes more convinced of his “depravity,” he also begins to believe that his condition was “not in the least disease or depravity” but “my most normal condition” (7). So his self-awareness seems like a disease because it causes him moral pain and internal tension; yet he does not want to consider it a disease because it seems like an inevitable condition.

The apparent inevitability of the Underground Man’s compulsion to do things he hates comes from his belief in moral determinism, which Rousseau in some instances seems to share. Moral determinism holds that in any given circumstance, a person with a given character can respond in only one way. This belief underlies the Underground Man’s belief that he can neither change his character or refrain from the “hideous things” he sometimes feels compelled to do (7,8). Rousseau reaches a similar belief – that humans have little control over their own actions but act according to their character – towards the end of his life. Describing his opponents in a calmer tone than he had in earlier Walks, Rousseau writes that in their interactions with him they are “nothing but mechanical beings, who acted only on impulse and whose actions could calculate only according to the laws of motion” (*Reveries* 87). That is, he chooses not to blame them for their actions because he believes that given their characters and situations, they could not have acted any differently. The belief in moral determinism also constitutes a form of perceived hyper-consciousness, or greater insight into the laws directing the universe than most people have access to.

The Underground Man’s belief in moral determinism leads him to a sort of internal inaction; he does not believe his character to be malleable, regardless of his efforts. This type of perceived paralysis of character differs from the inaction Rousseau

and Prufrock face because of their hyperconsciousness. To the extent that hyperconsciousness caused Rousseau inaction, it came in the form of daydreaming instead of doing some more visible type of work. He also avoided social interaction and believed that the plot against him would any action he might take ineffective. For Prufrock, hyperconsciousness leads to indecision that, at least within the scope of the poem, really does prevent him from taking any external action. When the idea to do something specific settles into his mind, it pulls him into cycles of evaluation, analysis, predictions of others' reactions that eventually paralyze his will.

Although the Underground Man's hyperconsciousness does not remove his ability to take external action, it does prevent him from believing that he has any rational basis for action. His hyper-self-consciousness, or awareness of his inability to meet his ideals, and his hyperconsciousness, or awareness of principles outside himself, collide in his explanation for his belief that although he hates what he does, he "could not be otherwise; that you no longer had an escape; that you could never become a different person" (8). He calls this inability to change "inertia," "the direct, legitimate, immediate fruit of consciousness" (8, 16), and contrasts his condition of necessary stagnation with "straightforward persons and men of action,"<sup>111</sup> who "take immediate and secondary causes for primary ones, and in that way persuade themselves...that they have found an infallible basis for their activity." His denial that human will is the primary cause for man's actions demonstrates that he takes himself to be hyper-conscious – that is, to understand the way the universe functions more accurately than most.

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<sup>111</sup> "Men of action," as the Underground Man calls them, are those who do not suffer from hyperconsciousness. Believing themselves to have rational basis for action, they do not hesitate to act. The Underground Man calls them "stupid" (10). Interestingly, he alludes to Rousseau as a "real normal man," the "antithesis" of hyperconscious men (*Notes* 10; Peace, *Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground* 10).

But although he denies that what most people consider to be primary causes truly are, he lacks an alternative suggestion for what *is* the first cause, and he defines consciousness in terms of the endless search for a primary cause.<sup>112</sup> “Where are the primary causes on which I am to build?...I exercise myself in the process of thinking, and consequently with me every primary cause at once draws after itself still another more primary, and so on to infinity. That is precisely the essence of every sort of consciousness and thinking” (16). This definition of consciousness also explains his “inertia.” Consciousness consists primarily in seeking to know the underlying causes of everything one sees. For our narrator, knowing these causes is essential for setting one’s “mind...at ease” and a prerequisite for action. Presumably, he never discovers the first causes<sup>113</sup> he seeks, and therefore never finds satisfactory basis for action. He is left in “inertia.” And yet he carries his argument even one step further: if no one is the primary cause of his own action, no can blame others or be blamed for his actions (8, 17). He writes regarding his inability to resist impulses to do what he believes to be wrong,

And the worst of it...was that it all proceeded according to the normal and fundamental laws of hyperconsciousness, and with the inertia that was the direct result of those laws, and that consequently one could not only not change but one could do absolutely nothing. Thus it would follow, as the result of hyperconsciousness, that one is not to blame for being a scoundrel. (8)

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<sup>112</sup> This passage presents one of many objections to philosophical positions presented in Nikolay Chernyshevsky’s novel, *What Is To Be Done?* (1863). Chernyshevsky argues that the root cause of any action is man’s self-interest (Peace, *Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground*, 86). As Dostoevsky prepares to argue later in *Notes from Underground* that man is not wholly rational and does *not* always act for his own advantage (according to an egoistic definition of advantage), he lays a foundation for that argument by saying that humans do not understand primary causes as fully as they believe themselves to.

<sup>113</sup> Consistent with Dostoevsky’s strategy of arguing for one position by demonstrating through his characters’ experiences the destructive effects of holding the opposite position, this dilemma faced by the Underground Man may constitute a subtle argument against atheism. The problem of the endless search for a primary cause is solved by Aristotle’s idea of the “unmoved mover,” or an initial cause that needs no other cause, which Aristotle suggests could be God. Dostoevsky may be attempting to show that philosophical problems result from rejecting God. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Aristotle,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/34560/Aristotle/254718/The-unmoved-mover>.

This conclusion eliminates the possibility of justified revenge, and although the Underground Man hates this conclusion, he finds no convincing reason to reject it. His belief that human will does not determine human activity as directly as most people take it to leaves him with no ability to justify his actions in his own eyes.

But this belief does not prevent the Underground Man from taking action. He seems to suffer from a problem opposite to Rousseau's and Prufrock's; instead of being unable to motivate himself to take any action, the Underground Man finds himself compelled by irrational impulses to take actions that he knows to be unwise. For example, as he considers whether to fulfill his promise to meet Simonov and his friends for dinner, he concludes going would probably lead to social disaster. But once the idea of going has taken root in his mind, he feels that to not go "was the most impossible thing of all: once I feel impelled to do anything, I am completely drawn into it, head first" (*Notes* 64). He feels as though some internal force causes him to act against his better judgment.

This and other examples of irrational actions illustrate one of Dostoevsky's central messages: that humans are *not* purely rational beings who always act in their best interest. This is a direct argument against Nikolay Chernyshevsky, whose widely-read novel *What is To Be Done?* (1863) argued that utopia could be achieved in people simply understood what was in their best interest, because they would necessarily act accordingly.<sup>114</sup> The Underground Man vocally rejects this position, expressing his and Dostoevsky's belief that the exercise of one's free will, even for destructive ends, is essential to being human (29). He argues that acting irrationally and even to doing "what is injurious to himself" can be beneficial because doing so "preserves for us what is most

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<sup>114</sup> Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 414.

precious and most important – that is, our personality, our individuality” (27). While instances such as the Underground Man’s choice to attend the dinner although he knows that choice to be foolish demonstrate Dostoevsky’s belief in an essentially irrational component of human nature, it is not clear that they truly exemplify the exercise of free will. The impulse to go to the dinner does come from within the Underground Man, but if he feels irresistibly compelled to go it does not seem that he is exercising free choice.

So we see that different components of the Underground Man’s philosophy and life seem to contradict each other. He feels compelled to take actions he resists and unable to change his own character, but at the same time believes free will to be a necessary component of human nature. He sees no rational basis for action but argues that it is good to take irrational actions in order to “prove to himself that he is a man and not an organ stop” (29). If nothing else, these paradoxes demonstrate the complexity of Dostoevsky’s polemic strategy. There are multiple ways to interpret the Underground Man’s views and the extent to which they represent Dostoevsky’s. It seems to me, however, that one of Dostoevsky’s most central messages is that humans are innately irrational and rational egoism therefore cannot be true.

The Underground Man’s experience of hyperconsciousness differs from Rousseau’s in that he has a different understanding of human nature, human will, and the relationship between human will and action. But the Underground Man and Rousseau are similar in that both spend extensive time lost philosophical reveries and reach radical conclusions that shape the way they live.

