Dostoevsky and Max Stirner

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I

In this presentation, we want to show how a German philosopher Max Stirner's *The Ego and its Own* played its particular roles on the formation of Dostoevsky's novels. We could not say that this problem has been fully studied until today. So far as we know, we have only a study on this subject by Н.Отверженный (Штирнер и Достоевский, 1925).

It is a very precious study from our point of view. He studied principally on an extraordinary affinity between Stirner's ideas and those of Dostoevsky's heroes.

For example he takes the hero of *Notes from Underground*, Raskolnikov, Dolgoruky, Versilov and Ivan Karamazov. He compares the discourses of these heroes with the phrases cited from Stirner's philosophy and there finds its clear traces. It is indeed very interesting, but we consider such a comparison is a little superficial, because it could not seize the essence of the matter. We would think the literary relation between Stirner and Dostoevsky more complicated and profounder.

Max Stirner (1806-1856) is a German philosopher whose ideas are the most radical and the most revolutionary. He rejects all social institutions, states, religions that have oppressed man's ego. He doesn't admit any other authorities but his own. Man's ego is only a true reality.

His major work is *The Ego and Its Own* (*Der Einige und sein Eigentum*, 1845). We quote here several phrases from this book that might represent plainly his ideas.

"Thousands of years of civilization have obscured to you what you are, have made you believe you not egoists but are called to be idealists (‘good men’). Shake that off! Do not seek for freedom, which does precisely deprive you of yourselves, in ‘self denial’: but seek for yourselves, become egoists, become each of you an almighty ego." (*The Ego and Its Own*, Cambridge texts in the history of political thought, translated by Steven Tracy Bington, p.147, italic is Stirner's).

"My freedom becomes complete only when it is my – might but by this I cease to be a merely free man, and become an own man. Why is the freedom of the people a ‘hollow word’? Because the peoples have no might! With a breath of the living ego I blow people over, be it the breath of a Nero, a Chinese emperor, or a poor writer. Why is it that the G…. legislatures pine in vain for freedom, and are lectured for it by the cabinet ministers? Because they are not of the ‘mighty’! Might is a fine thing, and useful for many purposes; for ‘one goes further with a handful of might than with a bagful of right’. You long for freedom? You fools! If you took might, freedom would come of itself. See, he
who has might ‘stands above the law’. How does this prospect taste to you, you ‘law-abiding’ people? But you have no taste!” (Ibid., p.151, italic is Stirner’s).

“If religion has set up the proposition that we are sinners altogether, I set over against it the other: we are perfect altogether! For we are, every moment, all that we can be; and we need be more. Since no defect cleaves to us, sin has no meaning either. Show me a sinner in the world still, if no one any longer needs to do what suits a superior! ……We are perfect altogether, and on the whole earth there is not one man who is sinner! There are crazy people who imagine that they are God the Father, God the Son, or the man in the moon, and so too the world swarms with fools who seem to themselves to be sinners: but, as the former are not the man in the moon, so the latter are—not sinners. Their sin is imaginary.” (Ibid., p.317).

II

It isn’t so difficult to find the same radical and dangerous insistence of individualism in the discourses of Dostoevsky’s heroes.

We admit its first expression in a curious and grotesque figure of Prince Volkovsky in the novel The Humiliated and Wronged. In this case, one could say that his discourses of Stirnerian ideas are unrefined. In Notes from Underground we meet the truly serious expression of Stirnerian ego. The self-consciousness of this underground man that sneers down the crystal Palace as a future symbol of human society could be said that of Stirnerian ego. Indeed we could easily find in this novel the same protest against the collectivism that oppresses the true individuality as in Stirner’s book.

The underground man confessed, “I’d sell the whole world for a kopeck if people would only stop bothering me. Should the world go to hell, or should I go without my tea? I say, let the world go to hell as long as I can always have my tea.” (Notes from Underground, translated by Michael R. Katz, Norton, 1988, p.83).

