At the end of *Demons*, Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, like many 1870s youth, forsakes the comforts of home and habit and travels to Russia’s heartland. There, on his deathbed, he renounces his self-image as victim and assumes responsibility for his life. Relinquishing his self-image as civic figure, he avows himself to be one of those possessed by the demons wracking Russia’s body and soul; he finally declares his love for Varvara Stavrogina; and he professes belief in God. This series of deathbed pronouncements represents the culmination of a progression: following shame-filled moments that expose the gap between his actual and ideal self-images, Stepan Verkhovensky attains moments of self-awareness. In facing his personal shame, acknowledging his self-deception as well as its sociopolitical effects, and reaching out to God, Stepan escapes his narcissistic isolation and joins the larger sociopolitical and metaphysical community. In portraying Stepan Verkhovensky, Dostoevsky refashions General Ivolgin’s drama of shame confronted, developing it to reveal more overtly the political and metaphysical dimensions of the personal.

Stepan Verkhovensky flees not only his past life, but also Dostoevsky’s narrator, thus repeating another narrative pattern Dostoevsky developed in *The Idiot*. As Robin Feuer Miller demonstrates, Dostoevsky’s disembodied but intrusive narrator in *The Idiot* creates reader sympathy for Prince Myshkin throughout the first three books of the novel. In Book Four, however, the narrator distances himself from Myshkin. This radical shift forces readers to take an ethical stand: our sympathies remain with Myshkin, not the narrator. By repeating this pattern with Stepan Verkhovensky in *Demons*, Dostoevsky involves the narrative audience in the novel’s emotional drama and trains his authorial audience to evaluate the novel’s action for ourselves. As I show in
this chapter, Dostoevsky establishes his narrator’s blatant subjectivity to create a critical distance between him and Dostoevsky’s authorial audience. In doing so, Dostoevsky emphasizes his novel’s metalinguistic dimension: in a narrative tour de force, Dostoevsky the author mimics his narrator’s technique. The narrator creates a critical distance between his narrative audience and most characters by exposing their pretensions and self-deceptions. Dostoevsky, in turn, creates a critical distance between his authorial audience and the narrator by exposing the latter’s obvious subjectivity.

The narrator of Demons has attracted a lot of critical attention from Dostoevsky scholars, who have particularly noted the discrepancies between his outsider representation of Stavrogin and his insider depiction of Stepan Verkhovensky, between his eyewitness status and his occasional omniscience, and between his styles of overreporting and underreporting. While scholars agree that Mr. G-v, the narrator, ironizes at Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky’s expense, they disagree about the extent of Mr. G-v’s sympathy for his best friend. I hold that Mr. G-v’s irony represents his attempt to sort out his conflicting feelings for Stepan. When the narrator begins telling his story, Stepan Verkhovensky is already dead. Although the narrator portrays himself as Stepan’s confidant throughout most of the novel, after the fête, Stepan literally locks him out and leaves him behind. Forced to tell the story of Stepan’s wanderings from a second-hand remove, the narrator employs irony to hide his humiliation.

By creating a subjective, ambivalent narrator, Dostoevsky forces the authorial audience to be wary. For instance, we know from the novel’s first paragraphs that Mr. G-v had long believed Stepan Verkhovensky’s claims about himself: “Just the other day I learned, to my great surprise, but now with complete certainty, that Stepan Verkhovensky had lived among us, in our province, not only not in exile, as we used to think, but that he had never even been under surveillance! Such, then, is the power of one’s own imagination! He himself sincerely believed all his life . . . ” (10:8;8). While accusing his friend of self-deception, the narrator exposes his own susceptibility. Dostoevsky creates a narrator grappling with his own gullibility. As he exposes Stepan, the narrator exposes himself.

By drawing early attention to the narrator’s subjectivity, Dostoevsky comments on the overt or concealed subjectivity of any narrative. He thus reproduces our everyday experience of judgment as we listen to others’ stories—we assess messenger along with message. Although Mr. G-v portrays Stepan Verkhovensky ambivalently but sympathetically, he portrays Peter Verkhovensky negatively. In having him do so, Dostoevsky provides his authorial audience with guidelines for evaluating the narrator’s account. Mr. G-v’s attitudes toward father and son can be explained by moral criteria as
well as personal sympathy. Stepan Verkhovensky is a *vrun*, a liar and idealistic self-deceiver; his son Peter is a *lzhets*, a falsifier and a deliberate deceiver of others. Readers initially trust the narrator, despite his erratic system of under-reporting or overreporting, because he mirrors our moral sympathies. Stepan Verkhovensky’s weaknesses inadvertently cause others harm; Peter Verhoven-sky’s weaknesses effect death and destruction.

