Surprised by Shame
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Dostoevsky's fiction, like Shakespeare's drama or Freud's psychology, reveals secrets. In exposing that which lies hidden, all three writers hoped to effect change—first in individuals and then in society. Like the ancient Greeks before them, all three diagnosed private pains as symptoms of public ills and vice versa. Like the Greeks, Shakespeare sought to persuade his audiences of this truth through dramatic exposition, by involving them in the cathartic action of his plays. Freud did this by posing as a private/public investigator, inviting his readers to participate in his ongoing search into the human and social psyche. Dostoevsky does this largely by surprising his audiences with shame, thereby pricking our public conscience and implicating us in the ethical action of his work.¹

While Dostoevsky's narrative strategies and thematics have earned him a place in the canon of world literature, he also holds a special place in the Russian canon. Like other Russian writers, Dostoevsky aggressively tries to mold his readers. While Karamzin aims to feminize readers, Pushkin to remasculinize them, and Lev Tolstoy to estrange and educate them, Dostoevsky aims to save them.² The most modern of Russia's nineteenth-century writers, Dostoevsky nonetheless embraces the unity of sociopolitical and metaphysical that characterizes the medieval worldview. Like Dante, Dostoevsky believes that to engage in right action both socially and politically means to live in right relation to God. Dostoevsky proposes to help readers return to the Garden by changing the way we look at the world. By uncovering shame, Dostoevsky implicates us in the painful experience of exposure and self-consciousness that can lead to individual and social redemption.

In time-honored fashion, Dostoevsky masks some of his most serious social criticism with comic forms. His liars, a rather uproarious and motley
group, can thus be seen as trenchant social critics who expose individuals and social institutions while exposing themselves. In Dostoevsky's work, exposure works both ways. In this, Dostoevsky self-consciously follows Gogol's lead. For example, when asked which of three characters he would like to play in Gogol's *The Inspector General*—for a performance to benefit the Literary Fund—Dostoevsky chose Shpekin, the postmaster who exposes the central character Khlestakov as an impostor. Delighted, Dostoevsky declared, “It's one of the most comic roles not only in Gogol but in all of the Russian repertory, and besides, is filled with deep social significance.” The letter that Shpekin opens and reads aloud exposes Khlestakov as an impostor or pretender, a figure of decided sociopolitical significance in Russian history, which witnessed numerous popular uprisings led by men pretending to be the “true” tsar. The letter also serves as Khlestakov's exposé of the play's major characters and thus reflects Shpekin and his townsmen back to each other and to themselves. In choosing Shpekin's role, Dostoevsky revealed his preference for expressing social criticism through the voices of characters who unintentionally expose themselves while intentionally exposing others.

In his first novel, *Poor Folk*, Dostoevsky assumes the role of Shpekinesque postmaster, the novelist who reveals his characters' secrets. An epistolary novel, *Poor Folk* portrays the correspondence of an impoverished minor clerk and a fallen woman—a relationship largely confined to letters for the sake of social decorum. This early work thus evidences a capacity Dostoevsky develops in his later works—a deep understanding of the recursive relationship between personal and social identity. In striving to define themselves, his characters land in the chasm between real and ideal, the nexus of self-fashioning. Makar Devushkin is the first of Dostoevsky's characters who attempts to bridge that chasm through the act of literary creation. He tries to transcend his personal, social, and economic inadequacies, the marks of his shame, by donning the writer's mantle and creating a compensatory identity. *Poor Folk* also demonstrates Dostoevsky's attention to narrative strategy and authorial concealment. Responding to the mixed, though largely positive reviews of his story, Dostoevsky wrote to his brother, Mikhail: “Our public, like every crowd, has instinct, but not book-learning [obrazovannost']. They don't understand how it's possible to write in that style. They are used to finding the author's mug in everything, whereas I didn't show them mine. And they haven't a clue that it is Devushkin speaking and not me, and that Devushkin can't speak any other way. They find my novel drawn out, when it doesn't contain one extra word” (28.1:117–18).

As Bakhtin has argued in his book on Dostoevsky’s poetics, Dostoevsky writes polyphonically, giving his characters their own words. But Dostoevsky does not relinquish authorial message. As I show, he inscribes clues for
interpretation into the very structure of his work. He orchestrates the words and deeds of his characters, thereby revealing gaps and creating situational rhymes that supply surplus vision. He conveys his message through contextualization. Makar Devushkin serves as one vehicle for Dostoevsky’s social message; Dostoevsky’s liars serve as others. Like their progenitor, Khlestakov, they are verbal self-fashioners. Like Khlestakov, they are full of shame and attempt to gain social acceptance with their verbal fabrications. Like Gogol’s postmaster, Dostoevsky exposes their secrets.

Shame Dynamics

Dostoevsky’s liars offer only one example of his mastery as a portrayer of shame and shame dynamics. His keen understanding of the self’s fragile coverings helps explain the particularly poignant and unexpected quality of his literary work. Shame concerns identity; thus shame exposed has the power to shake us to the core of our being. Unlike guilt, which involves a sense of transgression and has as its object what we do, shame has as its object who we are and involves a sense of inferiority or inadequacy and a fear of exposure. The states of feeling ridiculous, embarrassed, chagrined, mortified, humiliated, and dishonored are all variant shame states, all of which abound in Dostoevsky’s work. Dostoevsky even chooses titles that convey shame states, for example, The Humiliated and the Injured and “Dream of the Ridiculous Man.”

Shame arouses anxiety because it touches on taboo areas. There are legal taboos such as murder and incest—and there are social taboos, such as brutal truth-telling, that allow human beings to coexist relatively peacefully. Dostoevsky explores the shame and guilt surrounding all kinds of taboos. In his novel Crime and Punishment, for example, Dostoevsky confounds his readers by preparing us to expect Raskolnikov to live on the guilt-identity axis, while he experiences life on the shame-identity axis. We are therefore puzzled throughout the novel by Raskolnikov’s thoughts and actions. We expect guilt, but he feels shame. Raskolnikov is ashamed that his superman theory was wrong, that he is not among those who can heedlessly commit atrocious crimes in humanity’s name. He dwells on his sense of failure. He is not the Napoleon he wants to be. His agonized perception of his crime as ugly rather than glorious, insignificant rather than earth-shattering, reflects his sense of self.

Raskolnikov’s agonizing both illustrates and illuminates shame and guilt dynamics. In his case, guilt and shame are interwoven. He is guilty of murder. While he can never restore life to his victims, he can make restitution to society by accepting his guilt and serving time in prison. The shame dynamic
is more hidden. By murdering the old pawnbroker and her sister, Raskolnikov exposes himself to a humiliating self-examination. He must confront the crashing fact that he is not the hero he wants to be. While both shame and guilt lead him to commit murder, his shame intensifies afterward because he believes that his crime was a failure. Not in the physical sense, for he did kill the two women, but in the figurative sense, for he also kills his dream of greatness. His crime forces him to confront himself and to recognize, however painfully, that his theorizing about crime masked his sense of powerlessness and insignificance. His ideas camouflaged the reality of his poverty and impotence. While in Siberia Raskolnikov must work through both his guilt and his shame—he must repent his crime and he must learn to accept himself. Once his dream of the trichinae reveals that his theory was a destructive cover, he can see his crime's ethical evil and repent. Shame leads him to self-examination and acceptance of responsibility for his action. Here and elsewhere in Dostoevsky's work, shame and guilt meet in the ethical realm. Raskolnikov teaches Dostoevsky's readers a few important lessons that the novelist will reiterate and that the journalist will describe. Denial exacerbates transgression. Only by recognizing, acknowledging, and accepting one's shortcomings can one return to community.

Jane Austen also portrays the dynamic of self-confrontation that follows shame exposed. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet confronts herself after receiving a letter from Mr. Darcy, whose proposal of marriage she has just vehemently rejected. The letter informs her that Darcy had indeed interfered with Mr. Bingley's courtship of her sister Jane, but it also informs her that Mr. Wickham, who flirted with her earlier, is a wastrel and gambler who had tried to seduce Mr. Darcy's sister the previous summer.

She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried; "I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candor of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blamable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! Yet, how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Til this moment I never knew myself."

Austen portrays a moment of shame confronted, a critical moment when Elizabeth's acknowledgment of her personal shortcoming allows her to change
her relationship with significant others. By reading Darcy’s letter fairly, Eliza-
abeth is able to view her family critically, which prepares her for her separa-
tion from them.11 She also comes to view Mr. Darcy differently, recognizing
in him a potential life partner. Austen thus shows readers how a character who
confronts her shame positively can integrate healthily into her community.

Like Austen, Dostoevsky treats shame as a subject. Unlike Austen, Doso-
evsky’s works explain much reader discomfort, for shame involves both seeing
and being seen. Whenever we experience shame, we feel that there is nowhere
to hide. Conversely, when we see another experience shame, we see that other
as uncovered before our gaze. This reminds us of our own protective cover-
ings. Like the shamed, we suddenly feel acutely self-aware and vulnerable to
others and their gaze. Shame’s contagious force overturns our complacency,
our unself-conscious sense of self. Helen Block Lewis observes, “shame is an
acutely painful experience for both the person who suffers it and the sympa-
thetic observer. . . . Shame evokes a tendency for both the sufferer to hide and
the observer to look away.”12

While reading about Elizabeth Bennet’s shame, readers feel safe. First of
all, she confronts herself in a private setting—she has no homodiegetic (char-
acter) audience. Second, Elizabeth is in control, and so are we; we do not look
away from her shame, because she does not. Third, Elizabeth is a sympathetic
character with whom readers identify. The same does not obtain when read-
ing Dostoevsky. Frequently, exposed characters are not sympathetic. Dosto-
evsky breaks down the intersubjective boundaries between readers and even
unsavory characters by making readers witnesses to their shame. Dostoevsky
thus uses shame as an instrument of social conscience that not only expands
readers’ moral imaginations but also makes us examine our own collusion in
the status quo. By inducing social shame, Dostoevsky produces social disgust
and inspires social reform. We readers are persuaded to remake ourselves
according to the models he suggests.

