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**THE DOUBLE AND
THE GAMBLER**

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

THE DOUBLE
AND
THE GAMBLER

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Translated from the Russian by
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With an introduction by
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INTRODUCTION

In my view, all Russians are that way, or are inclined to be that way. If it's not roulette, it's something else like it.

Mr. Astley in *The Gambler*

Dostoevsky knew the passion for gambling very well; he was under its sway intermittently for some eight years, from his first trip abroad in 1863, where he had beginner's luck at roulette in Wiesbaden, until the spring of 1871, when he was again in Wiesbaden and lost everything almost at once. At one point during those years he even gambled away his young wife's wedding ring. This last time, however, gripped by a sort of mystical terror, he went running in search of the local Russian priest, lost his way in the dark, and wound up not in front of the Orthodox church but in front of a synagogue. There, for whatever obscure reason, something decisive occurred. "It was as though I had had cold water poured over me," he wrote to his wife. "A great thing has been accomplished within me, a vile fantasy that has *tormented* me for almost ten years has vanished." And indeed he never gambled again.

For Dostoevsky, roulette was not only a means of getting rich "suddenly, in two hours, without any work," as Alexei Ivanovich, the narrator and hero of *The Gambler*, says, but also "some defiance of fate, some desire to give it a flick, to stick [his] tongue out at it." What fascinated him and possessed him was the "poetry" of the game of chance, the look into the abyss, the ultimate risk, a susceptibility that he saw as part of the "unseemliness" of the Russian character. But for Dostoevsky, as for his hero, that unseemliness had its positive side precisely in its impracticality; it was open to passion and to the unforeseeable. "Perhaps I'm a dignified man," Alexei Ivanovich says to Polina,

but I don't know how to behave with dignity. Do you understand that it may

be so? All Russians are that way, and you know why? Because Russians are too richly and multifariously endowed to be able to find a decent form for themselves very quickly. It's a matter of form. For the most part, we Russians are so richly endowed that it takes genius for us to find a decent form. Well, but most often there is no genius...

The problem of giving expression to this richly endowed but as yet unformed Russian character challenged Dostoevsky throughout his creative life. The old tutor Nikolai Semyonovich discusses it at the end of *The Adolescent* (Dostoevsky's penultimate novel, published in 1875), implicitly drawing a comparison with the work of Tolstoy. "Yes, Arkady Makarovich," he writes to the adolescent hero,

you are *a member of an accidental family*, as opposed to our still-recent hereditary types, who had a childhood and youth so different from yours. I confess, I would not wish to be a novelist whose hero comes from an accidental family! Thankless work and lacking in beautiful forms. And these types in any case are still a current matter, and therefore cannot be artistically finished.

Dostoevsky chose to be precisely that unenviable novelist. In 1863, when the idea of *The Gambler* first came to him, he wrote to his friend Nikolai Strakhov: "The subject of the story is...a certain type of Russian abroad. Note: Russians abroad were a big topic in the newspapers this summer. All this will be reflected in my story. And also in general it will reflect the contemporary moment (as much as possible, of course) of our inner life." Dostoevsky constantly tried to capture that "contemporary moment" or "current matter" which had not yet found expression. That is one of his most distinctive qualities as a writer. Five years later, after months of work on what would eventually become *The Idiot*, he wrote to another friend, the poet Apollon Maikov, about his idea of portraying "*a perfectly beautiful man...*" The idea flashed even earlier in some sort of artistic form, but only *some sort*, and what's needed is the full form. Only my desperate situation forced me to take up this as yet premature thought. I took a risk, as at roulette: 'Maybe it will develop as I write!' " The gambler's defiance of fate, the risk of

embarking on the unforeseeable, thus becomes a metaphor for Dostoevsky's own artistic process.