In this chapter, I show how the narrator exposes Stepan Verkhovensky as a self-deceiver to bolster his own credibility; how Dostoevsky undermines the narrator’s credibility by exposing his subjectivity; and how Dostoevsky fuses the personal, political, and metaphysical dimensions of his novel in Stepan Verkhovensky’s drama of confronted shame.

**Self-Deception**

During the course of the novel, the narrator reveals six incidents in which Stepan Verkhovensky experiences the shame of recognizing the discrepancy between his actual and ideal self-images. All six times Stepan acknowledges his self-deception. In calling Stepan Verkhovensky a self-deceiver, I follow the philosopher Catherine Wilson’s account: “The self-deceiver does not simply possess inconsistent beliefs. He is said, rather, to have made himself believe what he knows to be not true. The active dimension in self-deception can only be accounted for on the supposition that his wants and desires are involved in the final composition of his beliefs.”

In Wilson’s account, self-deception involves weakness of will. If confronted with the statement “I am a civic figure,” based on the usual criteria and with evidence that he cannot ignore, Stepan Verkhovensky would probably accept the truth of the claim that he is not. Yet Wilson points out that self-deceivers act according to “an imaginary set of alternatives, in which the evidence does not have to be taken into account.”

In *Demons*, the narrator provides evidence showing (a) that Stepan Verkhovensky is not a persecuted civic figure, and (b) that most of the time he willfully ignores evidence to the contrary. Yet Stepan Verkhovensky can sustain his self-deception because he and his patron Varvara Stavrogina collude in creating an environment where such evidence can be ignored.

Stepan and Varvara thereby imitate a larger cultural pattern that Lotman identifies as the dualism of post–Petrine Russian culture—a split between the world of the ideal and that of the real, worlds that coexisted but did not intersect. As Lotman explains, “This world of ideas was a play world associated with social interchange, everyday life, and the entirety of official ‘facade’
life—all areas in which the intrusion of reality was felt most strongly. Here, to call attention to the true state of affairs was an unforgivable violation of the rules of the game. But alongside this world was another world of bureaucratic and state life. In this world, realism was preferred: pragmatists were needed, not dreamers.”

Lotman’s description evokes the image of Potemkin villages: facades erected to represent the ideal reality. But while Lotman might consider these a way for men like Potemkin to combine “dreaming” with pragmatism, he asserts that subsequent generations had to choose: “They could pursue activity that was practical but contradicted their ideals, or an activity that was ideal but had to be pursued outside of practical life. It was necessary either to renounce one’s dreams or to nullify life by living only in the imagination, substituting words, poems, ‘activity’ in dreams and conversations, for actual deeds. The word began to occupy a hypertrophic place in culture. This development led to the growth of creative imagination in the gifted and to ‘a great talent for lying,’ as Aleksandr Izmailov expressed it, in the mediocre.”

In colluding to present him as a persecuted civic leader, Stepan Verkhovensky and Varvara Stavrogina act as though their ideal were true, ignoring any contradictory political or social reality. Stepan Verkhovensky thus engages in self-deception by lying to himself and to others. Varvara Stavrogina collaborates in creating and sustaining an ideal that diverges from reality. They sustain the split between a sociopolitically determined ideal and an everyday reality, a split that began in post–Petrine Russia and persisted through the Soviet period, if not to this day.

By showcasing this collusion, Dostoevsky not only exposes the duality of Russian life, he also explores the underlying psychological dynamics. Like Dostoevsky’s other liars, Stepan Verkhovensky wants to be other. Like the nobly born General Ivolgin, Stepan Verkhovensky has had more opportunities to realize his desire than most of Dostoevsky’s other liars. Yet like the General, Stepan Verkhovensky lacks strength of will. His nocturnal crying sessions with the young Stavrogin, his hysterical one-sided correspondence with Varvara Stavrogina, his constant demands on his confidant, and his drinking all demonstrate this weakness. A dreamer rather than a doer, he fabricates a compensatory self-image that gratifies his vanity. In accepting Varvara Stavrogina’s job offer, Stepan Verkhovensky can maintain his self-image, for Varvara not only believes in “his reputation as a poet, scholar” and “civic figure,” but amplifies it: “She invented him, and she was the first to believe in her invention. He was something like a sort of dream of hers. . . . But for that she indeed demanded a lot of him, sometimes even slavery” (10:16:15–16). The initial collusion, which satisfies both parties’ need for a prestigious public image, thus ends with Stepan’s subjugation. Accordingly, Stepan carries two sets of books into the garden: volumes of serious writing, such as those of
de Tocqueville, into the garden, which hide the salacious novels, such as those of de Kock, that he actually reads.