Dostoevsky knew shame first-hand. He knew the sting of poverty, of rejec-
tion, of social awkwardness; he knew the shame of being a convict, a debtor,
and a gambler; he fell from boastful glory (following his first work, Poor Folk)
to near-oblivion (following his second work, The Double). He also experienced
shame vicariously by reading books ranging from The Iliad to Père Goriot. Dos-
evsky utilized his knowledge to become a master portrayer of shame psy-
chology. His rival, Tolstoy, masterfully depicts moments of shame and embar-
ra ssment in social settings, focusing on the more socially acceptable defenses
against shame—denial and desire to flee. Dostoevsky, on the other hand,
delves into the psyche of the humiliated and the narcissistically injured, explor-
ing the back alleys of his characters’ shame experiences and documenting a full
range of shame defenses—including aggressive anger.13 While Tolstoy and
Dostoevsky both present shameful moments that engender a character’s embarrassment and desire to flee, Dostoevsky’s depiction of passed-on shame, that is, of shame experienced wrathfully and inflicted in turn on others, intensifies readers’ discomfort and desire for flight. Characters who lash out and strike back at their offenders violate the social norms governing human interactions. The eruption of such uncontrollable energies cries out for containment. Readers long for order to be restored. By letting shame out of the box, Dostoevsky creates an almost unbearable dramatic tension.

In portraying scenes of shame, Dostoevsky exploits three properties of the shame experience: disruption, disorientation, and painful self-consciousness. In contrast with guilt experiences of transgression, repentance, and reparation that offer readers certain expectations that authors can satisfy, delay, or thwart, portrayed shame, like the shame experience itself, is always unexpected. It disorients and rouses self-consciousness in the shamed person and witnesses alike. If the author controls the shame experience, as Austen and Tolstoy do, readers feel safe. But when authors like Dostoevsky surprise their readers with shame, readers experience a similar disruption, disorientation, and self-consciousness. Reading Dostoevsky rattles yet rivets us.

Dostoevsky not only dramatizes scenes of exposure but describes the shame dynamics involved. The following two sentences, from Dostoevsky’s 1873 Diary of a Writer article, “Something about Lying” dramatize the shame dynamics of an exposed lie. The narrator is the Diary writer:

Tell me, haven’t you passed on a story [anekdot], as though it had happened to you, to the very person who told you that story about himself? You surely forgot, when suddenly halfway through the story you remembered and guessed something about it which was clearly confirmed in your listener’s suffering gaze, stubbornly directed at you (for in such cases, for some reason, one looks the other in the eye with ten-fold tenacity); remember how, despite everything and already deprived of your sense of humor, you nonetheless, with courage worthy of a great objective, continued to mutter your tale and, having finished as quickly as possible, with nervously hurried courtesies, shaking of hands and smiles, you fled in different directions, so that when suddenly in the burst of a last convulsion you were possessed for no reason whatsoever to shout down the stairs to your listener, who was already hurrying down them, a question about his auntie’s health, he didn’t turn around and didn’t answer then about his auntie, which remained in your memory as the most tormenting of everything from all of that story [anekdot] that happened to you. (21:118)

The lie in this passage is plagiarized—someone else’s story told as one’s own. It is exposed as a plagiarism by the speaker’s own memory and confirmed by the interlocutor’s gaze. The speaker both sees and is seen. The shameful
experience causes a deflating affect (loss of sense of humor). His interlocutor’s shame as witness to the plagiarism intensifies the speaker’s shame at being exposed. While guilt allows for expiation, shame is irreversible. As Helen Merrill Lynd notes, “No single, specific thing we can do can rectify or mitigate such an experience.”14 Disoriented by shame, the speaker entangles himself further, first by denial (persistence in telling the story), then by further denial (the question about the auntie’s health). The speaker thereby compounds the mutual shame. His listener has the same set of responses, and Dostoevsky manages to make his reader, another listener, experience them too, under the guidance of the listener in the text.

As Lynd points out, the memory of shame is bound to minute, concrete detail.15 In the cited passage, the Diary writer describes the shame experience in great detail—prolonging the reader’s vicarious experience by documenting every one of the speaker’s reactions. Finally, the Diary writer claims that it is a small detail, the listener’s nonresponse to the speaker’s question, that lingers most painfully in his memory. Its power derives from its symbolic function as a trigger, a detail that torments the speaker, a tangible sign of the wedge established between him and his listener. This affective detail represents a disruption of the relationship between speaker and listener: the speaker loses the sense of individual and social identity, the validation of self-worth, provided by a listener’s appreciative response. Finally, this detail emblemizes the paradox of shame: a profoundly isolating experience, it intimately relates us to the universe and our place (or lack of place) in it. Shame has revelatory and implicative power, as many involuntary responses do, for it painfully points to the deep connection between the shamed and the witnesses to that shame.

Shame isolates.16 The plagiarist above experiences a devastating sense of loss—of connection to the other. Speaker and listener can never meet again without reliving that moment of shame, unless either or both can forget or somehow make peace with it. Lynd explains: “To a person oriented more to the shame-identity axis, other persons, the They, or at least some of them, are parts of himself as he is part of them.”17 In other words, the community participates in the constructing and policing of identity. In Russian society, the nobility’s tight embrace of the honor code exemplifies this dynamic.18 Throughout most of modern Russian history, the upper classes were subordinated to the will and whimsy of the tsarist state. They thus lived with the constant threat that their lives would be painfully and shamefully disrupted. The nobility responded by opposing state policies regarding corporal punishment—a profoundly shame-filled form of discipline from which they had no guaranteed legal protections. To counter a potential form of discipline imposed from without, they imposed on themselves a code of behavior that also worked by shame: anyone who violated the honor code was subject to exclusion. The honor code enabled
the nobility to forge a sense of class identity that could hide the profoundly humiliating reality of their actual situation. In doing so, however, they created a social dynamic that made them extremely vulnerable to others’ opinions.

Because it involves the self’s relationship to others, the shame dynamic also touches on one of the tenets of Russian Orthodoxy—the mutual interdependence of all human beings. Vladimir Solovev, the Russian religious thinker Dostoevsky knew and liked most, describes in ethical terms what shame researchers describe in psychological terms—the recursive relationship between personal and social identity. For him, shame is the innate quality that differentiates humans from beasts. A sign of our ethical identity, shame manifests itself in conscience, which, in turn, leads to ethical action. As a writer, Dostoevsky provokes readers’ shame, thereby piquing our consciences and moving us to act ethically, which, in turn, improves the world in which we live.

In discussing the ethical functions of shame as discretion-shame and disgrace-shame, Carl Schneider identifies their area of commonality: “The two forms of shame—being ashamed and the sense of shame—share a common element, for at its core, shame is intimately linked to the human need to cover that which is exposed. This common element is apparent in the Indo-European root *(s)kem-, *(s)kam-, meaning ‘to cover.’” The Russian scholar N. D. Arutiunova notes that the Russian word стыд derives from the common Slavic root stud’/styd’, which means “that which makes something contract, freeze, stiffen, be cold.” After contrasting this with the “hot” responses to shame, such as burning and blushing, she points out that there are also “cold” responses to shame, which indicate a distancing, between self and shame or between self and other. In the Garden of Eden, for example, Eve and Adam eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, learn they are naked, and cover themselves.

Schneider notes that for English speakers, shame is largely synonymous with being ashamed, with disgrace. We thus fail to understand the significant role that the sense of shame or discretion-shame plays as a positive, restraining influence. Solovev’s conception of shame (стыд) focuses on what Schneider identifies as discretion-shame. Dostoevsky’s work illustrates the dynamics of shame (стыд) exposed, what Schneider calls disgrace-shame. While Solovev emphasizes shame’s role as a deterrent and Dostoevsky examines a whole range of roles for shame, particularly shame after the fact, both recognize the positive importance of others or the Other in shame experiences. Part of the searing pain in shame experiences derives from the devastating sense of loss of connection to others. Shame thus acts as a form of self-regulation. Dostoevsky shows that what holds true for actions holds true for metaphorical impulses. When one gets carried away by one’s passions, either physically or verbally, one oversteps the bounds of propriety, violating social norms. One thus places oneself outside of the habitual sphere of personal interaction. To
preserve one’s connection with others, one adopts appropriate patterns of behavior. Though initially a set of limits is imposed from without (as with the honor code or Orthodox ethics), individuals internalize them. Social regulation becomes self-regulation. With a sensitivity to apophaticism typical of his philosophy and theology, Solovev elaborates on this aspect of the shame experience—even though shame is experienced as a negative self-valuation, the very fact that shame is experienced speaks of a positive self-valuation.24 Only if we think ourselves capable of a better connection can we experience the pain of falling short.

Since there are times and places in all phases of human life where covering is appropriate and even imperative, shame serves yet another constructive role: “shame guards the separate, private self with its boundaries and prevents intrusion and merger. It guarantees the self’s integrity. . . . More specifically, it shields the self against overexposure and intrusive curiosity.”25 This protective function of shame makes Dostoevsky’s liars more paradoxical than his many other shamed figures, for example, Makar Devushkin, merely an aspiring author: to create an acceptable and perhaps even praiseworthy public persona, liars must expose themselves to public scrutiny. Their willingness to expose themselves to bridge the perceived gap between themselves and others makes them very powerful. Impelled by their need for social recognition, liars take risks that other characters do not. They also frequently exceed the accepted limits for lying in public and thus overexpose themselves. They must then protect their fragile, overexposed selves.

Dostoevsky’s liars are not a homogeneous group, nor do they respond to shame uniformly. While they mostly try to protect their selves from shame in standard ways—through flight, denial, or self-concealment—they occasionally confound all witnesses by flaunting their overexposed selves. They share the shame experienced as loss of privacy by violating others’ privacy. They aggressively expose themselves and others to humiliation and pain in public arenas. Characters like Fedor Karamazov do this all the time. They thus share their shame by behaving shamelessly, provoking scandal by flouting the social norms that would have them respond to shame in more socially accepted ways.

Reader Response

In portraying exposed shame, Dostoevsky relies on shame’s capacity to unnerve and yet transfix readers. He positions readers as witnesses, relying on our instinctive voyeurism, our desire to see that which is normally hidden, our pleasure in breaking a taboo. If we read on, we are implicated in the text’s action. He deploys shame’s paradox: as witnesses to shame we experience both separation from the shamed and communion with them. He counts on
shame’s contagiousness to make us self-conscious. He creates an image to haunt our ethical imaginations. He also inscribes his own poetics into such scenes, thereby affording us aesthetic pleasure.