The Underground Man’s experiences of hyper-*self*-consciousness, however, parallel Rousseau’s and Prufrock’s more closely. In Part II, when the Underground Man

begins to recount experiences from his past, we also see hyper-self-consciousness emerge in his deep fear of others' opinions of him. This type of self-justification more resembles Rousseau's and Prufrock's. He demonstrates his guttural, soul-controlling fear most clearly in his interaction with Liza. His dread of her coming to visit him reveals that any desire to help her pales in comparison to his overwhelming repulsion to the possibility of losing his heroic appearance and incurring her pity or disdain. The day after his first encounter with her, he gives the reader a snapshot of his "incessant" worry that dominates his mind: "What if she comes...it's horrid that she should see how I live for instance. Yesterday I seemed such a – hero to her, while now, h'm! It's horrid, though, that I have let myself sink so low, the room looks like a beggar's" (102). He has no thought of showing her kindness but only of how he will appear in her eyes. When she does come, his every action communicates fear, shame, insecurity and anxiety. He "stood before her crushed, crestfallen, revoltingly embarrassed, and...did my utmost to wrap myself in the skirts of my ragged wadded robe" (110). This is the epitome of self-consciousness: his first instinct is to try to hide himself from her. First he uses his robe; but since the robe itself indicates poverty and degradation, he tries to cover himself with his words. As anger builds up inside him to hide his shame and fear from himself, he says, "You have found me in a strange position, Liza. ...No, no, don't imagine anything. ...I am not ashamed of my poverty. On the contrary, I look on my poverty with pride. I am poor but honorable. One can be poor and honorable," I muttered, 'However – would you like tea?'" He obviously is ashamed at his poverty and has given her no reason to consider him honorable. Perhaps he realizes that his words will not cover the reality of his character or his circumstances, so he moves on to another technique: distraction.

Although she does not ask for tea, he leaves the room in order to demand that Apollon bring some, desperate for someone to come between him and Liza or to provide something other than himself for her to think about (111).

The Underground Man's attempts to preserve his image before others differ from Rousseau's in that Rousseau is confident of his own rightness and aggressively tries to persuade others to agree with him. The Underground Man, on the other hand, has no confidence in himself; so instead of relying on more complete self-description to produce a more positive image of himself, he tries to shield himself from truly being known and create an image of himself distinct from his true identity. Although Rousseau and the Underground Man have the same goal – to be thought well of – perhaps the process by which the Underground Man attempts to achieve that goal should not rightly be called self-justification.<sup>115</sup> He is not convinced that he is right; so rather than trying to convince others that he is right, he tries to deceive them with a false, inflated image of himself. In this attempt to create an external appearance in which he himself does not fully believe, the Underground Man resembles Prufrock, who speaks of “prepar[ing] a face to meet the faces that you meet” (line 27). In other words, he wants to create a “face” other than his true identity for the purpose of making a better impression in a social setting.

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<sup>115</sup> The Underground Man engages in a different process of self-justification, however, that is not embodied in his written reverie. The Underground Man affirms that humans need to confirm their own humanness to themselves: “the whole work of a man seems really to consist in nothing but proving to himself continually that he is a man and not an organ stop” (29). He believes that one may do so by taking irrational actions simply in order to demonstrate one's ability to do so. And notice the recipient of the proof: the goal is to prove “to himself” that he is fully human. The act of writing about his hyperconsciousness does not accomplish this task; rather, he claims that all of life should be a perpetual demonstration of one's individuality, which he sees as proof of one's value. While he reflects Rousseau in that both see and act upon the need to justify themselves in their own eyes, they use their respective written reveries differently in that process. Rousseau writes *in order* to justify himself; the Underground Man writes *about* the process of validating one's existence that takes place outside of the written world. So their psychologies are similar; their uses of the written form differ.

The Underground Man's interaction with Liza also reveals his version of the paranoia Rousseau exhibits. The Underground Man does not construct complex conspiracy theories the way Rousseau did, but intense emotional reactions build up within him at the thought of social interactions. Two days after his night with Liza, he dismisses his frenzy on the previous day as "nonsense, due to over-excited nerves, and, above all, as *exaggerated*. I always recognized that as a weak point of mine, and was sometimes very much afraid of it. 'I exaggerate everything, that is where I go wrong,' I repeated to myself every hour" (103). But the repetition of this observation "every hour" itself represents an attempt to calm still-tense nerves – and on that second day, too, the Underground Man "was so uneasy that I sometimes flew into a fury," in which he runs around his apartments and laments "the vileness" and "silliness" of the "sentimental souls" who would actually take him at his word when he seemed to show compassion. The fear of Liza's visit paralyzes him and sends him into another round of dreaming. He does not fear specific actions or negative intentions where they does not exist, but his overwhelmingly intense fear of this and other interactions also deserves to be called paranoia and a form of hyper-self-consciousness.

In his interactions with Simonov and his former classmates, however, the Underground Man does make unjustified assumptions about their attitudes and actions. When visits Simonov and his classmates barely seem to notice his presence, he concludes, "Evidently, they looked upon me as something on the level of a common fly. ...I knew, of course, that they must despise me now for my lack of success in the service, and for having let myself sink so low, going about badly dressed and so on which seemed to them a sign of my inaptitude and insignificance" (56). He attributes attitudes to them



that do not follow from the small piece of evidence he has, their failure to pay him much attention. On the basis of that fact, he concludes that they consider him sub-human, “despise” him for never being promoted at his government job, and believe poverty to be a sign of personal worthlessness. These conclusions are based on his deep fear, not logical reasoning. Similarly, when Simonov fails to apologize for giving him the wrong time for the dinner, the Underground Man concludes that “Evidently he had something against me. He must have made up his mind after what happened yesterday” (68).

Later on in the night, he demonstrates again the overwhelming emotional distress with which he responds to the belief that others do not think favorably of him. When the other men exclude him from their conversation after dinner, he paces angrily up and down the room for three hours (73). His agitation and humiliation accumulate until he “was so exhausted, so broken, that I would have cut my throat to put an end to it. I was in a fever; my hair, soaked with perspiration, stuck to my forehead and temples” (74). He exhausts himself by purposely intensifying his own experience of rejection by focusing on his own humiliation as he paces and by refusing to leave the hotel. His sweat and fever demonstrate the revulsion he feels towards his own unimpressive appearance in others eyes.

The forms of inaction that result from the Underground Man’s hyperconsciousness highlight its harmful effects. The Underground Man is well aware of these consequences; he names most of them. I have already discussed how his dreams prevent him from seeking personal growth, because the “contrast” between his “vice” and the ideals that he imagines living up to keeps him interested (53). So although one of his

purposes in writing his notes is to create a more “dignified” self-image for himself, he does not wish to accomplish this by actually changing. Rather, he simply wishes to create a more pleasing representation, accurate or not, of his still vice-filled self. Just as his contemplation of himself in comparison to abstract ideals removes his motivation to change himself, he takes his hyper-awareness of determinism to eliminate any good reason he would otherwise have for taking external action. He believes that one’s nature and circumstances determine one’s actions and, therefore, that people have neither “basis” nor “blame” for action (16, 8). The Underground Man’s philosophical contemplation leaves him believing that he will not find real justification for any action.

The Underground Man so fully and consistently immerses himself in reveries that they become the defining factor on how he understands reality. In this sense, reading serves the same function as his dreams, because in both he loses himself in a fictional world accessed through his imagination. He laments his own “divorce from reality” (121), and he identifies both reading and dreaming as the causes. He is shocked when Liza responds to him with pity, and he writes, “I was so accustomed to think and imagine everything from books, and to picture everything in the world to myself just as I had made it up in my dreams beforehand, that I could not even take in this strange circumstance all at once” (115). Although in this case Liza responds more positively than expected, his surprise illustrates a principle that helps to explain the isolation of all three narrators. All three have a set idea of the way others should respond to them; when they respond differently, our narrators withdraw instead of working to establish connections anyways. Rousseau justifies his withdrawal from society by saying that men do not deserve his attention (*Reveries* 66). They have failed to support him and his views as he

expected them to, so Rousseau distances himself completely. In this instance with Liza, the Underground Man at first accepts her compassion but gives her money as she leaves, reducing their interaction to one of economic rather than personal value (*Notes* 118). In his explanation, he says that “‘real life’ oppressed me with its novelty so much that I could hardly breathe.” In other words, because she did not act as he imagined she would, he is overwhelmed and cuts off the potential relationship. Prufrock does not give others the opportunity to meet or fail to meet his expectations, because he never actually interacts with anyone in the poem. But because he is convinced that they will not receive him favorably and that he will not be able to communicate effectively, he refrains from even attempting.