Being a persecuted civic figure constitutes only half of Stepan Verkhovensky’s ideal self-image, however. The life story the feverish Stepan tells Sophia Ulitina at the novel’s end includes a second self-defining role—that of noble lover. Coming at his life’s end, this version of his life story reveals the self-image Stepan Verkhovensky has long cultivated and would like others to share. He considers Sophia the perfect audience because he has chosen her “for his future path, and he was hastening to initiate her, so to speak” (10:494;647). By telling her his story, he hopes to heal his wounded vanity: for Stepan Verkhovensky portrays himself as a man who has been misunderstood and undervalued all his life—in both the public and private spheres. On his deathbed, however, Stepan Verkhovensky examines and renounces his self-defining roles. His courage in the face of painful truths about himself inspires reader sympathy.

By excluding him from Stepan Verkhovensky’s deathbed, Dostoevsky highlights the narrator’s changed status; he also shows how important women are in Stepan’s life. By making the narrator Stepan’s best friend and confidant, Dostoevsky exposes him to the authorial audience’s critical view. By sharing Stepan’s intimate accounts of five shame-filled moments with readers, the narrator reveals his insider status. His secondhand remove from the sixth, the most significant moment, thus carries Dostoevsky’s message: the narrator has become an outsider.

The insiders at Stepan Verkhovensky’s deathbed are women. To Sophia Ulitina he confesses a lifetime of lying; to Varvara Stavrogina he confesses his love. Stepan Verkhovensky, the narrator says, “could not be without a woman” (10:494;646). His first wife’s infidelities and flight scar him with a feeling of unworthiness; when she abandons him, he abandons their son. When his second wife unexpectedly dies, he accepts Varvara Stavrogina’s offer to become her son’s tutor. Varvara Stavrogina sustains his civic persona. Yet Stepan Verkhovensky can remain her dependent only on condition that he believes (a) that she believes in him and (b) that she loves him, albeit secretly. When Varvara destroys those beliefs, he experiences intense shame and flees—a characteristic defense against shame. Before fleeing, however, he locks himself into his quarters and writes a four-page letter to Dasha—“a pure and naive being,” “a meek one” (10:377;492)—because he needs female sympathy. On the road, he meets the Bible peddler, Sophia Ulitina, another meek and sympathetic woman, to whom he pours out his soul. Unencumbered by familiar faces and places, Stepan Verkhovensky relates his life story, embellishing his civic and amatory roles. He then suffers extreme shame: “All I told you earlier were lies—for glory, for magnificence, out of idleness—all, all, to the last word, oh blackguard,
blackguard! [Ja vam davecha vse nalgal]” (10:496;650). Throughout the novel, Stepan Verkhovensky’s verbal excesses move him to shame, provoking emotional crises that lead to self-understanding. Sophia Ultitina gives him both the sympathy and the text he needs to relinquish his narcissistic self-images.

**The Divided Self**

Throughout most of the novel, Stepan Verkhovensky entrusts his unvarnished self-image to his friend the narrator, who initially characterizes him as a noble self-deceiver:

I will say straight off: Stepan Trofimovich constantly played a certain special and, so to speak, civic role among us, and loved this role to the point of passion—so much so that it even seems to me that he could not live without it. Not that I equate him with a stage actor: God forbid, particularly as I happen to respect him. It could all have been a matter of habit, or, better, of a ceaseless and noble disposition, from childhood on, towards a pleasant dream of his beautiful civic stance. He was, for example, greatly enamored of his position as a “persecuted” man and, so to speak, an “exile.” There is a sort of classical luster to these two little words that seduced him once and for all, and, later raising him gradually in his own estimation over the course of so many years, brought him finally to some sort of pedestal, rather lofty and gratifying to his vanity. (10:7;7)

The narrator here describes the mechanics of Stepan Verkhovensky’s self-deception. An idealist by disposition, he readily adopts the prestigious role of a “persecuted” man. Over time, he elevates this self-image. In differentiating Stepan Trofimovich from a stage actor, the narrator represents his friend as an unconscious role player who gradually identifies himself so completely with his self-chosen role that it becomes life-sustaining. The narrator thus prepares readers for Stepan’s death. Once Stepan relinquishes his treasured self-image, he loses part of his life force.