Here we find the strong insistence of Stirnerian ultra ego. But we could not say the underground man is a persona formed according to Stirnerian ideas. His discourses are full of cynicism and extraordinarily chaotic.

Why such a bitter cynicism? The underground man doesn’t believe really Stirnerian ideas. For the author who had experienced the Dantesque hell of tsarist prison in Siberia, the ideas of Stirner are reduced to a utopia. Notes from Underground is said a parody of the novel What is to be done? of Chernyshevsky. But at the same time it is also a parody of Stirnerian philosophy.

This book of Stirner is very simple in its logical strategy. One could find easily that his logic is founded upon an idée fixe that every thing which has a right over his ego
should be denied. Then Stirner’s refusal to every authority attains to thorough denial of the external world. In spite of its extremely anarchistic denial of others’ right, Stirner insists that man should unite with others respecting every one’s ego. But is it possible for the mankind to have that sort of union? It would be unthinkable. It is the reason why Hobbes insisted on the necessity of state. One could say that human history is the process of conciliation of men’s egoism. To be short, Stirner rejects whole process of human efforts that have made a compromise among human individual egos. Stirner insists that one should return to one’s ego purified from any authority that oppresses him.

But man is a being that is obliged to live in pluralistic human relations. It is unthinkable for a human being to live in the complete solitude. But Stirner insists, “All is nothing to me”. According to Stirner, this “nothing” is creative. What does this ‘creative’ mean then? A true union of egos who reject any subjection must be a creation in this world. In the novel *Notes from Underground* the underground man proposed such a utopian relation to a wretched girl. But he mocked it himself. He didn’t believe in a Stirnerian union.

In spite of that after *Notes from Underground* Dostoevsky created repeatedly ultra-egoistic heroes. Why didn’t Dostoevsky abandon the ideas of Stirner? It would be by fatal shock of keen consciousness of one’s uniqueness that had been his trauma through all his life.

III

We want to say Dostoevsky’s attitude for Stirner’s thought was ambivalent. He had a very strong sympathy for it, but at the same time he was very critical of this radical thought that denied Christ.

Then what aspect of Stirnerian ideas did attract Dostoevsky? They say that Stirner is a predecessor of existentialism. In the existentialism the existence precedes the essence. For Stirner, the abstract idea (the essence) reduced from concrete things is always a ghost, a spook, while the truly real is one’s ego alone. In such a way Stirner says ‘no’ to every thing that surpasses one’s own. He writes in the conclusion of his book:

“*I am owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as unique. In the unique one* the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, of which he is born. Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and pales only before the sun of this consciousness. If I concern myself for myself, the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself, and I may say: All things are nothing to me.” (Stirner, op., cit., p.324, italics are
Stirner's).

It goes without saying that Stirner's standpoint is atheism. Stirner's discovery of uniqueness of human ego has resulted from the negation of Christianity. If there were not God, one could not help discovering a new God. Then he finds his ego itself as the unique one in this world. To discover one's uniqueness in this world, it is inevitable to have a critical moment in his life.

Dostoevsky's existential experience had begun just before his execution which was to be carried out after Petrashevsky affair. Dostoevsky told of the idea which occupied then his mind: what should become his being after his execution. Regarding the tower of a church shining in the morning sunbeam, he thought in his mind he should be assimilated into that element of sunray. He told several times of the same experience. But he didn't pray to God. Why didn't he pray to God? We couldn't say he had lost his belief in God.

At first he didn't believe his execution as a fact. But when the execution came out an undeniable reality, who could accept it without confusion? Although his belief in God was strong, he would have found himself in a panic, being surrounded by a mysterious wall of inevitable death. He must have searched in his mind what could support his fear and disturbance. But he could not find anything that assured him the world to come. Before the death coming, the ready-made ideas must have lost their meanings. Only the keen consciousness of uniqueness of himself should have caught him. Dostoevsky bade in his mind farewell to all of his friends, looked back on his past and looked around. These behaviors connote Dostoevsky's keen consciousness of his uniqueness.