The passage about the exposed plagiarism reveals Dostoevsky’s strategies. The two sentences cited address readers directly. The *Diary* writer thus asks us to remember a painful moment when we were exposed to shame. The second detailed sentence relentlessly forces us to experience this moment as we read, but also asks us to reexperience the pain from a shameful moment in our own lives. Dostoevsky thus places readers in the position of both seeing and remembering. In this case, Dostoevsky exploits the potential of second-person narration to pull the actual reader into the role of the addressee, thus directly transmitting the lived experience.

Dostoevsky as journalist borrowed extensively from Dostoevsky the novelist’s narrative strategies. Throughout his *Diary*, Dostoevsky the journalist speaks in the voice of his narrative persona, the *Diary* writer, who is often but not always identical to Dostoevsky the journalist/author. Since the *Diary* writer’s discussion of lying accords with Dostoevsky’s fictional portrayal of liars, however, I attribute his views to Dostoevsky. In his article, the *Diary* writer explores the universality of lying in Russia. His direct address to readers amply illustrates his point that “anyone” has engaged in the activity of lying, “anyone” in turn being an educated Russian. Because it is seminal for my discussion of lying, I will cite the long, highly illustrative opening paragraph of Dostoevsky’s “Something about Lying.” (Note the build-up to the earlier-cited passage.)

Why, in our country, does everyone lie [lgut], every single one of us? I’m convinced that right now people will stop me and shout: Ah, nonsense, not everyone by a long shot! You don’t have a topic, so here’s what you’ve thought up to start more effectively. I’ve already been reproached for lacking topics; but here’s the thing, I’m really convinced just now in the universality of our lying [gan’ia]. For fifty years you live with an idea, see and feel it, and suddenly it appears in such a form that it’s as though you’ve never known it before. A short time ago, the thought occurred to me that among us in Russia, in the intelligentsia classes, there can’t even be a person who doesn’t lie [nelgushchego cheloveka]. That’s just because among us even completely honest people can lie [lgat’]. I’m convinced that in other countries, for the most part, only scoundrels lie [lgut]; they lie [lgut] for practical gain, i.e., directly with criminal intentions. But among us even the most honorable people with the most honorable intentions can lie [lgat’] completely gratuitously. Among us, for the most part, people lie [lgut] for hospitality’s sake. One wants to produce an aesthetic effect in the listener, to grant pleasure, so that people lie [lgut], even, as they say, sacrificing themselves to the listener. Let anyone at all
remember—hasn’t it happened twenty or so times that he’s added, for example, to the number of miles per hour that the horses carrying him sometime galloped, if only it was necessary to intensify the listener’s joyful impression? And wasn’t the listener actually so overjoyed that he immediately began to persuade you that he knew a troika, which on a bet had overtaken a train, and so forth and so forth? Well, and what about hunting dogs, or about the false teeth you were fitted for in Paris, or about how Botkin healed you here? Haven’t you told such wonders about your illness that, though of course you believed yourself in mid-story (for in mid-story you always begin to believe yourself), yet, however, lying down to sleep at night and remembering with pleasure how pleasantly struck your listener had been, you suddenly stopped and involuntarily uttered: Ah, how I lied! However, that’s a weak example, for there’s nothing more pleasant than to talk about one’s illness, if only one finds a listener; and once one begins to talk, it’s already impossible not to lie; it even cures the patient. But, returning from abroad, haven’t you talked about thousands of things which you saw with your own eyes . . . however, I’m going to take back that example as well: it’s impossible for a Russian person returning from there not to exaggerate about abroad; otherwise there would be no reason to go there. But, for example, what about the natural sciences! Haven’t you discussed the natural sciences or the bankruptcy and flight abroad of various Petersburgians or yids, knowing absolutely nothing about those yids and not knowing a thing about the natural sciences? Tell me, haven’t you passed on a story, as though it had happened to you, to the very person who had in fact told it to you about himself? You surely forgot, when suddenly, halfway through the story you remembered and guessed something about it which was clearly confirmed in your listener’s suffering gaze, stubbornly directed at you (for in such cases, for some reason, one looks the other in the eye with ten-fold tenacity); remember how, despite everything and already deprived of your entire sense of humor, you nonetheless, with courage worthy of a great objective, continued to mutter your tale and, having finished as quickly as possible with nervously hurried courtesies, shaking of hands and smiles, you fled in different directions, so that when suddenly in the burst of a last convulsion you were moved to shout to your listener, who was already fleeing down the stairs, a question about his auntie’s health, he didn’t turn around and didn’t answer then about his auntie, which remained in your memory as the most tormenting part of the story that happened to you. In a word, if anyone were to answer to all that: no, i.e., that he hadn’t passed on any stories, hadn’t touched on Botkin, hadn’t lied about yids, hadn’t shouted down the stairs about the auntie’s health and that nothing similar had ever happened with him, then I simply won’t believe it. I know that the Russian liar more often than not tells lies quite imperceptibly to
himself, so that one might not even notice at all. This is how it happens: as soon as a person tells a lie [solzhet] successfully, then he likes it so much that he includes the story into the number of indubitable facts of his own life; and he acts completely conscientiously, for he believes it completely himself; indeed, it would sometimes be unnatural not to believe. (21:117–19)

This passage provides Dostoevsky’s thumbnail sketch of exhibitionist lying. The Diary writer immediately establishes his solidarity with Russian liars by referring to Russia in the first person plural—“in our country” (u nas). In referring to lying as “our lying,” he distinguishes Russian lying from the falsification he claims characterizes other countries. To emphasize his point about lying as a form of hospitality, the Diary writer switches to the third person—“Let anyone at all remember. . . .” After expanding on lying as hyperbole (horses’ speed) given in the third person, he then slips into the second person plural—“the listener starts to persuade you. . . .” The Diary writer then insists that “you” must have told hunting dog stories, exaggerated about doctors’ cures, fabricated stories about places you’ve seen during your travels; that “you” must have discoursed about the natural sciences or other subjects, knowing nothing whatsoever about them; that “you” must have plagiarized someone else’s story and been caught out. As the Diary writer verifies his claims, he reverts to the impersonal mode—“In a word, if anyone. . . .” Finally, he identifies the subjects of his discourse as “Russian liars.” The Diary writer thus ends where he began—with a hyperbolic claim about Russian lying. By employing hyperbole and therein lying, Dostoevsky not only challenges the veracity of his claims, he also exhibits his rhetorical skill.

By including the description of a plagiarism exposed into his peroration of the kinds of lying, the Diary writer involves readers in the shame experience both as members of the narrative and authorial audiences. In the narrative audience, we experience the full affect of Dostoevsky’s embedded text. In the authorial audience, we also recognize its metaliterary aspect, for the embedded text tells the story (anekdot) about the telling of a story (anekdot). Dostoevsky thus provides readers with two means of experiencing the shame: affectively and cognitively, as participants and as observers. He also supplies relief from the painful affect described. First, after implicating the narrative audience in the shame experience both by mimetically replicating such an experience and by directly asking us to remember one, the Diary writer shifts back to the impersonal mode, allowing the narrative audience to universalize the experience. He thus positions us to experience shame and then releases us. Second, the authorial audience experiences relief through our aesthetic appreciation of the text’s metaliterary construction. Third, the text engages us cognitively in the final discovery that such experience is pan-human. Cognitive
engagement and aesthetic pleasure thus alleviate, but do not eradicate, the pain of witnessing.

Finally, Dostoevsky the author challenges his authorial audience to consider the relation of this embedded text to its host paragraph. The paragraph ends with the Diary writer's assertion that it is natural to steal others' stories and assimilate them into one's own life story. Jefferson Singer's and Peter Salovey's research confirms the importance of stories, real or imagined, for our sense of identity: “What is most intriguing to us about the self is that identity may be as determined by events we believe happened to us as ones that did. Our illusions, fantasies, and manufactured memories are as much a part of our identity as our mental representations of objective past and present events. We are what we imagine ourselves to be, and we strive to motivate others to cooperate in this construction of the self.”

Stolen stories resemble manufactured memories: their authenticity is not an issue. Dostoevsky condones this form of self-fashioning, but points to a catch, for he stipulates that we must succeed. Success entails discretion: we must plagiarize without being noticed or even noticing it ourselves. The embedded text reveals the danger inherent in this natural activity: the shame of exposure. If we are caught out, we experience the double edge of shame's paradox: we lose our sense of connection to the very community that the plagiarism shows we are trying to join. The pain of separation then forces us to examine ourselves and our relation to others. In Solovev's words, shame signals conscience. Exposed to the other's gaze and to our own self-scrutiny, we are compelled to examine our motives. Why would we want to plagiarize another's story? The Diary writer identifies the motive as shame—shame at ourselves, desire to be other. By stealing another's story we can close the felt gap between others and ourselves.

Kinds of Lying and the Truth Factor

Plagiarism is only one kind of exhibitionist lying (vran'yo). The Diary writer describes three: (1) hyperbole, (2) bullshitting, and (3) plagiarism. Hyperbole is a figure of speech that exaggerates for emphasis. This is not only a beloved device of Dostoevsky himself, but one he uses in writing his article. Bullshitting is the verbal activity of making assertions without concern for their truth value, an activity the Diary writer strongly condemns. Plagiarism is the act of taking another's story and presenting it as one's own. These three kinds of exhibitionist lying are intimately related and can, but need not, overlap.