His life story plays a similarly vital role for him. As the narrator notes, Stepan chides Sophia for fussing about the details of lodging, food, and expenses, because he is anxious to tell her his life story, which is “something truly lofty for him and, to use the newest language, almost a struggle for existence” (10:494;647). Stepan thus dismisses Sophia’s practical concerns about the future to focus on his present, self-defining task. She recognizes that the energy he expends in telling the story may prove fatal: “This was a sudden straining of his mental powers, which, of course—and Sophia Matveevna
foresaw it with anguish throughout his story—could not but lead immediately afterwards to a great loss of strength in his already unsettled organism” (10:494;647). Like Dostoevsky’s other liars, Stepan Verkhovensky focuses almost exclusively on himself and the present moment.

Stepan Trofimovich’s life story has three parts: his childhood and first marriages, his role as civic figure, and his love story. The first part explains why he chooses Sophia as his third wife; the second outlines his self-image as a misunderstood man of talent; the third justifies his bachelor status on the grounds that he was the object of two women’s love. Stepan begins with a Rousseauist vision of childhood innocence that prepares Sophia for the tale of his first two marriages (10:494;647). In Stepan’s telling, he moves from a state of innocence to one of love and loss (his first wife abandons him and his second wife dies). Stepan’s personal story thus rouses Sophia’s sympathy.

Stepan’s account of his civic role, by contrast, confuses her: “The fogginess increased greatly for poor, trapped Sophia Matveevna when the story turned almost into a whole dissertation on the subject of how no one had ever been able to understand Stepan Verkhovensky and of how ‘talents perish in our Russia’” (10:494;648). Sophia later tells Varvara Stavrogina that his witty comments about our “progressive and governing” bewildered her and his vehement invective against the nihilists and “new people” frightened her. While Sophia is confused, readers are not, for Dostoevsky’s narrator has prepared us to understand this thumbnail sketch.

At the novel’s outset, the narrator observes that Stepan Verkhovensky never developed his talent. While Stepan blamed a “‘whirlwind of concurrent circumstances’” for the end of his career, the narrator comments: “And just think! It turned out later that there had been not only no ‘whirlwind’ but not even any ‘circumstances,’ at least not on that occasion” (10:8;8). In the Aesopian language of the time, “circumstances” signified government repression. Stepan thus implies that he lost his lectureship because the government deemed him subversive. Yet the narrator undercuts this suggestion by noting that Stepan managed to publish a study on knights in a progressive monthly journal. Then the narrator adds, “Afterwards it was said that the sequel of the study was promptly forbidden, and that the progressive journal even suffered for having printed the first part. That could very well have happened, because what did not happen back then? But in the present case it is more likely that nothing happened, and that the author himself was too lazy to finish the study” (10:9;9). The discrepancy between Stepan’s self-image as prosecuted public figure and the narrator’s suggestions that Stepan fabricated those circumstances reveals Stepan Verkhovensky’s tendency to project blame outward. Like Dostoevsky’s other liars, he also projects himself onto others. The narrator suggests that Stepan drops his study because he succumbs to laziness.
Stepan accordingly describes Russia as a country full of lazy people: “It’s simply Russian laziness, our humiliating impotence to produce an idea, our disgusting parasitism among the nations. Ils sont tout simplement des paresseux” (10:172;216). Moreover, while Stepan describes Russia as a parasite on other nations, to the narrator he admits that he’s nothing but a sponger (10:26;28).

While Stepan Verkhovensky misses the irony in his civic message to others, Dostoevsky ensures that readers do not. Stepan calls his countrymen to work while he lives as an idle dependent: “With us everything comes out of idleness, even what is fine and good. . . . We are unable to live by our own labor. . . . Nothing can ever be acquired gratis. If we labor we shall have our own opinion. For twenty years now I’ve been ringing the alarm and calling to labor! I’ve given my life to this call, and—madman—I believed! Now I no longer believe, but I still ring and shall go on ringing to the end, to my grave; I shall pull on the rope until the bells ring for my funeral!” (10:32–3;36–7).