The two short novels brought together here were both gambles, but of very different sorts and separated by a period of twenty years. The first, *The Double*, dates to 1845. Dostoevsky was then twenty-four years old and still intoxicated with the praise that had been showered on his first novel, *Poor Folk*, which had been finished in the spring of that year and shown in manuscript to the foremost critic of the day, Vissarion Belinsky. Thirty-two years later, in the January 1877 issue of his *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky wrote of how Belinsky had summoned him a few days after that. Carried away with admiration, the fiery critic had cried out to him: "This is the mystery of art, this is the truth of art! This is the artist's service to truth! The truth is revealed and proclaimed to you as an artist, it has come as a gift. Value your gift, then, and remain faithful to it, and you will be a great writer!" Dostoevsky had left Belinsky, as he says, "in rapture."

I stopped at the corner of his house, looked at the sky, at the bright day, at the people passing by, and felt with my whole being that a solemn moment had occurred in my life, a break forever, that something altogether new had begun, something I had not anticipated even in my most passionate dreams... I recall that moment with the fullest clarity. And afterwards I could never forget it. It was the most ravishing moment of my whole life. When I was at hard labor, remembering it strengthened me spiritually. Even now I am ecstatic each time I remember it.

Belinsky had urged him to "remain faithful" to his gift. Another writer might have heeded that advice and continued on the successful path of portraying ordinary people in a sentimental manner and, as Konstantin Mochulsky put it, with "a humanistic-philanthropic tendency ('the humblest person is also a man')." Instead, Dostoevsky wrote *The Double*.

Poor Folk was published on January 15, 1846, in the *Petersburg Almanac*, edited by the poet Nikolai Nekrasov, who had originally brought the manuscript to Belinsky. *The Double*, which Dostoevsky had begun during the summer of 1845, was published two weeks later, on January 30, 1846, in the journal *Notes of the Fatherland*. The closeness in time belies the great difference between them. Belinsky was reserved when Dostoevsky read several chapters from *The Double* at a soirée in his apartment, to which a

number of well-known critics and writers, among them Ivan Turgenev, were invited. In the February 1846 issue of *Notes of the Fatherland*, along with praise, he allowed himself some criticism of the novel's prolixity. Other critics were harsher, accusing Dostoevsky of paraphrasing or even plagiarizing Nikolai Gogol's "Diary of a Madman" or of making a hodgepodge of Gogol, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and other lesser-known writers. Above all, *The Double* seemed a betrayal of the "realism" to which Belinsky and his followers were devoted, and which they found so satisfyingly embodied in *Poor Folk*. "We certainly were hoodwinked, my friend, with Dostoevsky the genius," Belinsky wrote later to the eminent critic Pavel Annenkov. The striking originality of *The Double* passed them by. But its publication was enough to marginalize Dostoevsky in Russian literature for many years to come, an exacerbation that may have driven him towards radical politics, ending in his arrest in April 1849 and his mock execution eight months later, followed by ten years of hard labor and Siberian exile. This first gamble was an artistic one, and it cost him dearly.

In the evening of the day he handed the manuscript of *Poor Folk* to Nekrasov, Dostoevsky went to visit a former friend. As he recalled in the same January 1877 issue of *Diary of a Writer*: "We spent the whole night talking about *Dead Souls* and reading from it, as we had done I don't remember how many times. That happened then among young people; two or three would get together: 'Well, gentlemen, let's read Gogol!'—and they might sit and read all night." We tend to forget that Gogol's greatest works, "The Overcoat" and the first part of *Dead Souls*, were published only three years before the moment Dostoevsky describes here and still dominated the literary scene. Gogol's fantastic Petersburg, his world of government clerks, offices, and the table of ranks, of nonentities and impostors, is everywhere present in Dostoevsky's early work. In fact, Dostoevsky's dialogue/struggle with Gogol went on throughout his life. But *The Double* is specifically and quite obviously an expansion on "The Diary of a Madman" and "The Nose." It represents not a plagiarism or imitation, but a "rethinking of Gogol," as Mochulsky observed. What did this "rethinking" involve?

In the autumn of 1845, Dostoevsky wrote to his brother Mikhail about *The Double*, not quoting from the novel but describing his work on it in the voice of its hero, the titular councillor Yakov Petrovich Goliadkin:

Yakov Petrovich Goliadkin upholds his character fully. A terrible scoundrel,

you can't get at him. He simply doesn't want to go ahead, claiming that he's just not ready yet, and that meanwhile he's his own man now, that he's never mind, maybe also, and why not, how come not; why, he's just like everybody else, only he's like himself, but then just like everybody else! What is it to him! A scoundrel, a terrible scoundrel! Before the middle of November, there's no way he can agree to end his career.