The Diary writer also specifies three functions for exhibitionist lying—entertainment, aesthetic pleasure, and mutual hospitality. He does not distinguish among liars who engage in varieties of vran'yo; rather, he distinguishes
between exhibitionist liars and falsifiers. Falsifiers, the Diary writer claims, lie for “practical gain” (lgut iz prakticheskoi vygody). The Russian word for this kind of lying is lozbi, which I translate as “deliberate lie.” In his work, Dostoevsky distinguishes between the two nouns lozbi (which carries a strong, negative, moral charge) and vran’yo (which is loaded with social and semiliterary meaning). Yet, in his article, as elsewhere, he uses the verb lgat’, which means to lie and to speak or write a lie, a falsehood, or that which opposes truth, more frequently than the verb vrat’, which has a broader range of meanings that not only encompasses those of lgat’, but also includes to talk nonsense, to bullshit, to blather, to humbug; to boast, to tell a fable as truth,31 because in polite usage in the nineteenth century as well as today, the verb lgat’ is preferred; vrat’ is more familiar and is used with children.32 Dostoevsky complicates any translator’s job by using prefixes such as na/sol/pere to denote the verb’s perfective aspect as well as its hyperbolic qualities. Though ideally I should be as precise as Dostoevsky, the English language does not allow for these distinctions, so I have included the Russian verb in parentheses. I translate vrat’lgat’ as “to lie,” “to tell lies,” and, occasionally, “to fabricate.” Readers will see for themselves the infelicity of trying to be completely consistent.

While Dostoevsky’s exhibitionist liars occasionally accrue material benefits from their lying, they lie epideictically—to display themselves, to enhance their image in others’ eyes. By specifying entertainment, aesthetic pleasure, and hospitality as lying’s function, Dostoevsky emphasizes its social nature: lying occurs largely in the public sphere. Like any form of discourse, lying requires an audience. Since liars publicly engage in verbal self-fashioning to gain audience approval, the audience is cathetically charged. Dostoevsky’s liars enthusiastically hyperbolize, plagiarize, and ignore the truth. By engaging in excess, stealing from others, and disregarding truth, they violate boundaries, thereby setting the stage for scenes of exposure. When liars are exposed, as they invariably are in Dostoevsky’s texts, shame comes into play. Dostoevsky, as I show, counted on this.

Dostoevsky’s liars are not a homogeneous group, nor do they respond uniformly to the threat or to the shame of exposure. I divide them into the shamed and the shameless based on the way they manifest or confront their shame. I examine the content of their lies, their performance as liars, and the narrative dynamics of the scandal scenes in which they are exposed or expose themselves as liars. The ways in which shame moves each liar to perform shape his performance. Liars who attempt to conceal their shame, for instance, perform differently from those who flaunt theirs. The concealers also evoke more reader sympathy. In the narrative dynamics of scandal scenes, my dual inquiries coalesce. After Crime and Punishment, the protagonist of which is a murderer, a
character who violates moral boundaries;\textsuperscript{33} Dostoevsky’s novels abound with liars, characters who flirt with or violate social boundaries.

Liars are performers. Like fiction writers, they display their verbal talents in the public sphere, the social nexus where identity is negotiated. Their sense of self depends on their success and thus on their ability to entertain, to provide aesthetic pleasure, to create an arena of reciprocity (the liar’s narcissism often complicates this arena, as we will see). As a writer of fiction, Dostoevsky well understood how amplified stories may produce an aesthetic effect that enhances the pleasure of both liar and interlocutor. As the \textit{Diary} writer points out in his first example of hyperbole (the troika outracing the train), a listener’s aesthetic enjoyment of hyperbole may inspire him to further hyperbole—one good lie outdoes another—a fact that leads to mutual satisfaction. In fact, the \textit{Diary} writer hyperbolically claims that reciprocal lying is a norm of social interaction among all educated Russians at all social gatherings (21:119). The unspoken rule is that one lies and allows others to lie—a social contract. Mark Twain, in his essay on lying, praises mutually hospitable lying: “I think that all this courteous lying is a sweet and loving art, and should be cultivated. The highest perfection of politeness is only a beautiful edifice built, from the base to the dome, of graceful and gifted forms of charitable and unselfish lying.”\textsuperscript{34} The \textit{Diary} writer holds a similar position, arguing that only the “truthful” or “literalist” “dullard” (\textit{pravdivaia tupitsa}), the “untalented” (\textit{bezdarnye}), and the “heartless and hemorrhoidal” (\textit{besserdechnye i gemorroidal’nye}), that is, people without creative talent and aesthetic sensibility, do not accept lying as a social norm.\textsuperscript{35}

On the other hand, the \textit{Diary} writer points to the consequences of accepting lying as a social norm—truth becomes a rarity:

We Russians fear truth most of all, that is, we don’t fear it, if you like, but constantly consider truth [\textit{istina}] as something already too boring and prosaic for us, insufficiently poetic, too ordinary; consequently, by avoiding it constantly, we have made it in the end into one of the most unusual and rare things in our Russian world (I’m not talking about newspapers). In this way we’ve completely lost the axiom that truth, especially in its purest form, is more poetic than anything that exists in the world, and, moreover, that it’s even more fantastic than anything that the habituated human mind can fabricate [\textit{nalgat}] or conceive for itself. In Russia the truth almost always has a completely fantastic nature. Indeed, people have finally made it so that everything that the human mind can fabricate or overfabricate [\textit{nalzhet i perelzhet}] for itself is already much more understandable to them than truth, and that goes for everywhere in the world. Truth lies on the table in front of people for a hundred years, and they don’t take it, but chase after invented things, all because they consider truth fantastic and utopian. (21:119)\textsuperscript{36}
In this passage, Dostoevsky uses the verbs nal'gat' and perel'gat'. While the unmarked perfective prefix for the verb lgat' is so-, the prefixes na- and pere- both indicate a kind of excess, an adding-it-on (na-) or an over-and-above (pere-) quality that emphasizes lying’s constructed nature. Here, as elsewhere, the Diary writer articulates a Platonic vision of the world in which the mimetic obfuscates the metaphysical: human constructions hide the ultimate unity of all human beings. Lying is thus associated with an ephemeral, socially constructed reality that presupposes a social contract to disregard truth. By choosing the noun istina, as opposed to pravda, to designate “truth,” the Diary writer further invokes poetic, biblical, and metaphysical concepts of an eternal absolute. By contrast, lying is grounded in the mimetic, not the poetic, in the material, not the metaphysical, realm.

The Diary writer later argues that this disregard for truth induces a “mindlessness” (legkomyslie) that the philosopher Harry Frankfurt identifies as typical of bullshitters and that Dostoevsky recorded repeatedly in his notebooks as a deeply disturbing fact of contemporary life. In fact, the Diary writer opens his 1876 edition with a discussion of “contemporary Khlestakovs” whom he characterizes as narcissistic, vain, and unthinking. He declares that they are capable of committing suicide out of shame and that they never entertain “Hamletian” questions about the soul’s immortality. After negatively comparing their “thoughtlessness” (bezmyslie) with the sincere searching of the eighteenth-century atheist philosophers Diderot and Voltaire, he condemns their complacency (spokoistvie) and their worldliness.

Vranyo, in general, ignores truth. Hyperbolists delight in amplification. Plagiarists tend to their public image. Finally, as Frankfurt argues, bullshitters disregard truth altogether. Falsifiers must know the truth to deviate consciously from it, but the bullshitter engages in a different enterprise. None of these liars worries in the least about truth.

Frankfurt’s observations on the differences between falsifiers and bullshitters illuminate the differences between falsifiers and Dostoevsky’s liars:

The liar is inescapably concerned with truth-values. In order to invent a lie at all, he must think he knows what is true. And in order to invent an effective lie, he must design his falsehood under the guidance of that truth.

On the other hand, a person who undertakes to bullshit his way through has much more freedom. His focus is panoramic rather than particular. He does not limit himself to inserting a certain falsehood at a specific point, and thus he is not constrained by the truths surrounding that point or intersecting it. He is prepared to fake the context as well, so far as need requires. This freedom from the constraints to which the liar must submit does not necessarily mean, of
course, that his task is easier than the task of the liar. But the mode of creativity upon which it relies is less analytical and less deliberative than that which is mobilized in lying. It is more expansive and independent, with more spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play. This is less a matter of craft than of art. Hence the familiar notion of the bullshit artist.41

In describing bullshit artists, Frankfurt might easily have been describing Dostoevsky’s liars. They improvise, exaggerating for effect. They fake context as well as facts. They appropriate whatever materials are at hand to serve their exhibitionist ends. They are not deliberate deceivers, but self-promoters. Falsifiers, like Dostoevsky’s Peter Verkhovensky42 or Ivan Karamazov’s Grand Inquisitor, lie for identifiable purposes. They have concrete social or political objectives. Dostoevsky’s exhibitionist liars, on the other hand, are less concerned with the actual state of affairs in the outside world than with their own self-image. While they may want wealth, power, or social status, they lie not to obtain those ends but to create the illusion that they have them. Above all, they want to be accepted as qualified self-presenting agents.

Similarly, possession of knowledge counts less for them than does the appearance of knowledge. The Diary writer gives the example of someone discoursing on chemistry, knowing only the word “chemistry” (21:121). Improvising from sources that could be acceptable only to a thirteen-year-old schoolboy, this speaker produces an “incredible effect” on his audience and “left, respecting himself incredibly,” as the Diary writer rather wryly observes (21:122). The Diary writer emphasizes that the speaker values self-presentation over content. He scorns facts in favor of delivery: he speaks “weightily and unhurriedly releasing his words”; his tone is “haughty.” In short, the goal of the exhibitionist liar is social acceptance. His self-image is determined by audience response.

The Diary writer’s example of the discourse on chemistry flags another distinction between falsifying and bullshitting, a distinction that holds equally for plagiarism. Both are forms of fakery. As Frankfurt notes:

For the essence of bullshit is not that it is false but that it is phony. In order to appreciate this distinction, one must recognize that a fake or a phony need not be in any respect (apart from authenticity itself) inferior to the real thing. What is not genuine need not also be defective in some other way. It may be, after all, an exact copy. What is wrong with a counterfeit is not what it is like, but how it was made. This points to a similar and fundamental aspect of the essential nature of bullshit: although it is produced without concern with the truth, it need not be false. The bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean that he necessarily gets them wrong.43
While the falsifier engages in a kind of factual discourse that can be adjudged veracious or mendacious, the bullshitter engages in a kind of discourse that may contain mimetic but not poetic truth, or poetic but not mimetic truth. The bullshitter fakes things, but he may accidentally get them right. As Dostoevsky’s readers well know, truth often appears in the mouths of his liars, fools, and scoundrels. The utterance’s source may be compromised without compromising the utterance itself.