### The Message from Underground

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the Underground Man’s moral, psychological and relational corruption serves as an argument against the influx of Western culture, which Dostoevsky blames at least in part for creating the sociological and cultural conditions that drive his narrator to hyperconsciousness and reveries. Another central message of *Notes from Underground*, which the Underground Man presents somewhat more explicitly but does not follow through to its ultimate conclusion, is man’s need for Christ.<sup>116</sup> This argument comes in two parts: first, Dostoevsky rejects the popular competing view that humans are ultimately rational beings that exist primarily to exercise reason and to perfect society by meeting their own needs. In the Underground Man’s words and nature, Dostoevsky asserts that humans are *not* purely

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<sup>116</sup> Dostoevsky summarized “the essential idea” of *Notes from Underground* as “the necessity of faith and Christ,” an idea originally communicated in Section Ten of Part One but removed by censors (qtd in Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 425-26).

rational and need more than material comfort and logical reasoning to satisfy their souls. This part of his argument is explicitly stated. Using a chicken coop that shelters him from the rain as a metaphor for a society intended only to meet physical needs, he responds in Section Ten of Part One to those who tell him that he should be content with a chicken coop, “Yes, I answer, if one had to live simply to avoid getting wet. But what is to be done if I have taken it into my head that this is not the only object in life?” (33). He expects his readers to find his desire for something more than technological advancement and material comfort can provide ridiculous, but the Underground Man tells them, “Laugh away; I will put up with all your laughter rather than pretend that I am satisfied when I am hungry.”

Neither do his dreams provide intangible satisfaction, as Rousseau claimed that his, along with his study of the natural world, did. The Underground Man tries to tell himself that “better conscious inertia” than a lack of hyperconsciousness. But he interrupts himself midsentence: “Bah! But after all, even now I am lying! I am lying because I know myself as surely as two times two makes four, that it is not at all underground that is better, but something different, quite different, for which I long but which I cannot find! Damn underground!” (35). Joseph Frank writes that before the censors “mutilated” Section Ten, it clearly expressed that that “something different...for which I long” was Christ.<sup>117</sup> In the publication of *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky expressed his frustration with the censors for removing explicit references to Christ, who alone could satisfy spiritual longings. But the Underground Man, left without any knowledge of Christ in the published version of *Notes*, never finds what he seeks.

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<sup>117</sup> Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 425.

Rousseau and Prufrock show the same discontent with their imagined worlds, although they try to portray themselves as more “resigned” to their places in life. Rousseau admits that even the highest source of happiness that he has found does not fully satisfy him. After describing the ideal state of contemplation in some detail,<sup>118</sup> he claims that the one who reaches the ideal state of reverie has found “a sufficient, perfect, and full happiness, which leaves in the soul no void needing to be filled” (*Reveries* 55). And yet the sad tone with which he describes his separation from society belies his claim that his soul is content. In the previous chapter, I described the sadness he expresses at his aloneness. In his Ninth Walk, he reiterates his loneliness more poignantly, wishing he could “enjoy a few moments of pure, heartfelt affection, even if only from a babe in arms” so that he “would no longer be obliged to seek among animals the kind looks that I am now refused by human beings” (97-98). He knows that he has relational needs that reveries cannot fill. Although he enjoys a sense of connection to the natural world, and even tangentially to God through Creation,<sup>119</sup> his immersion in nature cannot ultimately replace social relationships. Rousseau’s sense of unfulfillment is not the same as the Underground Man’s deep spiritual cravings, but they are similar in that the only thing Rousseau can identify as the ultimate source of happiness – contemplation of self and of the natural world – cannot fulfill it, just as what the Underground Man’s surrounding culture tells him should satisfy him (material comfort, technological advancement, and rational activity) does not.

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<sup>118</sup> This is his description of the ideal state of reverie: “a state where the soul can find a position solid enough to allow it to remain there entirely and gather together its whole being, without needing to recall the past or encroach upon the future, where time is nothing to it, where the present lasts for ever, albeit imperceptibly and giving no sign of its passing, with no other feeling of deprivation or enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear than simply that of our existence, a feeling that completely fills our soul” (55).

<sup>119</sup> Cook explains that Rousseau saw plants as part of God’s artwork. This perspective inspired awe of God in him because of the complexity, beauty, and order he saw among plants (Cook, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Botany*, 17-18).

Prufrock finds his reveries similarly unsatisfying. His entire poem expresses his imagination in that he takes no external actions but only speculates about what would happen if he did. Afraid of the possibilities and paralyzed by uncertainty, he never takes action. Throughout the poem, he longs to retreat from painful analysis and indecision into unconsciousness, represented by sleep, or into his imagination, represented most vividly by the underwater “chambers” and mermaids with which the poem ends. But in the last line, Prufrock shows that he knows his imagination provides only temporary escape and not real resolution of questions that pulse through the poem. His reverie ends when “human voices wake us, and we drown” (line 131). Since he inevitably must return to reality, represented by the “human voices,” and since that return causes him to “drown,” we see that his reveries have no power to provide rational basis for action, establish mutually intelligible communication, create meaning, or give him life after death.

So we see that reveries and imagination may give each character entertainment and distraction but never complete fulfillment. Recognizing Rousseau’s *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, and Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as part of the same reverie mode highlights the continuity of human experience across distinct historical periods, sociological contexts, and continents. Matlaw claims that hyperconsciousness is part of “the tragedy of the modern man,”<sup>120</sup> and Belinski and Mikov described Dostoevsky’s “literary method...as an *analysis* of the soul and mind of modern man.”<sup>121</sup> While the exact cultural and historical context into which Dostoevsky writes may be unique, the reverie mode allows us to see that the

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<sup>120</sup> Summarizing the message of Part I of *Notes from Underground*, Matlaw writes, “hyperconsciousness may be a disease, entailing suffering, but man prefers suffering, which is the token of his individuality, to a life devoid of suffering but also devoid of individuality, hence of humanity. This chain of thought, then, asserts the tragedy of the modern man” (xviii).

<sup>121</sup> Neuhauser, “Romanticism in a Post-Romantic Age,” 346.

human experience Dostoevsky captures are not uniquely modern. Similarly, the stream of consciousness technique, to which I argue that the reverie mode is a predecessor, is considered distinctly modern and is often associated with the psychological shock and disillusionment following the World Wars. Again, while that technique does not develop until the twentieth century, the reverie genre demonstrates that similar human experiences and attempts to capture them in literature had existed for centuries.

## Chapter 3

### Longing for a New Order: Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Dostoevsky wrote into a culture soaked in Romanticism's influence and in responses against it. The Underground Man embodies some Romantic values, but he is ultimately designed as an argument against Romanticism (among other things). T. S. Eliot, too, incorporates some components of Romanticism into his literary philosophy although he rejects Romanticism as a whole. During his undergraduate years at Harvard (1906-10), Eliot studied under Irving Babbitt, whom Louis Simpson names as one of the three most influential figures in Eliot's "life and thought."<sup>122</sup> Babbitt considered Rousseau a symbol of the Romantic movement, which Babbitt saw as encouraging a dangerous elevation of emotionalism, individuality, and unrestrained imagination over intellect and control.<sup>123</sup> Babbitt taught that one could produce art superior to the Romantics' by embracing humanism, which balanced emotion with reason and exercised a "disciplined" imagination.<sup>124</sup> Embracing Babbitt's views,<sup>125</sup> Eliot shaped his entire career, in a sense, as a response against the Romantic aesthetic principles Rousseau embodied.

Seeking to develop his work as a poet along a non-Romantic trajectory, the young Eliot was frustrated to find that his contemporaries wrote only what Simpson calls "watered-down Romanticism," leaving Eliot to look to other times and places for

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<sup>122</sup> Louis Simpson, "T. S. Eliot, or Religion," 107. The other two are Jules Laforgue and F. H. Bradley.

<sup>123</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 353-54; Simpson, "T. S. Eliot, or Religion," 100.

<sup>124</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 353-54; James Miller, *T. S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet, 1888-1922* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 83.

<sup>125</sup> Simpson, "T. S. Eliot, or Religion," 116.



examples to imitate.<sup>126</sup> He was drawn to European culture, and after graduating from Harvard he left for Sorbonne University in Paris, where he pursued graduate study under Alain Fournier. Among those he studied under Fournier was Fyodor Dostoevsky; during the same years, 1910-11, he began writing “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Specifically, Eliot was reading *Crime and Punishment* while writing “Prufrock,” and several scholars point out resemblances between Prufrock and Raskolnikov. Among others similarities, both characters wander through city streets under the tormenting weight of indecision; both experience intense self-consciousness; both associate stairs with a specific dreaded action; and both find themselves lonely in a large city.<sup>127</sup> I argue that strong similarities also exist between Prufrock and the Underground Man, and, furthermore, that both use the reverie mode.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” shows many of general characteristics I associate with the reverie genre. The narrator expresses meandering thoughts as he walks aimlessly through winding, “half-deserted streets” (line 4). The poem emphasizes his internal experience. Like Rousseau and the Underground Man, Prufrock suffers from internal conflict and indecision and lacks confidence in his own identity. His poem flows from that tension. One of component of Dostoevsky’s work that Eliot most admired was his ability to probe the disturbing depths of the human mind even as it operated under normal circumstances. In his essay entitled “Beyle and Balzac,” Eliot wrote that

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<sup>126</sup> Simpson, “T. S. Eliot, or Religion,” 99.