Goliadkin, as Mochulsky noted, “emerges and grows out of the verbal element. The writer had first to assimilate his character's intonations, to speak him through himself, to penetrate the rhythm of his sentences and the peculiarities of his vocabulary, and only then could he see his face. Dostoevsky's characters are born of speech—such is the general law of his creative work.” In Gogol, with the one exception of “The Diary of a Madman,” the verbal element is the narrator's voice, not the character's. Gogol's characters are entirely objectified, like parts of nature, pure products of the narrator's words about them; they have no consciousness, and that, in fact, is what makes them so remarkable. For Dostoevsky, on the other hand, consciousness is the central issue: the narrator's speech in *The Double* is a projection of and dialogue with Goliadkin's consciousness; we are given no outside position from which to view him. “Even in the earliest ‘Gogolian period’ of his literary career,” Mikhail Bakhtin observed,

Dostoevsky is already depicting not the “poor government clerk” but the *self-consciousness* of the poor clerk...That which was presented in Gogol's field of vision as an aggregate of objective features, coalescing in a firm socio-characterological profile of the hero, is introduced by Dostoevsky into the field of vision of the hero himself and there becomes the object of his agonizing self-awareness.

This was the “small-scale Copernican revolution,” in Bakhtin's phrase, that Dostoevsky carried out “when he took what had been a firm and finalizing authorial definition and turned it into an aspect of the hero's self-definition.” The failure to grasp the major implications of this shift in artistic visualization probably accounts for the critical incomprehension that greeted *The Double*.

The disintegration, the inner plurality, of isolated consciousness that Dostoevsky first explored through Mr. Goliadkin remained a constant theme

of his work. Many years later, he wrote that he had “never given anything more serious to literature” than the idea of *The Double*. Mr. Goliadkin is the precursor of the man from underground, of Velchaninov in *The Eternal Husband*, of Stavrogin in *Demons*, of Versilov in *The Adolescent*, and finally, most tellingly, of Ivan Karamazov. The notion that *The Double* is an exploration of the abnormal and pathological, the description of a man going mad, is mistaken (though Otto Rank, in his *Don Juan, A Study of the Double*, found in it “an unsurpassed clinical exactitude”). Dostoevsky was concerned here, as everywhere, with penetrating into the depths of the *normal* human soul, but by means of an extreme case and a bold device—the “literal” splitting of his hero into two Goliadkins. The attempt to determine whether Mr. Goliadkin Jr. is a flesh-and-blood double or a fantasy provoked by the “persecution mania” of Mr. Goliadkin Sr. runs into a host of difficulties as we follow the various turns of the story. Dostoevsky deliberately leaves the boundary between fantasy and reality undetermined. The whole novel thus becomes an embodiment not only of psychological but of ontological instability.

The Double was the first expression of Dostoevsky’s genius, prefiguring his later work in a way not to be found in anything else he wrote in those years or even in the first years after his return from exile in 1860. In a letter to his brother in 1859, he spoke of his plans to rewrite it: “In short, I’m challenging them all to battle, and, finally, if I don’t rewrite *The Double* now, when will I rewrite it? Why should I lose an excellent idea, a type of the greatest social importance, which I was the first to discover, of which I was the herald?” But nothing came of it. For the three-volume edition of his collected works published in 1865 by the bookseller F. T. Stellovsky, he simply abridged the text (that is the version translated here) and supplied it with a new subtitle, “A Petersburg Poem.” It was only with *Notes from Underground*, published in 1864, that he returned to the “idea” of *The Double*, not to rewrite it but to re-create it with incomparably more human experience and artistic skill.

Notes from Underground opened the way for the five great novels on which Dostoevsky’s fame chiefly rests. In their shade, however, lie some smaller works of a rare formal perfection, more concentrated and at times more penetrating than the major novels, works such as *The Eternal Husband*, “The Meek One,” and “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man.” *The Gambler* belongs to their number.