As we said, in such an extremely marginal situation one should experience that every idea that has preoccupied his mind totally collapses and one should stand face to face with nothingness. And such nothingness must accompany a sense of strong assurance of one's uniqueness. Perhaps a keen sense of own uniqueness had fallen on Dostoevsky like the brilliant morning sunbeam.

IV

But the second spiritual revolution occurred in Dostoevsky through four years' exile. He experienced this time the Dantesque hell of tsarism through and through. He finds Christ alive vividly among the Russian folk. He discovered there the true Russian soul. In such a way his career as a great writer begins. It is well known that he sent a letter to Mme Fonvizin, a wife of Decembrist, in which he confessed "I am a child of the age, a child of the age of unfaith and doubt now and (I know it ) shall remain so to the grave.
What terrible tortures has this thirst to believe cost me, and still costs me now, a thirst which is all the stronger in my soul the more proof I have against it. However, God sometimes sends me moments in which I am entirely serene; in these moments I love and find that I am loved by others, and in such moments I have formed in myself a credo in which everything is clear and holy for me. This credo is very simple. Here it is: to believe that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more sympathetic, more reasonable, more manly, and more perfect than Christ, and not only is there nothing, but, I tell myself with jealous love, there can be nothing. Besides if anyone proved to me that Christ was outside the truth, and it really was so that the truth was outside Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth.” (Cited from Ernest J. Simmons: Dostoevsky, The Making of a Novelist, p.60)

This confession is very important from the point of view of formation of Dostoevsky’s novels. Dostoevsky’s novels are constructed always on the antagonism between Christ and the ultra-egoistic heroes. In other words, in the novels of Dostoevsky these ultra-egoistic heroes live their egoism through and through to their catastrophic ends.

Raskolnikov, Rogozhin, Stavrogin, Kirillov and Ivan, these heroes have extreme egotism, while they also have the very strong motivation of Imitatio di Christi. In this point, they differ fundamentally from Stirnerian egoists. Not only do they make of a Stirnerian ultra ego a God in the Russian way, but they sacrifice themselves to him, by which they fall to betraying Stirner’s thought. Stirnerian egoists might be always free from worship of any other authorities but themselves. Then if anyone kneels before an idea, that means he kneels before a ghost. Stirner says all things are nothing to him. His philosophical discourse begins from this thought and ends with the same phrase.

But Stavrogin confesses:

“When sitting at the tea table and chattering away with them, I formulated for the first time in my life what appeared to be the rule of my life, namely, that I neither know nor feel good or evil and that I have not only lost any sense of it, but that there is neither good nor evil (which pleased me), and that it is just a prejudice: that I can be free from any prejudice, but that once I attain that degree of freedom I am done for.” (The Devils, translated by David Magarshack, Penguin Books, p.692).

Stirner’s egoist attains to the perfect freedom. He said, “I am the creative nothing (schöpferishe Nichts), the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.”

From the standpoint of Stirner, “The creative nothing” is an infinitely free being. Being free, it could create anything from one’s ego himself, not from other beings. Creative nothingness creates new things that have never been in this world. But
Stavrogin hesitates before the illimitable freedom. Why does he hesitate, he a sort of superhuman? Stirner denies the suicide. It is not without saying that if one commits suicide, that means one kneels before whatever an idea that is not his own. But Stavrogin and Kirillov who have realized their infinite freedom end their lives by suicide. We hear what Kirillov told us about his motivation of suicide.

"The reason why man has hitherto been so unhappy and poor is because he was afraid to express the main point of his self-will, but has expressed it only in little things, like a schoolboy. I am terribly unhappy, because I am terribly afraid. Fear is the curse of mankind. But I shall proclaim my self-will.