<sup>127</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot*, (Cambridge, W. H. Allen, 1960), 21. Peter Lowe, “Prufrock in St. Petersburg: The Presence of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* in T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.’” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28.3 (2005 Spring), 1-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25167524>.

Dostoevsky's point of departure is always the human brain in a human environment, and the 'aura' is simply the continuation of the quotidian experience of the brain into seldom explored extremities of torture. Because people are too unconscious of their own suffering to suffer much, this continuation appears fantastic. But Dostoevsky begins with the real world, as Beyle does; he only pursues reality farther in a certain direction.<sup>128</sup>

Eliot speaks of people who don't understand their own experiences and of the ability of an author to probe beneath the surface of the human mind and soul in order to discover deeper layers of consciousness beneath daily experience. *Notes from Underground* exemplifies this ability of Dostoevsky's, and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" seems like an attempt to develop or imitate that skill.

#### A Reverie Poem

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is most commonly categorized as a dramatic monologue.<sup>129</sup> Reveries do share certain characteristics with dramatic monologues;<sup>130</sup> for example, both present a single character's voice and point of view. Nevertheless, I argue that reveries deserve to be distinguished from dramatic monologues for many of the same reasons for which they are distinguished from confessions. Confessions and dramatic monologues are essentially methods of communication from the speaker to the reader or to another (albeit silent) character. The intention to communicate presupposes the existence of both an audience and a message. The speakers

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<sup>128</sup> David Spurr and Hugh Kenner include the passage when they discuss Dostoevsky's influence on Eliot. See Kenner, *The Invisible Poet*, 95; David Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness: T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Criticism*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 24.

<sup>129</sup> Among others, Hugh Kenner (*The Invisible Poet*, 35), David Spurr (*Conflicts in Consciousness*, xvi), and Robert Langbaum (*The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1957), 77) refer to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as a dramatic monologue.

<sup>130</sup> I rely primarily on Melvin Friedman's and Robert Langbaum's definitions of dramatic monologues in *Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 26-27 and *The Poetry of Experience* 76-79, respectively.

of reveries, as we have discussed, hold an ambiguous relationship to their audience, speaking as though they wish to be overheard but explicitly denying their audience's existence.<sup>131</sup> In his discussion of historical antecedents for the stream of consciousness technique, Melvin Friedman writes that in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, "Rousseau holds up his own thoughts, in the process of formation."<sup>132</sup> Confessions and dramatic monologues serve as packages in which to present one's thoughts; reveries (both *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and other members of the genre) capture the internal processes through which those thoughts are formed.

As is the case in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and *Notes from Underground*, the priority placed on the speaker's thought process in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is evident in its organization of ideas. The poem follows no obviously logical progression of ideas but meanders along with Prufrock's thoughts from questions to external images, back to internal tensions, among past, present, and imagined worlds, and often returning in mental cycles to the same thoughts or variations of them. Although structural characteristics such as couplets and other rhyming patterns, structured stanzas, and literary devices such as assonance and alliteration distinguish the poem from the other reveries we have studied in that its form is not "shapeless" as Rousseau said of his *Reveries* (8) or lacking "system or method" (*Notes from Underground*, 37), the ideas it contains are not presented in a formally structured way. While Eliot's technique shows formal intentionality on the author's part, the content of the poem reflects the uncontrived and unpredictable nature of his character's thoughts.

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<sup>131</sup> The explicit denial of the existence of an audience is not a necessary criterion for qualification as a reverie although both *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and *Notes from Underground* include such denials. Reveries do, however, give some implicit or explicit reasons to question whether the narrator intends to have readers.

<sup>132</sup> Friedman, *Stream of Consciousness*, 56.

Secondly, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” shows the same undefined relationship between speaker and audience that characterizes the other reveries. Like *Underground Man*, who repeatedly addresses the “gentlemen,” Prufrock opens the poem with the line, “Let us go then, you and I” (line 1) and scatters references to “you” throughout the rest of the poem. At first glance, this seems to be a direct address to another character within the poem, justifying the poem’s identification as a dramatic monologue, at least with respect to the issue of audience. James Miller supports this interpretation by noting that when asked about the identity of “you” decades after writing the poem, Eliot responded that while he did not remember very clearly, he was “prepared to assert that the ‘you’ in ‘The Love Song’ is merely some friend or companion, presumably of the male sex, whom the speaker is at that moment addressing.”<sup>133</sup> Miller suggests that this companion could have been Harold Peters, a friend of Eliot’s with whom he often took walks through the city.<sup>134</sup> Alternatively, Prufrock could be addressing readers outside of the world of the poem directly, calling them to associate themselves with the speaker and his experience as expressed in the poem.

A third reading, however, gives reason to question whether “you” exists as person distinct from the poem’s “I,” meaning Prufrock. Many scholars point out that Prufrock suffers from a “split consciousness” in which one part of his mind thinks and acts while another observes and responds. According to this interpretation, “you” and “I” represent components of this split consciousness. Several scholars interpret images in the poem as demonstrating Prufrock’s internal division. A. R. Jones identifies Prufrock as the “patient etherized upon a table” (line 3), as if prepared for dissection or analysis which Prufrock

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<sup>133</sup> Miller, *T. S. Eliot*, 153.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* 156.

himself goes on to perform in the rest of the poem.<sup>135</sup> He divides himself in two in order to be both inspected and inspector. Spurr points out that Prufrock alludes to his “dual identity” by comparing himself to a “*pair of ragged claws*” (line 74, emphasis added) rather than to a single creature.<sup>136</sup> Elizabeth Schneider highlights the more dramatic images of Prufrock seeing his own “nerves” being projected onto a wall (line 105) and his “head...brought in upon a platter” (line 82).<sup>137</sup> Finally, unlike the Underground Man and the gentlemen, who remain sharply at odds with each other, “you” and “I” always appear in the same lines, seem closely associated with each other, and merge into “we” at the end of the poem (lines 129,131).<sup>138</sup> Whichever interpretation one chooses, the existence of conflicting plausible explanations of the whether “you” refers to a distinct person or a component of Prufrock’s mind aligns the poem more closely with the reverie mode than with the dramatic monologue.

Finally, the motivation Prufrock’s reverie as recorded in the poem matches Rousseau’s and the Underground Man’s apparent purpose in writing *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and *Notes from Underground*, respectively. Prufrock does not explicitly state his reason for writing, as Rousseau and the Underground Man do; in fact, he is *not* writing in the same sense that the other two are. He is not identical to the author himself, as Rousseau is in *Reveries*, nor does he, as a created character, undertake his own writing project as the Underground Man does.<sup>139</sup> In fact, one of the poem’s central themes is the essential impossibility of honest, mutually intelligible communication, expressed most

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<sup>135</sup> A. R. Jones, “Prufrock Revisited,” *Critical Survey* 3:4 (Summer 1968), 220  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41549304>.

<sup>136</sup> Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness*, 8.

<sup>137</sup> Elisabeth Schneider, “Prufrock and After: The Theme of Change,” *PMLA*: 87.5 (1972), 1105.

<sup>138</sup> Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness*, 12.

<sup>139</sup> Dostoevsky introduces the Underground Man as “the author of his own notes,” from which Dostoevsky takes “excerpts” to form *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 3).

potently in Prufrock's exclamation, "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (line 104).<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, there are identifiable parallels between the reasons for which Rousseau and the Underground Man write and those that prompt Prufrock's thoughts, which the poem captures. All three seek to analyze and understand themselves better and seek to release internal tensions; they enter reveries for their own benefit and not to create a product to present to the public.