This leads to the question of liars’ motives. Unlike falsifiers, Dostoevsky’s liars are not in the business of deception. As Frankfurt notes,

Since bullshit need not be false, it differs from lies in its misrepresentational intent. The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what he takes the facts to be. . . . His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.44

While Frankfurt does not specify a motive for bullshitters, Dostoevsky provides one for his liars.45 They lie because they are ashamed of themselves. They do not intend to deceive others but to create a public persona that will be accepted and admired. They lie to affirm their own self-worth and thus their social worthiness.

The Russian Context: Identity and the Divided Self

The Diary writer locates the question of identity at the root of lying. Identifying shame as one of lying’s two primary sources, he claims that all Russians tell lies because they are ashamed of their actual selves and want to be other, a keen (and universally applicable) observation disguised as an unverifiably hyperbolic statement. He thus argues that Russians sense a discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves (21:119). In examining the intrapsychic conflict that gives rise to lying, Dostoevsky points to sociopolitical and metaphysical conflict as well. He dates the psychic split between private and public selves, and the subsequent rise of a national inferiority complex, to Peter the Great’s reforms. And, in his fiction, he returns to biblical roots, seeing shame and the lying it spawns as the fruit of the fall.46

Dostoevsky’s most conspicuous liars—General Ivolgin, Lukian Lebedev, Captain Lebiadkin, Stepan Verkhovensky, and Fedor Karamazov—are all Russian men, all in their forties and fifties, and all of equivocal social status. Although in “Something about Lying,” Dostoevsky initially claims that all
educated Russians tell lies, he then, with Karamzinian chivalrousness, exempts women. Throughout his article, but particularly at the end, he employs a common tactic of epideictic rhetoric—praise or blame by contrast. First, he hyperbolically defines men as a class of liars: “there is not a Russian man who doesn’t lie” (net nelgushchego russkogo mushchiny), thereby anticipating his claim that women are paradigms of social morality. What earlier Dostoevsky praised as a virtue, male liars’ desire to please others (apparent altruism), he then contrasts with women’s commitment to social welfare (genuine altruism). This negative comparison also reveals the shallow narcissism of male liars’ concern about their public image. While Dostoevsky contrasts men and women for publicistic purposes, he maintains the opposition in his fiction. Although neither all of Dostoevsky’s male characters are liars, nor all of his female characters altruists, Dostoevsky never created a full-blown female liar.

The fictional predecessor for Dostoevsky’s liars is Gogol’s Khlestakov, the archetypal Russian liar. As Iurii Lotman observes, Khlestakov not only lies, he is characterized by a poverty of imagination that makes him a consumer, as opposed to a generator, of romanticism, by a desire to escape from himself that leads him to divide the world into his own space (worthless) and foreign space (highly prized), and by a short memory that makes him incapable of complex calculation and so contributes to the “ingenuous simplicity” that Gogol reminded his actors was so essential to Khlestakov’s personality. Lotman’s characterization can be used as a portrait of shame. Khlestakov is ashamed of his actual identity as an insignificant bureaucrat from Petersburg; he thus tries to pass himself off as an inspector general in the provincial town where he gets stuck from lack of money. Like Khlestakov, Dostoevsky’s liars disregard truth altogether and represent themselves as they would like to be seen. Like Khlestakov, they are more interested in appearing successful than in actually being so. Likewise, they want to be admired and respected, yet they are entirely unconcerned with having the virtues that would make them so. Furthermore, Khlestakov embodies other important negative aspects of lying that characterize Dostoevsky’s liars: its potential for mindlessness (legkomyshlie), boundlessness (bezbrezhnost’), and narcissism. Nevertheless, though Dostoevsky’s liars follow the Khlestakovian model, they move progressively away from it, General Ivolgin (The Idiot, 1868) being the most Khlestakovian and Fedor Karamazov (The Brothers Karamazov, 1880) the least. General Ivolgin, for example, craves admiration and respect; Fedor Karamazov, on the other hand, settles for the power over others that derives from displaying his shame. Likewise, General Ivolgin is the most ingenuous of Dostoevsky’s liars, while Fedor Karamazov is the most self- and audience-conscious of them.

Unlike Khlestakov, who is a young man in his twenties, created when
Dostoevsky was in his twenties, Dostoevsky’s most striking liars are in their forties and fifties. General Ivolgin and Fedor Karamazov are both fifty-five years old; Stepan Verkhovensky is fifty-three; Captain Lebiadkin is forty; and Lebedev is pushing fifty (like Ivan Karamazov’s devil). This means that Dostoevsky was their historical contemporary, but it also means that Khlestakov is their fictional contemporary, for Dostoevsky’s liars are aged Khlestakovs. Aware of the parallels between lying and fiction, Dostoevsky creates this pantheon of highly entertaining liars to flaunt his metaliterary skill.

**National Identity Crisis**

Though Dostoevsky uses his liars as loci of metaliterary play, he also grounds them in nineteenth-century reality as emblems of the national identity crisis. Studies have shown that a vacillation between self-aggrandizement and desire to merge with an ideal characterizes shame. Amplified in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Russian society, this vacillation can be seen in the conflicting pulls of Westernizer and Slavophile values—autonomy and community. In the context of Dostoevsky’s worldview, it can be seen in a wavering between the two value systems embodied in the Russian intelligentsia and the people—an imported value system that emphasizes individual self-sufficiency and a native Christian value system that emphasizes human interdependence. Seen in the sociopolitical context of Dostoevsky’s fiction and journalism, his liars embody the national identity crisis. Seen in metaphysical terms, this vacillation expresses the struggle between the devil and God in the human soul.

Unlike Dostoevsky’s shame-ridden underground men who withdraw, his liars, driven by the desire for social recognition, propel themselves into the public sphere. Not introspectors but exhibitionists, Dostoevsky’s liars occupy themselves with self-fashioning. Nineteenth-century possibilities for social mobility motivate these men and contribute to their identity crises.

Two areas of psychological study dealing with vacillations in personal identity—studies of lying and studies of shame—illuminate Dostoevsky’s liars. Studies of lying show that there are two crucial periods for children as regards lying: (1) ages three or four, when children become capable of telling a deliberate lie, and (2) adolescence, when children challenge authority and the legitimacy of many social rules. Throughout childhood, children also vacillate between their conflicting desires for dependence and independence regarding their families. Adolescence further exacerbates children’s susceptibility to peer pressure. Lotman observes that “As a trait of historical, and not individual psychology, lying indicates infantile tendencies in a mature person, group, or generation.” Their adolescent-like traits—obsession with being
recognized socially as an individual yet accepted as a conforming member of a group, revolt against authority, and focus on the immediate present—explain why Dostoevsky’s liars are so exasperating and appealing.53

Dostoevsky’s journalistic and fictional works prescribe some cures for the Russian divided self. On the sociopolitical level, Dostoevsky’s doctrine of pochvennichestvo prescribes merging the attributes of the intelligentsia and the people to heal the split between them. On the individual and metaphysical levels, Dostoevsky has Zosima, a spiritual healer, diagnose shame as the disease ravaging Fedor Karamazov’s psyche and soul: “And above all do not be so ashamed of yourself, for that is the cause of everything” (14:40;43). Zosima here suggests that shame of one’s self may lead to sinful actions (à la Raskolnikov). Like the Diary writer, Zosima thus prescribes truthfulness as the cure: “And above all, above everything else—do not lie” (14:40;44).

### The Ethics of Discourse

In his “Fourth Reverie of the Solitary Walker,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau likewise identifies shame as a motive for lying and recommends truth as a healing agent, concluding that truth is “an homage that the good man pays to his own dignity.”54 Like Zosima, Rousseau links the concepts of truth and self-respect, arguing that the first promotes the second. In fact, Rousseau’s entire “Fourth Reverie” raises many critical issues addressed in Dostoevsky’s journalistic argument and his fictional portrayal of lying. Since Dostoevsky was an avid reader of Rousseau, with whom he polemicized most of his life,55 Rousseau’s “Reverie” may well have served as a catalyst for Dostoevsky’s own thoughts on lying, fiction, and truth. Both Rousseau’s “Fourth Reverie” and Dostoevsky’s “Something about Lying” conclude by discussing the links between shame and self-respect. Like Rousseau, Dostoevsky explores varieties of lying and reveals his own preoccupation with the ethics of discourse.

Rousseau distinguishes between lying and fiction on ethical grounds. First, he defines lying as an activity that involves concealing “a truth which one ought to make known.”56 He elaborates this ethical criterion by further defining lying as “everything which by being opposed to truth offends justice in any way.”57 Fiction, on the other hand, does not entail an ethical offense: “[T]o lie without advantage or disadvantage to oneself or others is not to lie; it is not falsehood but fiction.”58 Rousseau explains: “[E]verything which although opposed to truth does not affect justice in any way is no more than a fiction.”59 For Rousseau, it is always bad to lie or misrepresent and thus lie by proxy, but, given his belief that we all live in a corrupted world, he allows fiction (a corrupt form) to serve as a vehicle for sociopolitical reeducation.60 In this view, fiction’s ethical potential depends upon authorial intention.
Dostoevsky follows Rousseau in categorizing statements according to ethical criteria. A speaker’s motives distinguish falsifying from exhibitionist lying (vran’yo). Falsifying is motivated by “practical gain” and “criminal intentions.” On the other hand, Dostoevsky views exhibitionist lying as “innocent” (lgan’yo nevinnoe), perhaps because of its “lack of advantage or disadvantage to oneself or others.” In Rousseau’s terms, lying is closer to fiction than is falsehood.

Nonetheless, lying is not identical with fiction. As I have argued earlier, Dostoevsky locates lying in the mimetic sphere, the world of appearances. He locates good fiction, on the other hand, in the poetic and metaphysical spheres. For Dostoevsky, lying obfuscates all truth—factual, moral, and poetic. In his 1873 article, the Diary writer both notes the liar’s “scorn for facts” (21:122) and deliberates on Russians’ lack of respect for truth (21:119). Viewing truth as boring, prosaic, and ordinary provides a tremendous impetus to embellish reality—by hyperbolizing or plagiarizing—or to disregard truth altogether—by bullshitting. As Frankfurt affirms, “It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit.” We best understand Dostoevsky’s liars as liars who disregard truth, rather than as liars who falsify for personal gain.