I am bound to believe that I do not believe, I shall begin and end, and open the door. And I shall save. Only this will save mankind and will transform it physically in the next generation. For in his present physical condition man cannot — as far as I can see — get along without his former God. For three years I have been searching for the attribute of my divinity, and I’ve found it: the attribute of my divinity is — Self-Will! That’s all I can do to prove in the main point my defiance and my new terrible freedom. For it is very terrible, I am killing myself to show my defiance and my new terrible freedom." (*The Devils*, p.614-614).

Here we find clearly the fundamental negation to the Stirnerian thought. In the case of Stavrogin, his confession might give us a hint of elucidation. His suicide is the result of his debauchery. Stavrogin gave himself to every sort of experience in order to try the Stirnerian ideas. He pursued to the last degree his egoistic impulse. He was apathetic to his debauchery. But he could not have been a super egoist above the human ethic. He failed in superhuman trials which could challenge the God. He finds his fatal failure inside of his ego itself. The image of a wretched girl attacks him in the dream.

Stirnerian theory lacks thoroughly the sense of history, which is severely criticized by K. Marx in *Deutsche Ideologie*. It means that his ego should be so indifferent to every human or social relation. What is then ‘creative nothing’? But what comes from such ‘nothing’?

Stavrogin says, “Your brother told me that he who loses his ties with his native soil, loses his gods—that is, all his aims. One can go on arguing about anything for ever, but from me nothing has come but negation, with no magnanimity and no force. Even negation has not come from me”. (*The Devils*, p.667).

This confession of Stavrogin is the denial of Stirnerian ideas.

Kirillov denied also Stirnerian ideas. From the standpoint of Kirillov, Stirner’s ideas lack the quest for the meaning of the human existence. They lack the point of view of death. Where there are no human or social relations, there are no meanings that
must be formulated by such relations. If it were not for an idea of death, this
insurmountable wall for human beings, there wouldn't be a discovery of true life.

Kirillov considered always the meaning of life. He said he could not understand
why atheists don't commit suicide in spite of the death of God. In the mind of Kirillov,
the image of Christ always exists. If it were not for Christ, man wouldn't have any
meaning of life. It was absolutely necessary for him to give the human life some
meaning replacing Christ. He wanted the eternal life in this world. Then he committed
suicide. But he was attacked at the moment of suicide by so strange a feeling that he
could not help hesitating to fulfill the fatal deed. Perhaps it was caused by his
subconsciousness. Kirillov had made of his 'self-will' a God. But his theory of man-god
had fallen under the grotesque appearance of his irrational feeling. Stavrogin perished
also.

Stirner has no concern for death, for the world to come, for the irrational in the
human being. It would be sufficient for this philosopher to make a discovery of
uniqueness of man's ego. Stirner attained the ego purified from ready-made ideologies,
social, political ideologies, rejecting them as ghosts. This discovery itself could be said
revolutionary. But as a Russian novelist, Dostoevsky was not satisfied with such a
Stirneian ego.

We have come to the conclusion that Stirner gave Dostoevsky the idea of ultra
egoists. Pursuing the fortunes of these egoists to the last stage, Dostoevsky not only
revealed the problematic of Stirnerian ideas but also developed them by the Russian
spirit.

Postscript

This paper was presented at the 14th International Dostoevsky Symposium held in
Naples on 13-20 June 2010. After my presentation, I had several questions and advices
about my theme. Among them, there was a very precious advice that taught me the
existence of a precedent article of this theme by Nadine Natov. It was Professor Richard
Peace, author of *Dostoyevsky: An examination of the major novels*, who has given me
this advice. After my return to Japan, I made an effort to get this article in vain, which
didn't give me any chance to modify this essay. Nevertheless that I present here my
essay, it is due to an assurance that such a theme as this has not been treated in Japan.
In future, I hope to rewrite on this theme in inquiring precedents articles.

In completing this presentation, I owe much to Mr. Daniel Carl Strack, Professor of
The University of Kitakyushu and a colleague of JCL. He had the kindness to examine
my English and give me necessary advices. I would express my sincere thanks to his
kind and appropriate suggestions.

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