Prufrock shows a distinct lack of confidence in his own identity, and for the most of the poem, he cannot find a satisfactory way to define himself. His search for insight into his own character parallels Rousseau's, who wrote in *Reveries* that since writing *Confessions* he has lost his confidence in his understanding of his own character (*Reveries* 60), and the Underground Man's, who says he has "taken up my pen" in order to "get to the bottom of" the strange "enjoyment" of pain he finds within himself (*Notes from Underground*, 8). As mentioned earlier, Eliot's poem opens with an image of a "patient etherized up on the table" (line 3), as though Prufrock himself is preparing to be dissected. Over the course of the poem, he shifts his attention from a specific dilemma about whether to attend the social gathering to questions about his own identity. Spurr calls the whole second portion of the poem an "attempt at self-definition."<sup>141</sup> Prufrock does not engage in pure and direct introspection or explicitly describe his character qualities or personality. Instead, images, recollections, and speculation about possible actions create a patchwork of insights into Prufrock's character that he seems to be trying

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<sup>140</sup> Prufrock's questioning the possibility of communicating effectively seems like a socially-oriented version of the Underground Man's implied question about whether it is possible to "be perfectly frank, even with oneself, and not take fright at the whole truth" (36). Prufrock's communicative difficulties imply that it is not possible, at least not for him, to be "perfectly frank" with those around him. The Underground Man seems to acknowledge, however, that to be honest with other people is more difficult than to be honest with oneself; this belief is built into the reason for which he expects to be able to speak honestly although Rousseau, who wrote for others, supposedly could not.

<sup>141</sup> Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness*, 7.

to fit together into a cohesive whole. In the process, he compares himself to numerous literary figures, historical figures, and animals, including a cat, a crab, a bug, John the Baptist, Lazarus, Hamlet, Polonius, and a Shakespearean Fool. Each comparison has specific, relevant connotations; but for now, we may see that the wide variety and number of beings to which Prufrock attempts to compare himself reveals the depth of his uncertainty in his own identity.

Secondly, just as the Underground Man recorded his musings in search of relief from oppressive memories, a tone of longing for resolution of tension colors Eliot's poem. Several different tensions are expressed. Most obviously, he explores the opposing forces of his desire for effective action and his indecisiveness leading to paralysis of the will. The opening stanza begins and ends with statements of intended action: "Let us go then, you and I," and "Let us go and make our visit" (lines 1, 12). But the more Prufrock thinks about the action he has just proposed, the more we see his "inertia," as the Underground Man called it – his internal drawing back from movement. Every proposal of action triggers mental wandering in an opposite direction. After that initial statement of intended action (line 1), his mind immediately retreats to the image of "the evening spread out against the sky" and a winding network of streets. The image of a "spread out" evening has no direction or movement and represents his withdrawal from the idea of making his visit.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, when he suggests to himself a possible way to begin the conversation ("Shall I say..."), his thoughts tend almost immediately towards the "narrow streets" and "smoke" (lines 70-71) that represent aimlessness and a lack of intentionality.

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<sup>142</sup> Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness* 4.

Secondly, we see two related tensions between social needs and a bent towards independence. First, he feels pressure to conform to social norms, represented by his “morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin” (lines 42-43), as well as by the references to tea party etiquette (lines 34, 102). His internalization of social norms can be seen in his fear of breaking them,<sup>143</sup> but we see an internal force opposing that one in images of rebellion against social expectations. Miller points out that to “wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled” and “part my hair behind” (lines 121, 122) were new fashions at Eliot’s time, representing his rebellion against traditional norms.<sup>144</sup> Kenner also notes that according to standard visiting procedures, a visitor would be announced to the guests in an upstairs room before he entered the gathering; so if Prufrock has reached the point where he can “turn back and *descend* the stair” (line 39, emphasis added), he must have already been announced to the guests. To leave at that point without entering the room would constitute a blatant breach in etiquette.<sup>145</sup>

But Prufrock’s internal conflict does not revolve only around meeting external expectations; he also feels torn between a deep desire for personal connection and fear of others’ criticism. The whole poem is motivated by his desire to express his interest in one of the women at the gathering, and according to Spurr, the image of greatest resolution and peace in the whole poem is the connection between Prufrock and the imaginary “sea-girls” in the closing lines (129-30).<sup>146</sup> But images of unmitigated loneliness also fill the

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<sup>143</sup> The Underground Man acknowledges the same fear. He writes, “I was morbidly afraid of being ridiculous, and so I slavishly worshiped the conventional in everything external. I loved to fall into the common rut, and had a whole-hearted terror of any kind of eccentricity in myself” (*Notes from Underground*, 41).

<sup>144</sup> Miller, *T. S. Eliot*, 158.

<sup>145</sup> Kenner, *The Invisible Poet*, 21.

<sup>146</sup> Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness*, 11.



poem, and Prufrock feels powerless to change his isolation. In the first stanza, he walks through “half-deserted streets” (4), and if “you and I” are both components of himself, he walks alone. He speaks of “prepar[ing] a face to meet the faces that you meet” (27), implying that even when he does see other people, only their constructed exteriors interact. Later, after claiming to have “known them all already” (49), he clarifies: “I have known the eyes already” (55) and “I have known the arms already” (62). None of his interactions constitute genuine relationships; they are expressed in terms of isolated body parts because the people have no meaningful connection beneath their surface-level conversations. When he finally suggests to himself what he might say to the woman, he begins, “I have gone at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows” (70-72). He perceives the city as full of “lonely men” because he is one; he also offers social critique of the urban setting, in which people can be surrounded by other people and still alone. But again Prufrock’s reverie is not primarily a message to others, pointing out flaws in their system and demanding change; it is primarily an expression of his own doubts and desires. He reaches no conclusion to present to an audience, as would be the case were he speaking a dramatic monologue. The poem captures unpredictable twists and turns of his thoughts, showing one of the defining characteristics of the stream of consciousness technique that would develop during Eliot’s century.

So we see that “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” shows the general characteristics of the reverie genre – emphasis on the speaker’s internal experience and a combination of purposeful thought and undirected day-dreaming presented through a narrator’s disjointed, repetitive, self-doubting thoughts without acknowledging the

reader's existence. Anthony Cuda calls the poem a "prolonged scrutiny of one's own fears and weaknesses" through which Eliot "opens a window onto the soul's inner world."<sup>147</sup> It also shares the three characteristics that distinguish reveries from confessions and dramatic monologues: it leaves uncertainty about whether its intended audience includes others or only the narrator's self, it is written for the narrator's benefit rather than for purposes of communication, and it is accordingly organized by the narrator's thought progression and not a logical or chronological structure. Using the reverie genre, Eliot captures a similar human experience to the Underground Man's and Rousseau's: that of an imaginative dreamer caught in hyperconsciousness.

#### Life, Death, and In Between: Trapped in Hyperconsciousness

Like Rousseau and the Underground Man, Prufrock retreats from uncertainty or emotional distress in his life to his imagination. In one sense, the entire poem is an expression of his imagination, since it all occurs within his mind and he takes no external action (except perhaps walking through the city as he thinks). Spurr describes Eliot's poetry as "often dreamlike in quality" and portraying a "descent to a submerged inner world"<sup>148</sup> that parallels Dostoevsky's underground world. More specifically, however, we see an example of Prufrock's underground imagination in the images of the mermaids. If the "beach" (line 124) represents the boundary between active thought and release into unconsciousness or imagination,<sup>149</sup> Prufrock gladly crosses it to enter the "chambers of the sea" in which his imagined world seems more present than reality. His desire for

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<sup>147</sup> Anthony Cuda, "T. S. Eliot's Etherized Patient," *Twentieth Century Literature* 50:4 (Winter 2004), 396-97.

<sup>148</sup> Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness*, xiv.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

retreat from reality shows that other being with other people seems to constitute a form of hell for him.

Prufrock also experiences the same categories of hyperconsciousness that Rousseau and the Underground Man do. We have already discussed Prufrock's self-analysis and, in Chapter 1, we mentioned how his fear of the criticism he imagines receiving prevents him from attending the gathering. He imagines pausing at the top of the stairs to

wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
 ... With a bald spot in the middle of my hair –  
 (They will say: "How his hair growing thin!")  
 My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
 My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin –  
 (They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")  
 Do I dare  
 Disturb the universe? (38-46)

His hesitation comes from the response he anticipates from other people. Even his successful efforts at putting together a presentable outfit do not defend him from the women's criticism. His clothes are "firm," "rich and modest," implying competence, confidence, and social propriety. These adjectives constitute one of the few positive self-descriptions Prufrock gives. The women he imagines, however, show no interest in his clothes; they criticize his body. It is as though they can see past the artificial image Prufrock creates to the weakness (represented by baldness, which indicates aging) and incompetence (or lack of youthful strength as indicated by his thin limbs) beneath. The possibility of receiving their condescension turns even his thoughts away from the idea of making his visit. He retreats into the comfort an endless cycle of "decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" (line 48), showing his hyper-self-conscious fear of his image before others.