While Dostoevsky and Rousseau agree upon the power of fiction to effect personal and social change, they diverge in their views on the relationship between lying and truth-telling. Here authorial intent and target audience play critical roles. Rousseau wrote his Reveries in part to change public perception of his autobiographical persona, to salvage the self-image that suffered so greatly after the publication of his Confessions. His autobiographical persona thus discusses only his own practices, which include hyperbole, but not other kinds of lying: Rousseau mentions neither plagiarizing nor bullshitting. Dostoevsky’s Diary writer, on the other hand, writes largely in the third person as an observer of the contemporary Russian social scene. He describes a full spectrum of lying and demonstrates his solidarity with Russian liars by writing hyperbolically. Unlike Rousseau’s autobiographical persona, who characterizes himself as a solitaire, Dostoevsky’s Diary writer thus identifies fully with his narrative audience. After establishing this identification, he uses it to model a negative response to the practice of bullshitting, which he views as a source of harm to both self and others.

Both Rousseau and Dostoevsky make a case for lying as a form of hospitality intended to entertain an audience. Dostoevsky adds that in amusing his audience the speaker “sacrifices himself” to them, thus representing such lying as apparently virtuous. Nonetheless, both he and Rousseau conclude by condemning such seeming altruism. Rousseau concludes that “one should not
debase oneself in order to amuse others”; Dostoevsky concludes that the apparent altruism of entertaining others differs from the genuine altruism of social activism.65 By stressing liars’ concern for appearances, he exposes their apparent self-sacrifice as self-aggrandizement.

Dostoevsky’s position on the relationship between lying and shame also resembles Rousseau’s. Rousseau confesses, “I have often lied out of shame, to avoid embarrassment in trivial affairs or affairs that concerned only me, as when in order to keep a conversation going I have been forced by the slowness of my ideas and my lack of small talk to have recourse to fiction for something to say.”66 Dostoevsky goes further, declaring that “The delicate reciprocity of lying is practically the first condition of Russian society—of all Russian meetings, parties, clubs, scientific societies, and so forth” (21:119). The Diary writer hyperbolically characterizes lying as social glue, the kind of discourse that facilitates social interactions (which he, unlike Rousseau and Tolstoy, does not characterize as meaningless). Though rooted in shame, lying can serve a positive social function.

That social function is jeopardized when lying (vran’yo) starts down the slippery slope toward lie (lozh’), however. In The Brothers Karamazov, Zosima links lying to shame and shame to identity by noting the speaker’s shame sensitivity. After he points out that Fedor Karamazov’s buffoonery is rooted in shame, Zosima counsels the old buffoon, “not to be so ashamed of yourself,” but also to refrain from drunkenness and from verbal licentiousness. “[A]nd above all, above everything else—do not lie.” Fedor Pavlovich asks whether Zosima is referring to his Diderot story. Zosima replies:

No, not about Diderot. The important thing is not to lie to yourself. The person who lies to himself [lgushchii] and who listens to his own lie [lozh’] gets to the point where he cannot distinguish the truth either in himself or around him and consequently he loses respect for himself and for others. Respecting no one, he ceases to love, and, having no love, in order to occupy and amuse himself, he gives himself up to passions and coarse pleasures and becomes a beast in his vices, and all of this comes from continuous lying [bespreryvnoi lzhi] to others and to himself. (14:40–41;44)

By condoning the Diderot story, Zosima distinguishes between the lying that constitutes the Russian social contract, which promotes community, and deliberate lying, which destroys community. Once a person lies to himself deliberately, he lies to others. Deliberate lying leads the liar away from self-knowledge. It undermines the mutual trust and respect necessary for the development of community. Once habituated to lying, the liar loses all sense of connection to others and thus to God.
Zosima tells Fedor Pavlovich not to lie, but, more importantly, he tells him not to be so ashamed of himself. Zosima thus points to the escape from lying: self-respect. As Zosima demonstrates in his own story later in the novel, a person must overcome his shame sensitivity to feel he is part of the human community. He thus propagates the lesson learned by Dostoevsky’s ridiculous man, a fictional character from the Diary of a Writer, who has a dream of unity with others that frees him from his fear of seeming ridiculous.

Interestingly, both Rousseau’s solitary walker and Dostoevsky’s gregarious Diary writer conclude their reflections on lying by discussing the ethical consequences of indulging in verbal excess. Rousseau sums up, “Truth is an homage that the good man pays to his own dignity. When my lack of small talk forced me to fill the silence with harmless fiction, I acted wrongly, because one should not debase oneself in order to amuse others, and when the pleasure of writing led me to embellish reality with ornaments of my own invention, I acted even more wrongly, because to decorate truth with fables is in fact to disfigure it.” Rousseau thus concludes with two points that Dostoevsky will elaborate in different ways. First, following Rousseau’s example, the Diary writer moralizes that pandemic lying obfuscates truth. Second, Dostoevsky’s journalism and fiction both manifest concern for the personal and social consequences of self-debasement. In his fiction, Dostoevsky demonstrates that his shameless liars’ decision to play the fool harms not only them but those around them.

In closing, Rousseau condemns even the embellishment of reality. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, clearly enjoys his liars and their stories. Furthermore, he makes their discourse serve his authorial truth. And, while Dostoevsky’s Diary writer criticizes hyperbole, he wholeheartedly engages in it. He thus deploys a rhetorical strategy that he will later use to great advantage in his 1876–77 Diary, coopting the very rhetorical practices which he is denouncing. In concluding, the Diary writer expresses shock at the gentlemen who discourse pompously yet ignorantly. He censures this display’s shamelessness as a source of despair for Russia’s future. The Diary writer attributes such shamelessness to a lack of conscience: “It [shamelessness] manifests an indifference towards the self-judgment by one’s own conscience, or, what is the same thing, an extraordinary true lack of self-respect . . .” (21:124). Dostoevsky thus echoes Rousseau’s conclusion that “Truth is an homage that the good man pays to his own dignity.” Dostoevsky and Rousseau agree that some kinds of lying cause no short-term harm to self or others; rather, they do cause a long-term harm, for a lack of self-respect can lead to shameless behavior. The Diary writer thus invokes the Solovevian sense of shame as conscience, a sense of moral discretion or appropriateness that restrains a person from shameful display or action. In other words, he condones hyperbolic lying,
and even plagiarism, but he condemns bullshitting, as it can potentially lead others astray.

While Rousseau defines all lying that is “without advantage or disadvantage to oneself or others” as fiction, Dostoevsky’s definition of *vrant’yo* encompasses a broader range of discourses. Like fiction, lying expresses a powerful psychic energy. In both his journalism and his fiction, Dostoevsky describes lying as a fundamental human activity. Taking his cue from the philosophers, Dostoevsky has Razumikhin declare in *Crime and Punishment*:

> I love when people lie [vruj]! Lying [Vran’yo] is the single privilege humans have over all organisms. If you lie [Sovresh]—you get to the truth! I am a human being, because I lie [Potomu ia i chelovek, chto vru]. Not one truth has ever been reached without first lying [ne sovrat] fourteen times, or maybe a hundred and fourteen, and that’s honorable in its way; well, but we can’t even lie [sovrat-to] with our own minds! Lie [vri] for me, but lie [vri] in your own way, and I’ll kiss you for it. Lying in one’s own way [Sovrat po-svoemu] is almost better than telling the truth in someone else’s way; in the first case you’re a human being, and in the second you’re only a bird! (6:155)

In a statement that clearly parodies Descartes’s famous dictum, one of Dostoevsky’s most sympathetic characters posits lying as the quintessential human activity. In this deliberately hyperbolic view, Razumikhin argues that human beings are governed not only by reason, which allows them to think and speak, but also by a transcendent impulse. Like the *Diary* writer, Razumikhin hyperbolizes while discussing hyperbole. His rhetorical strategy, in turn, exemplifies his point: as an implicitly comparative rhetorical trope, hyperbole points beyond itself—to the reality that serves as its implicit starting point and to something transcendent, like truth, that the verbal excess attempts to express. In Razumikhin’s view, hyperbole thus expresses a metaphysical impulse rooted in the idea of the transcendent.

While at first glance the *Diary* writer’s view that lying is rooted in shame seems to contradict this account, shame’s paradox reveals their common ground in the desire to be other. Like hyperbole, shame implies comparison. Thus an individual’s sense of lack presupposes a standard, norm, or ideal which he or she does not live up to. Razumikhin posits a sense of metaphysical lack, a desire to reach a transcendent truth through the nontranscendent medium of language. The *Diary* writer posits a psychological or material lack, a desire to be other, to have what the ideal other has. Both accounts thus explain the metaphoric impulse, the use of hyperbolic language to close the gap between the actual and the ideal. In fiction after *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky emphasizes the desire to exhibit one’s self, but he does not drop
metaphysical desire, which rears its head, however comically, in the discourse of his liars.

Razumikhin qualifies his statement by differentiating between kinds of lying—“lying in one’s own way” and “telling the truth in someone else’s way”—descriptions that point to Dostoevsky’s early concern with human identity as well as his interest in the debate between romanticism and classicism over the functions of creativity and imitation. “Lying in one’s own way” can be seen as a romantic concept, identified with selfhood, with an individual’s creative resources, the ability to create or fashion a self, while “telling the truth in someone else’s way” can be seen as a classicist concept that points to imitation. When imitation involves the mindless repetition of others’ ideas or stories, a practice that Dostoevsky repeatedly condemned, it can describe plagiarism. Dostoevsky reveals the pitfalls of story-stealing by playfully exposing plagiarists.

Implicating the Reader

In the following passage from *The Idiot*, General Ivolgin tells a plagiarized story that explains his social fall. Ivolgin thus tells the truth under cover. His lie serves both as the cover-up and as the sign of the cover-up. By having the fallen woman Nastasia Filippovna expose Ivolgin’s story as a plagiarism, Dostoevsky trains readers to plunge below the story’s surface, and accept its poetic truth while rejecting its mimetic veracity. Dostoevsky also implicates us in the action of passing on shame, thereby complicating our response to the novel’s central drama—the story of Nastasia Filippovna’s shame.