Even before Prufrock names the dilemma of whether to visit the woman he is thinking about, the epigraph points to Prufrock's hyper-self-consciousness. In the epigraph, taken from Dante's *Inferno*,<sup>150</sup> a soul in hell says because he believes that no listeners will return to earth to spread reports of what he said, "Without fear of infamy I answer." He implies that if news of his words were to reach humans on earth, he *would* fear infamy and would *not* answer. Prufrock, being still on earth, cannot bring himself to speak honestly, showing the same "fear of infamy." This persistent fear torments Prufrock and makes living in society seem to him comparable to hell.

Prufrock experiences hyperconsciousness that parallels Rousseau's and the Underground Man's sense of possessing deeper insight into human nature and the nature of the universe than most people around him do. Prufrock portrays upper class Bostonian society as overcivilized but, as A. R. Jones says, "suffering from emotional and intellectual starvation."<sup>151</sup> Others are concerned with Michaelangelo (line 14), "toast and tea" (line 34), "novels...teacups...[and] skirts" (102), while he, like the Underground Man, suffers from unmet needs of which his society seems totally unaware. He takes his social critique one step further than the Underground Man does, according to Arden's interpretation, by showing other members of society as not only misguided and concerned with petty things but "spiritually dead."<sup>152</sup> In his hyperconsciousness, or heightened sensitivity to the meaninglessness of contemporary society's values, Prufrock

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<sup>150</sup> The epigraph is printed in the original Italian: "S'io credessi che mia risposta fosse / A persona che mai tornasse al mondo, / Questa fiamma staria senza piú scosse. / Ma per ciò che giammai di questo fondo / Non tornò viva alcun, s'i'odo il vero, / Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo." The translation is as follows: "If I but thought that my response were made / to one perhaps returning to the world, / this tongue of flame would cease to flicker. / But since, up from these depths, no one has yet / returned alive, if what I hear is true, / I answer without fear of being shamed." Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Robert & Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 317. Canto XXVII, lines 61-66.

<sup>151</sup> Jones, "Prufrock Revisited," 221.

<sup>152</sup> Eugene Arden, "Echo of Hell in 'Prufrock,'" *Notes and Queries*: 5 (1958 August), 363.

seeks a new form of order other than the existing social structure to reign in the chaos that seems innate in the universe and to give more meaning to his life than he has yet found. David Spurr points to Prufrock's desire to "murder and create" and "Disturb the universe" (lines 28, 46) as evidence that he finds wants to overturn the current forms of order and find something more meaningful and purposeful to counteract the universe's tendency towards disorder.<sup>153</sup>

Eliot experienced a similar search for order and purpose; he sought aesthetic principles and religious truth to guide his work and life. Following Babbitt's lead, he rejected Romanticism for its lack of "discipline," among other things, and adopted humanism as Babbitt did. Later, however, he found humanism too to be lacking the order he sought, and he turned to religion and joined the Anglican Church in 1927.<sup>154</sup> Prufrock is a created character and not explicitly Eliot himself; but critics agree that Prufrock seems to be only a thin fictional mask for Eliot that allows him to explore his own emotions and experiences without being labeled an emotional or confessional poet.<sup>155</sup> Elizabeth Schneider writes this: "Prufrock was Eliot, though Eliot was much more than Prufrock. ... Eliot was not either the dedicated apostle in theory, or the great exemplar in practice, of complete 'depersonalization' in poetry that one influential early essay of his for a time led readers to suppose."<sup>156</sup> If we take Prufrock as a representation of Eliot, incomplete though it is, we can see shadows of Eliot's religious questions under the surface of Prufrock's dilemma and search for order.

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<sup>153</sup> Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness*, 4.

<sup>154</sup> Simpson, "T. S. Eliot, or Religion," 100.

<sup>155</sup> Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness*, 2.

<sup>156</sup> Schneider, "Prufrock and After," 1105.

The most prominent religious question in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is the existence of hell and life after death. The poem begins in hell with the epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno*. The poem ends Prufrock being called out of his reverie back to reality, but he expresses the return to reality as the time when “human voices wake us, and we drown” (131). If returning to life is death, the rest of life is life after death.<sup>157</sup> For Prufrock, who seems to have no connection to God, life after death is hell. In fact, the whole poem is often interpreted as representing a living hell. Schneider calls it a “portrait of a man in Hell.”<sup>158</sup> Hell for him is both the self-consciousness he experiences in a watching society and the internal division of a split consciousness. Schneider points out that Prufrock uses “violent images [to] convey the extremes of self-shattering consciousness”; and these, she says, convince the reader that “we are visiting a kind of hell.”<sup>159</sup> Referring to the passage in which Prufrock describes the “eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” (line 56), Schneider calls Prufrock a “specimen insect impaled, to be stared at in its death agony as it ejects its insides.” She points out the violence involved in displaying “one’s own nervous system” on a wall, and finally to the “agonized split self” represented by Prufrock watching his head “brought in upon a platter” (line 83). By associating hyperconsciousness with death and hell, Prufrock surpasses even the Underground Man in the extent to which he expresses the pain that comes with hyperconsciousness. The Underground Man called it a “disease” – unwanted and unhealthy, but still belonging to the realm of life.

Prufrock’s questions regarding life after death extend beyond the existence of hell, however. Many of the people to whom he compares himself are those who have

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<sup>157</sup> Jones, “Prufrock Revisited,” 221.

<sup>158</sup> Schneider, “Prufrock and After,” 1104.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.* 1105.

returned from the dead with a message for the living, or who have interacted with those who have done so. First, as we have mentioned, the speaker of the epigraph falsely believes that Dante will never return to earth after hearing his message; Dante does return from hell to the living world, and perhaps writing *Inferno* constitutes passing on the message intended to stay in the underworld. Later, as Prufrock questions his identity, he says, “I am not Prince Hamlet” (line 111), whose torturous indecision hinges in part on his uncertainty about whether the apparition he saw was truly his father’s spirit, coming from purgatory to speak to him, or a demon sent from hell to deceive him. Prufrock does not feel his condition of paralyzed indecision worthy of comparison to Hamlet’s, but even denying his identity to Hamlet highlights some similarity in their experiences and their questions about life after death.

Before denying that he is Hamlet, Prufrock compares himself to Lazarus, who would know what happens after death. Prufrock allows the possibility of a greater degree of similarity between himself and Lazarus when he asks, “Would it have been worth while, ... / To say: ‘I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all” (lines 90, 94, 95). Lazarus appears in the Bible both as a man Jesus raised from the dead and as a character in a parable Jesus tells, in which a rich man in hell asks Abraham in heaven to send Lazarus (also in heaven) to earth to warn the rich man’s family that hell is real.<sup>160</sup> Prufrock does not specify what it would mean to “tell you all” (line 95), but one may speculate that the poem itself constitutes his message to the rest of society about the reality of the hell of hyperconsciousness. He also expresses again the implicit question of whether it is possible to return to earth after death and even seems to question whether

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<sup>160</sup> John 10:1-44; Luke 16:19-31. It is not clear whether these passages refer to the same man or to two different men with the same name.

such a return is a prerequisite for communicating truth. Hamlet's father can tell him about his uncle's affair and treason only *after* his death, and the rich man in the parable believes that Lazarus's message will carry more weight with his family than "Moses and the Prophets," whose writings Abraham points out that they already have.<sup>161</sup> Prufrock has so far found it "impossible to say just what I mean" while on earth (line 104), but if he were Lazarus it seems that he could speak more fully. His reference to John the Baptist, however, expresses fear that for one who has not died, speaking openly will *bring* death. John the Baptist's head was literally "brought in upon a platter" because he condemned King Herod for taking his brother's wife, and she prompted her daughter to ask for John's head in response to the King's promise of any gift she named.<sup>162</sup>

Prufrock finds no answers. Nevertheless, the questions underlying his words – questions about what happens after death and the connection between death and the ability to communicate effectively – show his consciousness of issues beyond most socialites' concerns. The relationship between Eliot and Prufrock mirrors that between Dostoevsky and the Underground Man: the narrators ask the authors' questions but never find their answers.<sup>163</sup> Dostoevsky believed people needed Jesus and Russian Orthodox Christianity,<sup>164</sup> but he does not give the Underground Man that option in the published version of *Notes from Underground*. The Underground Man knows what he does *not* want – materialism, rationality, or the underground – but Dostoevsky leaves him longing for "something...which I cannot find" (*Notes* 35) and never finds within *Notes*. Prufrock

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<sup>161</sup> Luke 16:29.

<sup>162</sup> Matthew 14:3-11.

<sup>163</sup> The Underground Man came close to discovering an answer in Dostoevsky's original version of *Notes from Underground* (see pages 82-83 in my second chapter), but in published version he only points out that man needs more than material comfort and reason; he does not imply such specific questions as Prufrock does.

<sup>164</sup> Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 211-12, 414.



asks more specific questions and seems to come closer to an answer. Eliot seems to wish he were more similar to those who have some obvious connection to God, such as a prophet or one whom He raised from the dead. But Prufrock himself finds no such connection. This too reflects the nature of the reverie genre; it tends to capture questions rather than answers.

That Prufrock and the Underground Man ask spiritual questions at all can be seen as a commentary on the consequences of the urban environment that both inhabit. When Rousseau found society oppressive but still longed to belong to a system greater than himself (despite his claims of self-sufficiency), he immersed himself in intensive study of plants. In the Seventh Walk, after describing nature's beauty and the joy he finds in the sensations nature produces, he writes that "My meditations and reveries are never more delightful than when I forget myself. I feel ecstasy and inexpressible rapture when I melt, so to speak, into the system of beings and identify myself with the whole of nature" (*Reveries* 74). Finding a pleasant connection to the natural world, Rousseau seeks no further. Perhaps the distance urbanization creates between people and the natural world motivates the Underground Man and Prufrock to seek meaning and identification with something greater than themselves in the supernatural world.

In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the inaction that flows from Prufrock's hyperconsciousness is even more central than it is for the Underground Man or Rousseau; it is the center of his frustration and the impetus for his self-doubt and his departure into the world of his dreams for escape. His desire for purpose and order gives him no solid basis for action. Prufrock longs to "murder" and "disturb" existing forms of social order

because of their inability to give life meaning. And yet he fails to “create” or discover an alternative source of meaning, and so finds himself floating without an anchor or a rudder, tossed back and forth by his desire to resist the cultural current that would have him squash his inner conflict and simply go through the motions of sociability and his lack of sufficient motivation or conflict to do so. Therefore, trapped between his frustration with inertia and his fear of others’ reactions to any he might take action, he does nothing.

Prufrock’s hyper-self-conscious anxiety regarding his image before others lead him to another form of inaction: he feels incapable of taking any action that is unexpected or inconsistent with others’ expectations of him. His feeling of entrapment is most clearly illustrated in this passage: he believes that visiting the women will subject him to

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
 And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
 When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
 Then how should I begin  
 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
 And how should I presume? (56-61)

Prufrock imagines that other guests have a “formulated phrase” for him – a single, set way they have already decided to see him. That “phrase” restricts him like a pin holding an insect in place in a display. Although he can “wiggle,” or slightly alter his position before them through insignificant things such as proper clothing, he feels no freedom to do anything outside what is prescribed by that “phrase.” He knows that “the butt-ends of my days and ways” are so different than what members of his society expect from him that he cannot bring himself to express his true feelings. “Butt-ends” summons the image of a cigarette butt – what is left over after the cigarette has served its purpose. According to society’s expectations, Prufrock can serve his purpose simply by attending the

gathering and acting according to social conventions; his emotions, inner conflict, and desire for more genuine connections are discardable and unwanted, like cigarette butts. He feels confined by others' opinions of him and unable to act.

Prufrock's self-analysis leads to inaction because his dissatisfaction with what he finds in himself tempts him to long for escape into unconsciousness. Images of sleep are scattered throughout the poem. Two have already been mentioned: the "etherized patient" and the sleeping cat. Ether anesthetizes, and Prufrock's tone as he contrasts his walk through the city with the unconscious evening indicates that he would rather be the anesthetized evening. The fog-cat of lines 15-22 floats through the city like Prufrock does, but it is under no compulsion to enter any of the buildings. It comes close to social gatherings, "rub[bing] its back upon the window panes" (15) and "curl[ing] once about the house" (22), but instead of going in or saying anything, it "fell asleep" (22). Because his introspection has shown him the depth of his social and communicative inadequacy, Prufrock would prefer to escape social interaction into sleep. These images reappear several stanzas later with a more clear contrast between Prufrock and the evening and cat. After claiming he should be a silent crab under the sea, he writes, "And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! / Smoothed by long fingers, / Asleep...tired...or it malingers, / Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me. / Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" (75-80). The juxtaposition of his question with the image of the sleeping evening-cat demands a negative answer – or at least implies that he wants to answer, "no," and that he would rather stretch out on the floor and go to sleep, where he might find "peace" instead of "crisis." But again, this desire for unconsciousness and resulting inaction comes from his assurance of his own

incompetence, which he has gained through self-analysis. If he thought he had the strength, it seems unlikely that he would still want to retreat into sleep.

Like Rousseau and the Underground Man, he retreats from life as he has found it into an imagined life, represented by the world under the ocean. In the world accessible through reverie, Prufrock does find order and intimacy. As mentioned earlier, the world of waves and mermaids exists in a state of “organic order” in which characters and their surroundings interact in natural harmony with no need for Prufrock or anyone else to impose an external, rationally defined order on them.<sup>165</sup> Spurr expands his analysis of this passage as providing resolution to tensions that had existed throughout the poem. He had earlier identified Prufrock’s desire for purposeful action and his environment’s tendency toward aimless activity as opposing forces. But here, there is no tension between Prufrock’s attempted momentum towards a specific question and the women who aimlessly “come and go” (line 13) and whose arms “lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl” (67), mirroring the distracting, directionless motion of the fog (which “slides along the street” (25) and “curled about the house” (22)). Instead, the “chambers of the sea” (129) provide intimacy, compatibility, and union of purpose.

And yet both Spurr and Prufrock recognize that these dreams, too, are insufficient. Spurr calls them an “escape as much as resolution” and points out that although the tensions of the rest of the poem do not follow Prufrock into his reverie, the poem’s major questions have not been answered.<sup>166</sup> Although like Rousseau Prufrock enjoys his reveries more than the Underground Man does, like both he recognizes that

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<sup>165</sup> Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness*, xiv, 10,11.

<sup>166</sup> Spurr identifies the poem’s major questions as “the problem of how one should presume, of how purpose and discourse can prevail over the aimless and inarticulate” (12).

they can only be temporary and are not objectively real. His imagined world is held under the control of time, which dominated so much of the earlier portion of the poem, which cuts his dream short when “human voices wake us, and we drown” (line 132). Here Prufrock expresses both that he finds life in his reveries, since their end is death, and that he knows they are not real, since it is “human” voices, not those of mermaids singing, that bring him out of his reverie.

### Modern Consciousness is Not New

Eliot’s central message consists at least partially in social critique. Through Prufrock’s experience, Eliot highlights a phenomenon that the Underground Man also experienced: people have acquaintances but remain lonely because they have only interacted as superficial exterior “faces” (line 27) concerned with tea, ties and art. Other than this social critique, no central conclusions emerge. Jones writes that “Prufrock, if it stands for anything, stands for the resignation or despair of a world searching, not for the answers to the human predicament, but for the appropriate, the meaningful questions.”<sup>167</sup> The lack of resolution in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” characterizes the reverie genre.

By comparing “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to *Notes from Underground* and *Reveries of Solitary Walker*, we see a continuity of the human experience captured by the reverie mode in slowly evolving technique. After analyzing *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, we concluded that Rousseau provided insight into the varying levels of consciousness, an uncommon idea at his time. He stopped at describing their existence, however, and did not attempt to give the reader insight into the actual experience of sub-

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<sup>167</sup> Jones, “Prufrock Revisited,” 221.

consciousness processes. Dostoevsky, too, is often acclaimed for his ability to capture human psychology in fiction. As the reverie mode enters the twentieth century in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” however, it begins to approach stream of consciousness technique. Lawrence Bowling characterizes stream of consciousness technique (and distinguishes it from the internal monologue) by its attempt to express images and sensations that would not ordinarily be expressed in language within one’s mind.<sup>168</sup> For example, Prufrock would likely notice “the yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes” (line 15) as a mental image without narrating his movement within his mind; but the poem captures the image as well.

The term reverie connotes additional characteristics that not all stream of consciousness writing shares, such as the narrator’s self-doubt, unresolved tensions and questions, and continual concern with his image according to other people’s perspectives. An essential element shared between the reverie mode and stream of consciousness writing is the piece’s limitation to a single, non-omniscient narrator’s individual experiences, expressed through a record of unfiltered, unstructured, undirected thoughts. Both Dostoevsky and Eliot were considered to be capturing uniquely modern experiences of dissociation from society, isolation in urban settings, and harmful psychological processes. Seeing *Notes from Underground* and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as part of the reverie mode and both influenced by *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, however, places not only these works but these experiences in a larger context of similar human experiences prior to urbanization. Each author modifies the technique, but the

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<sup>168</sup> Lawrence Bowling, “What is the Stream of Consciousness Technique?” 341. An internal monologue, according to Bowling, only expresses mental content that exists as language in the subject’s mind.

narrators' internal experiences are surprisingly similar – and therefore, not uniquely modern.