“A stupid story, and in two words,” the General complacently began. “Two years ago, yes! almost, just after the opening of the new —skii railroad, I (already in civilian garb), busy with incredibly important affairs concerning the resignation of my commission, bought a ticket, in first class: I went in, I sit down, I smoke. That is, I continue to smoke; I lit a cigar earlier. I am alone in the compartment. Smoking is not prohibited, but it’s not permitted either; like this, it’s semi-permitted, as usual; well, depending on who you are. The window is lowered. Suddenly, just before the whistle, two women with a lapdog position themselves, just opposite. They are late. One is dressed up most lavishly, in light blue; the other more modestly, in black silk with a cape collar. They are by no means ugly, look around haughtily, speak English. I’m not bothered, of course; I smoke. That is, I almost turn it over in my mind, but nonetheless, continue to smoke—since the window is open—out the window. A lapdog is lying on the light blue lady’s lap. It’s small, all in all the size of my fist, black, with white paws, even a rare breed. A silver collar
with a crest. I’m not bothered. I only notice that the ladies, it seems, are angry, about the cigar, of course. One stares with a lorgnette, tortoise-shell. Once again I’m not bothered: because in fact they don’t say anything! If they had said something, gave warning, asked, there is, after all, a human language! But as it is they are silent . . . suddenly,—and without the slightest warning, I tell you, that is without the very slightest, so it’s absolutely as if she’d gone off her rocker,—the light blue one grabs the cigar from my hand and out the window. The coach is flying, I look—like a half-wit. The woman is a savage; a savage woman, quite certainly of a savage background. And yet a portly woman, fulsome, tall, blonde, ruddy (even too much so), her eyes flash at me. Without saying a word, I, with extraordinary politeness, with the most perfect politeness, with the most refined, as they say, politeness, approach the lapdog with two fingers, take it delicately by the neck and hurl it out the window right after the cigar! It only yelped! The coach continues to fly. . . .”

The company applauds and the General swaggers: “And I’m right, I’m right, I’m triply right! . . . because if cigars are prohibited in train cars, then dogs are all the more so.” Kolia cheers his father, but Nastasia Filippovna demonstrates that he lifted the story in minute detail from a newspaper.

In his 1873 article, Dostoevsky claims that Russian lying has two basic roots: the fear that truth is prosaic, and shame at oneself and desire to be other (21:119). When the two converge, as in the case of a person’s identity, the person feels his own life deficient in interest and borrows or embroiders facts of another’s life (fictional or actual) and presents them as his own. In this case, General Ivolgin skirts the possible mundanity and shame of the actual story of his break with the Epanchins and fashions himself as other. Ivolgin thus appropriates another’s story. His audience applauds him for actions that are, as Nastasia Filippovna reveals, those of a Frenchman written up in a Belgian newspaper.

While Ivolgin steals his story from the newspaper, he contextualizes in a telling manner. Significantly, he sets the action in a first-class train compartment, thus establishing his social status. The act of smoking, which is “semi-permitted, . . . depending on who you are,” further underscores his class privilege. Yet the moment is ripe for shame: he locates it during his transition from military to civilian life, a time when he was self-conscious about his civilian dress. The women first snub him with their hostile silence then shame him brutally.

Nastasia Filippovna follows their example. She exposes his plagiarism by repeating five times that it is “exactly the same” as the newspaper story. Her brutal exposure of the General signals the novel’s poetic self-consciousness,
just as the *Diary* writer’s account of an exposure scene that involves mutual recognition does.

Both scenes demonstrate shame’s contagiousness by portraying witnesses’ embarrassed responses. Dostoevsky highlights audience response, but he also underscores narrative awareness. For instance, the *Diary* writer claims that stealing others’ stories is natural. Yet Ivolgin ultimately fails. He owes his initial success to his sympathetic listeners. But Ivolgin fatally misjudges his audience. He expects admiration, not exposure. He does not see Nastasia Filippovna as a social outcast who intends to expose his son Gania as an equally fallen creature. Instead of accepting the shame of her fall, Nastasia Filippovna lashes back at those responsible—the fathers who have betrayed instead of protecting her. Ivolgin’s own narcissistic injury blinds him to hers.

Dostoevsky, on the other hand, keeps his reader focused on shame. In this scene, he piles up portrayals of passed-on shame. Ashamed of his fall in social status, General Ivolgin steals another’s story. Ashamed because Generals Epanchin and Totsky plan to marry Nastasia Filippovna off to him, Gania plans to shame her. But she has the upper hand. Ashamed of her own fallen status, she shames father and son alike. Dostoevsky stockpiles shame until character-witnesses and readers are paralyzed by it. Then the doorbell rings, and Rogozhin arrives. The arrival of another out-of-place character interrupts the exposition of shame and creates an expectation of further scandal, an expectation Dostoevsky gratifies. Dostoevsky briefly deflects attention from General Ivolgin’s shame to reveal the broader picture of shame that nineteenth-century Russian society colludes in—the exclusion/containment of a fallen woman. Dostoevsky exposes the cost of social harmony. He moves from the specific nineteenth-century Russian reality to the universal human condition.

Dostoevsky’s *Diary* article reveals that he understands the complexities of shame dynamics and knows how to implicate his readers in the shame experience. Furthermore, he understands the discomfort arising from witnessing another’s shame (whether in life or in fiction) as well as the affective connection that obtains between vicarious and remembered experience. In the article’s exposed shame scene, consciousness of shame arises from within. Furthermore, the one witness to the speaker’s shame flees. This example thus portrays internally induced shame and two responses to a shame situation—denial and flight. In the novel, shame comes from without. Moreover, a whole roomful of characters witness the General’s shame. The private sphere can inhibit personal exposure and embarrassment. The public sphere can encourage public exposure, the violation of social norms, and thus scandal. By portraying scandal, Dostoevsky taps into the universal unease that attends the witnessing of shame situations. We cannot witness another’s exposure without feeling vulnerable ourselves. Portrayed shame overflows textual bounds.
Dostoevsky deliberately uses the parallels between shame dynamics and narrative dynamics to involve his readers. Like the speaker in the article, the General tries to deny his plagiarism, but Nastasia Filippovna aggressively blocks his attempts. Moreover, her assaultive accusation complicates readers’ responses. We would normally distance ourselves from a character like Dostoevsky’s alcoholic General—but Dostoevsky creates sympathy for him by exposing his shame publicly. We might normally feel that as a seduced minor Nastasia Filippovna deserves our sympathy, but her aggressive passing on of shame unsettles us. By augmenting sympathy for Ivolgin and diminishing sympathy for Nastasia Filippovna, Dostoevsky makes us complicit with the status quo.

## Narrative Ethics

Throughout his career, Dostoevsky unites ethics and aesthetics. In *The Brothers Karamazov* (1881), Ivan Karamazov declares that he refuses to accept social harmony if it has to be based on the suffering of even one small child. Twelve years earlier, in *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky portrays one woman’s refusal to allow social harmony based on her own suffering and humiliation. Dostoevsky exposes her shame and suffering. By evoking our discomfort and uncovering our desire to contain/marginalize her, Dostoevsky implicates us in the social injustice she experiences. We cannot pass judgment on her without examining our own motives. Dostoevsky thus places us in a very contemporary dilemma.

As a journalist, Dostoevsky uses hyperbole to make his point about hyperbole. As a novelist, Dostoevsky uses the dual nature of the shame experience—its affective and cognitive aspects—to implicate us in universal experiences. We may want to run, but Dostoevsky will not let our consciences hide. When we accept the status quo we collude in the perpetuation of social injustice.

Portraying shame allows Dostoevsky to circumvent Russia’s heavy censorship and address politically charged issues like the woman question. In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky moves the political to the personal. This, in turn, illustrates an important difference between lying and fiction. For Dostoevsky, fiction is a tool for social change. While Ivolgin tells a story to conceal the truth of his social fall, Dostoevsky tells stories that address social ills in the guise of individual cases of shame. He thus awakens the public imagination and makes us understand private pains more fully as public ills. Like Rousseau, Dostoevsky uses fiction to arouse readers’ desire for positive ideals. For Dostoevsky, lying may entertain, but all good literature effects moral change.

Dostoevsky’s liars and fiction writers differ in how they use their sources.
Dostoevsky draws on world literature and the Bible for their deep cultural roots and memories; he also draws on anecdotes and newspaper accounts. Dostoevsky’s liars employ the same sources, but shallowly. Dostoevsky transforms his sources; his liars do not. Dostoevsky shapes his sources into instruments of truth; his liars passively palm them off as their own experience. Contrast how General Ivolgin incorporates the lapdog story into his own biography and how Dostoevsky incorporates it into his novel. Ivolgin borrows the story and embellishes it. He unconsciously uses it as an analogue story, providing his audience with autobiographical information by modeling the protagonists in his purloined narrative on actual people. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, does this consciously, furnishing his authorial audience entry into his character’s psyche. Ivolgin, for instance, links the resignation of his commission with the trip. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, gives Ivolgin’s trip a metaphoric twist—his journey ends in exile both from the army and from first-class society. Furthermore, Dostoevsky creates this scene of lying and exposure to make explicit the terms of what I call, in chapter 8, the Russian social contract: one lies and then allows one’s interlocutor to do the same. By violating this contract and not permitting General Ivolgin to lie, Nastasia Filippovna points to a fundamental collusion at the base of polite society. She raises our awareness of the conventions by which we live.

Dostoevsky also uses this scene to draw his authorial audience’s attention to his novel’s synthetic dimension. Throughout The Idiot, Dostoevsky raises questions about the nature of fiction, especially its contractual dimension. Authors abound in The Idiot. Prince Myshkin and Ivolgin tell stories; Lebedev fabricates legal speeches and anonymous letters; Keller writes a newspaper article (which Lebedev edits); Ippolit writes a lengthy suicide note; Aglaia recites and revises Pushkin’s “Poor Knight” to voice her vision of Prince Myshkin as a Don Quixote figure; Aglaia and Nastasia Filippovna correspond. These authors are extremely concerned with audience response, but they are rarely sensitive to their audiences (Myshkin is the exception). Dostoevsky thus examines the ways that narcissism undermines rhetorical efficacy.