## Conclusion: The Reveries and Beyond

The reverie genre is designed to express the narrator's reveries. Reveries – and here I mean the state of being lost in thought or allowing one's mind to wander – come in various forms. Reveries can lead to an impressionable state in which one primarily receives sensations from physical surroundings, as Rousseau describes in his Fifth Walk, to contemplation of philosophical topics, or to analysis of one's own character, past, memories, and motivations. Reveries can also lead to speculation about one's appearance before others and to the imagination of non-existent people and events. But in addition to expressing the narrator's reveries, the reverie mode is also defined by certain characteristics of the way in which it expresses the narrator's thoughts. It places emphasis on the *process* of thinking and not only on the ideas or conclusions produced by that process. The reverie writer allows the reader to see the narrator's thoughts *as* they are being formed, in the order and condition in which they first appear to the thinker. The second characteristic follows from the previous one: a reverie does not restructure and reorganize the narrator's thoughts in order to present them more simply or logically to the reader. Finally, the reverie gives the reader some reason to question whether it is directed at a reader at all or only created for the narrator's own sake;<sup>169</sup> there must at least be some sense in which the reverie is written for the narrator's benefit rather than as a means of interpersonal communication.

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<sup>169</sup> This criterion becomes difficult to apply in cases such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in which the narrator is a fictional character who is not writing within the fictional world in the way that the Underground Man is. In cases such as this, we will apply this criterion to the thought process the author captures. Then we may ask, in order to determine whether the work in question is a reverie, whether the thoughts presented appear as though they would proceed just the same if we could not read them because of some self-interest the narrator has in thinking them. On the other hand, the work will not meet this criterion if it seems that the thoughts it captures would differ either in content or structure if they existed only in the narrator's mind and were not being presented in writing.



Based on *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, *Notes from Underground*, and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” we found several striking similarities among the personalities and experiences of the reverie writers.<sup>170</sup> Some of these character qualities and similar experiences likely preceded their engagement in reveries and prompted them to lose themselves in thought, while others resulted from repeated reveries. Each narrator finds himself in some form of isolation – either physical exile on a scarcely-inhabited island or urban isolation in which he is surrounded by people, of whom he considers few to be acquaintances and none friends. Their disconnection from society prompts two forms of reverie: self-analyzing introspection and speculation about abstract ideas that reveals a desire to be part of something beyond oneself. Rousseau finds a connection to a greater system in his study of botany; Prufrock wonders about life after death and the possibility of connection to God; the Underground Man finds nothing to satisfy this desire but states the need more explicitly than the others. Spending excessive time lost in one’s own mind, however, has apparently real negative consequences. Despite the extent to which each narrator thinks about how he will appear before others, he struggles to actually understand others’ perspectives. His focus on ideals or imagining of idealized experiences makes him resist real, in-person interactions that are necessarily unpredictable and not ideal. Having a narrator who shares these and other characteristics with the three narrators we have studied is not a necessary criterion for qualification as a reverie. Nevertheless, it seems likely that other reverie writers will share at least some of the experiences and character qualities that either lead to or result from reveries. The extent to which the three narrators on which we have focused resemble each other shows,

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<sup>170</sup> By this I mean Rousseau, the Underground Man, and Prufrock, not Rousseau, Dostoevsky and Eliot, since *Notes from Underground* and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” contain the reveries of the fictional narrators and not of the authors themselves.

I believe, some evidence that latter two authors were familiar with and responding to the earlier two's work.

When we attempt to apply this definition of the reverie genre to works besides these three, we find elements of the reverie genre in various places. There are two categories of cases that meet some but not all the conditions for qualification as a reverie. The first category contains works that describe the narrator's or another characters' experiences of reveries – that is, of allowing one's mind to wander into self-analysis, philosophical contemplation, enjoyment of nature, or another form – but do not present the reverie experience in a manner consistent with the reverie genre. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* provides an example of one such work. The narrator explains to the reader that she will "do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion.... I am going to develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought which led me to" her central conclusion, namely, that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."<sup>171</sup> This train of thought began as she was "sitting on the banks of a river...lost in thought" and continues to develop as she walks through a university campus where, because of the beauty of her physical surroundings, the "roughness of the present seemed smoothed away;...and the mind, freed from any contact with facts...was at liberty to settle down upon whatever meditation was in harmony with the moment."<sup>172</sup>

She describes a reverie much like Rousseau's: both choose a topic for contemplation and sit in or walk through nature as they think, finding peace in nature.

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<sup>171</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, ed. Mark Hussey, annotated and introduced by Susan Gubar, (Orlando: Harcourt, 1929).

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.* 5,6.

Although the experience bears strong resemblance to Rousseau's, however, the presentation of the experience aligns more closely with Montaigne's *Essays*. That is, she has reached her conclusion and now purports to communicate both it and the process by which she reached it to her reader. She remembers the progression of her thoughts, but the progression has already been completed. A proper reverie captures one's thoughts as they occur. It draws the reader into an internal journey whose destination the narrator does not know at the outset.

The other category of modern literature in which we find components of the reverie genre is in stream of consciousness technique, whose roots I have already pointed out in the reveries we have discussed. One key characteristic of stream of consciousness technique is its attempt to express various "states and levels" of consciousness, some of which are immediately present in a character's attention and some of which are closer to unconsciousness.<sup>173</sup> Friedman identifies *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* as "probably the most original contribution of the French eighteenth century to the study of consciousness."<sup>174</sup> We see the reverie genre's emphasis not only on one's internal experiences but on expressing thoughts "in the process of formation"<sup>175</sup> continued and expanded upon in stream of consciousness writing.

Another related characteristic of stream of consciousness technique by which Bowling distinguishes it from the internal monologue is its ability to capture components of consciousness that are not ordinarily expressed in language. At the end of Chapter 3, we discussed an instance of an attempt to put an image into words in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Dostoevsky also reveals his awareness that such a technique could

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<sup>173</sup> Friedman, *Stream of Consciousness*, 58-59.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.* 56.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.* 57.

exist (although he does not attempt to fully carry it out throughout his story) in a comment he makes through his narrator in *An Unpleasant Predicament*. He writes,

It is well known that whole trains of thought sometimes pass through our brains instantaneously as though they were sensations, without being translated into human speech, still less into literary language. But we will try to translate these sensations of our hero's and present to the reader at least the kernel of them, so to say, what was most essential and nearest to reality in them.<sup>176</sup>

While reveries do not necessarily put words to images, sensations, or other ideas that do not exist in linguistic form within one's mind, their focus on the whole of the one's internal experience provides antecedents for this endeavor.

At the end of chapters two and three, I argued that in recognizing the reverie genre, we find beneath the literary method a set of human experiences that are consistent across the centuries. Reveries and hyperconsciousness have the same effects on isolated individuals from Rousseau to Prufrock. Physical setting makes a difference for the likelihood of finding reveries enjoyable and for where individuals turn to find connection to something greater than themselves. Historical and cultural context make a difference in the content of one's reveries (when the Underground Man contemplates philosophical issues, the arguments of Dostoevsky's contemporaries are among the issues he chooses) and the commonness of the experiences the reverie genre tends to capture. For example, although strong similarities tie the Underground Man's and Prufrock's experiences to Rousseau's, the Underground Man and Prufrock are both meant to represent and criticize the existence of a more widespread problem in their respective societies.

Our contemporary sociologists would likely recognize many of the reverie writers' social critiques but attribute them, now, to the shift towards technological

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<sup>176</sup> Qtd in Friedman, *Stream of Consciousness*, 66.

communication. Sherry Turkle argued in a 2012 TEDTalk that technology is creating an endemic of loneliness by encouraging the replacement of face-to-face conversations and personal relationships with virtual connections.<sup>177</sup> Instead of only reading about or imagining alternative realities as the reverie writers do, we actually engage in virtual worlds in which, Turkle points out, we can edit our words and images before making them available to the public. Having the ability to remain almost continually “connected” promotes constant concern with the way we appear before others rather than with other people themselves. Aren’t Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social networks the perfect way to “prepare faces to meet the faces that we meet”? If the inability to self-edit during face-to-face interactions makes us avoid them, are we taking one step closer to the Underground Man’s “divorce from reality”? Is online the new underground?

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<sup>177</sup> Sherry Turkle, “Connected, but alone?” April 2012, transcript, TED Talk. [http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry\\_turkle\\_alone\\_together/transcript#t-347000](http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together/transcript#t-347000)

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