Unlike fiction, lying knows no measure. It lacks modesty and discretion, what might be called a healthy sense of shame. General Ivolgin, while telling Prince Myshkin about how he served as Napoleon’s page boy and confidant, gets carried away: “O Prince!” cried the General, so intoxicated by his own story that perhaps he was unable to stop short of even the most extreme indiscretions” (8:416). In crossing discretion’s boundary, General Ivolgin violates the social norm permitting a measure of hyperbole. He thus makes himself vulnerable to public exposure. Myshkin understands his own no-win situation: “He also understood that the old man had been transported by the ecstasy of his success. Nonetheless, he sensed that he was one of that order of liars, who,
though they lie to voluptuousness and even to self-oblivion, still, at the very height of their ecstasy, suspect all the same that they will not be believed, that they cannot be believed. In the present situation, the old man might come to himself, be endlessly shamed, suspect the Prince of limitless compassion for him, and be offended” (8:418). Discretion-shame protects the individual from overexposure. Transgressing social norms places both transgressor and witnesses in limbo: when norms are violated, behavior cannot automatically follow socially prescribed rules. Shame does not follow a set script.

By making the Prince his focalizer in this scene, Dostoevsky places his readers in the same position as Myshkin. We understand that Ivolgin has crossed a boundary, but, like Myshkin, we are powerless to help him. Nonetheless, Dostoevsky models a way out. Like his only relative Mme. Epanchina, Myshkin understands that while there is no easy return from shame, an empathic audience permits restoration to community. As the General flees an earlier shame-filled situation, Mme. Epanchina extends a metaphorical hand to him, saying, “[S]tay a minute; we are all sinners; when you feel that your conscience reproaches you less, come see me, we'll sit and chat about old times” (8:204). Mme. Epanchina appeals to the General’s sense of disgrace-shame as well as to his sense of discretion-shame; she attributes to him the ability to confront his own shame and get beyond it. Most importantly, however, she empathically identifies with him (“we are all sinners”). She recognizes that the first step toward recovery must occur internally—the General must face his own conscience. In proposing “a chat about old times” as further cure, Mme. Epanchina acts on her understanding that the second step occurs in the social sphere. Empathic discourse can heal shame. Dostoevsky provides his authorial audience with a model of proper response, a code for social interaction.

Dostoevsky the journalist, of course, uses different kinds of rhetoric than Dostoevsky the novelist. Dostoevsky the journalist employs a kind of rhetoric that Dostoevsky's liars use: epideictic, a form of rhetoric that displays the speaker's performance. In the classical world, epideictic speeches were regarded in the same light as dramatic spectacles or athletic performances. Unlike forensic rhetoric, which concentrates on interpreting the past, or deliberative rhetoric, which rationalizes action to be taken in the future, epideictic rhetoric focuses on the present. Furthermore, while forensic and deliberative rhetoric have practical aims (winning a court case, moving an audience to action), epideictic rhetoric serves, rather, to affirm values. Epideictic is the genre of praise and blame, and equally of amplification. As much at stake as the subject of praise or blame is the speaker's rhetorical skill, for the speaker must produce an aesthetic response in his audience, whereby he demonstrates the qualities that make him worthy of audience approval or even worthy to address an audience. Significantly, audience response is critical for epideictic
rhetoric, which works more through intuitive comprehension or insight than cognition. Dostoevsky’s *Diary* writer employs epideictic rhetoric to promote a sense of *communitas* through shared values. Dostoevsky’s liars, on the other hand, employ it to promote themselves.

The *Diary* writer employs epideictic rhetoric to both praise and condemn lying. Instances of praise for lying include the descriptions of polite lies that constitute all social interaction. His article also commends lying as a cure for illness (anticipating Freud). Yet he writes most about the bullshitters. By elaborating on their practice of speaking on subjects about which they know nothing, Dostoevsky reveals lying’s negative face.

In his fiction, Dostoevsky portrays lying’s positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, the profoundly appealing Razumikhin from *Crime and Punishment* (1865) praises lying (discussed earlier). In *Raw Youth* (1875), Dostoevsky provides an example of lying that enhances group identity. On the negative side, Dostoevsky’s liars generally follow Gogol’s Khlestakov in their narcissism, disregard for truth, quest for social recognition at any price, mindless speech, and violation of social norms. In pointing out these harmful potentials in his article, the *Diary* writer advocates their positive opposites: self-control, mindfulness, and altruism.

Dostoevsky’s rhetoric differs most from that of his liars, however, in its goals. Dostoevsky’s liars amplify givens for self-enhancement—to win their audience’s admiration or recognition, or both. Though the *Diary* writer parades his rhetorical talent, he wants to educate his audience. He elevates his readers’ self-awareness by listing a series of propositions with which they identify. First he declares that all Russians are liars, citing numerous examples that are transparently universal. Then he asserts that he does not believe anyone who claims that he has never hyperbolized, bullshitted, or plagiarized, thus compelling our complicity. The *Diary* writer sweetens this identification by lauding the generosity as well as the aesthetic sense inspiring this kind of lying. In the second half of the article, however, he distances himself and his audience from the bullshitters.

When they preserve decorum, liars uphold the social order. When they indulge in excess, as they do in Dostoevsky’s fiction, they demonstrate bad manners, disrupt decorum and causing scandal. Excess thus precipitates disgrace and failure. Three of Dostoevsky’s lower-born liars—Lebedev, Lebiadkin, and Fedor Karamazov—lack good manners or flaunt bad manners and thus behave shamefully. Though General Ivolgin and Stepan Verkhovensky preserve the good manners of their class, they both indulge in excess and fail to reckon with their audiences. As Dostoevsky repeatedly shows, rhetorical success requires self-awareness and audience awareness. In outperforming his liars, Dostoevsky demonstrates that the potential shortcomings of
lying (a tendency to excess, a disregard for truth, and a stress on performance) can be balanced only by the virtues necessary for truly effective rhetoric (a sense of limits, a respect for truth, and a moral purpose). Dostoevsky thus proves the moral of his article: self-awareness enhances performance.

While four of the fictional liars I discuss in this book—General Ivolgin, Stepan Verkhovensky, Lukian Lebedev, and Captain Lebiadkin—entertain readers in Dostoevsky’s authorial audience, they are often unsuccessful vis-à-vis their own audiences because of their narcissism. On the other hand, Ivan Karamazov’s devil and Fedor Karamazov prove to be extremely self-conscious and audience-conscious storytellers. They tailor their stories to suit their specific audiences and thereby achieve anticipated responses. They also furnish Dostoevsky’s authorial audience with evidence of his work’s increasingly metaliterary character.

**Dostoevsky the Reformer**

Before turning to a chapter-by-chapter examination of Dostoevsky’s fictional liars, I must state the obvious: their lying reveals a great deal about these speakers. Whether unconsciously (Ivolgin) or consciously (Fedor Karamazov), Dostoevsky’s liars employ hyperbolic rhetoric that simultaneously conceals and reveals truths about themselves and their desires. In expressing their desires or ideals, these characters’ lies reveal the gap between their desired and actual self-images. If, as Dostoevsky claims, lying intimately relates to identity and liars’ shame at their own identities motivates their lying, then they inscribe their shame into their rhetorical self-presentations. Dostoevsky thus shows his authorial audience how lying manifests shame content.

Furthermore, while this book focuses on the narrative dynamics of shame to portray Dostoevsky as a social or spiritual reformer, shame issues play a larger role in Dostoevsky’s fictional oeuvre. Dostoevsky relishes his role as Gogol’s postmaster—exposing others and thus gratifying readers’ voyeuristic impulses. Nonetheless, by placing us in the uncomfortable position of witnessing others’ shame, he reveals the price of knowledge. Once we taste the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (albeit vicariously), we are no longer innocent—we are shamed. Knowledge of others’ shame leads to an uncomfortable awareness of our own. Our discomfort as readers derives not only from the sense of vulnerability we feel as witnesses but also from the very shameful, contagious nature of shame itself. As H. B. Lewis notes,

Before we leave our review of the phenomenologies of shame and guilt, let us note that guilt is the more respectable affective state (for both sexes), as well
as the more articulate. Shame for the failure of the self to live up to its ideals is respectable enough when it is spoken of in the abstract. When it is experienced in its concrete, living form—when the ideal is represented in consciousness as an actual other before whom one is ashamed—the experience itself evokes more shame. Shame is not only a neglected experience, it is a devalued experience because it is so feelingful and so “other”-connected. In our society, people are ashamed of themselves for being ashamed.86

This returns us to shame’s paradox: shame isolates yet connects us. We all feel somehow defective and needy; we all want to be qualified self-presenting agents; we all need ideals to live up to and fall short of. Dostoevsky not only portrays a post-lapsarian shame-filled world but plunges his narrative audience into it affectively. We may flee—as some readers of Dostoevsky do—never to return. Those who remain may be temporarily paralyzed by affect. But Dostoevsky also provides his authorial audience with the affective and cognitive means to alleviate the pain. Dostoevsky gives us models for empathic listening—characters like Myshkin, Mme. Epanchina, Zosima, and Alesha Karamazov. These characters use their moral imaginations to hear the shame/pain inscribed in others’ discourses and proffer them an empathic bridge. After making us experience the often painful ties that bind us to others, Dostoevsky shows us a way to join fully in the human community.

An examination of Dostoevsky’s liars demonstrates that even when meta-literarily engaging the Russian literary tradition, Dostoevsky’s work is deeply ethical and political. In verbally overstepping unspoken social boundaries, his liars reveal the social conventions governing the life of nineteenth-century educated Russians. In comically decrying their own fate, liars identify actual problems facing most educated Russians. In exposing the shame that spawns lying, Dostoevsky implicates his readers in the ethical and sociopolitical action of his work. Witnesses to others’ exposed selves, we stand exposed to self-scrutiny. Thus exposed, we recognize the ties that bind us to others and refrain from passing quick judgment. Thus exposed, we may live more consciously, embracing the positive in our selves and others. Thus self-conscious, we may consciously fashion ourselves as ethical and sociopolitical beings who strive to live more harmoniously with others. Dostoevsky’s fiction demonstrates that the effort at social reform begins at home.