By fashioning a narrator who constantly exposes the gap between his friend’s actual and ideal selves, Dostoevsky prepares readers to see the situational irony of Stepan Verkhovensky’s lofty rhetoric. He thus demonstrates the dynamics of self-deception.

Dostoevsky’s portrayal of Stepan Verkhovensky matches Wilson’s account of self-deception in a way that dovetails with Frankfurt’s account of bullshitting.11 What Frankfurt calls a disregard for truth, Wilson sees as a disregard for evidence to the contrary. The narrator shows how this operates in his friend’s case. As part of his self-image, Stepan Verkhovensky believes that he was persecuted and forced to live in exile. After debunking this myth, the narrator speculates: “Had someone then convinced the most honest Stepan Verkhovensky, on irrefutable evidence, that he had nothing at all to fear, he would no doubt have been offended. And yet he was such an intelligent man” (10:8;8).

When the narrator suggests to Stepan Verkhovensky that he publish an early poem that had been confiscated, “he declined the proposal with obvious displeasure. My opinion as to its perfect innocence he did not like, and I even ascribe to it a certain coolness towards me on his part, which lasted a whole two months” (10:10;10). When the poem is published abroad, Stepan Verkhovensky is apprehensive, but, as the narrator notes, “I am convinced that in the hidden turnings of his heart he was remarkably flattered” (10:10;11).

Stepan’s self-image as a persecuted exile satisfies his vanity; the poem’s publication satisfies his desire for recognition. When the narrator attempts to provide evidence of the poem’s innocence, Stepan avoids him. When not confronted with such evidence, Stepan sidesteps it, thus acting like all individuals and nations who have a vested interest in maintaining an idealized identity. Yet when confronted with such evidence, Stepan Verkhovensky, like General Ivolgin on his deathbed, experiences grief and self-awareness. While
the narrator relates these moments to expose Stepan Verkhovensky’s self-deception and thus diminish reader sympathy, the opposite occurs. As the narrator recounts two crises concerning Stepan’s self-image as civic figure, three centering on his self-image as unrequited lover, and the hyperbolized life story that fuses the two, reader sympathy for Stepan Verkhovensky increases.

Shame and Self-Awareness: The Public Sphere

The narrator relates the first two incidents in tandem. The first occurs after Stepan Verkhovensky’s trip to Petersburg with Varvara Stavrogina at the end of the 1850s. Initially a great success with the current literati, who invite him to public literary gatherings, Stepan Verkhovensky then experiences a moment of great pride and equal humiliation:

When he came out on the stage for the first time as a reader at one of these public literary readings, there was a burst of wild applause that continued for about five minutes. He recalled it with tears nine years later—rather more because of his artistic nature than out of gratitude. “I’ll even swear to you and will wager,” he himself said to me (but only to me, and as a secret), “that no one in that whole audience knew the slightest thing about me!” A remarkable confession: indeed he must have possessed keen intelligence if he could understand his position so clearly, right there on the stage, despite all his rapture; and indeed he must not have possessed very keen intelligence if even nine years later he could not recall it without feeling offended. (10:21–223)

This memory can be termed “self-defining,” as it “is vivid, affectively charged, repetitive, linked to other similar memories, and related to an important unresolved theme or enduring concern in an individual’s life.” For Stepan Trofimovich, this memory clearly provides pleasure as well as pain. It recalls the gratifying, intoxicating applause. Yet it presents painful evidence that he is applauded for what he represents rather than for who he is. While he would like to savor his success, he bitterly acknowledges his failure. This memory remains affectively charged precisely because it touches Stepan’s sorest spot—his desire for recognition. Stepan’s participation in the fête in Book Three reprises this moment. He sees his speech as his last civic duty, a performance that can neutralize this impersonal, ignominious success by allowing him to triumph in his own name.

A second moment of shame-induced self-awareness follows the first. After the fiasco in Petersburg, Varvara Stavrogina sends Stepan to Europe to recover. Less than four months later, a homesick Stepan “races back” to Skvoreshniki. Two weeks after his “ecstatic” reunion with Varvara, he confesses to the
narrator, “my friend, I’ve discovered something new and . . . terrible for me: je suis un mere sponger et rien de plus! Mais r-r-rien de plus!” (10:26;28). Overwhelmed by the shame of his financial and emotional dependence on Varvara Stavrogina, Stepan entrusts his self-discovery to the narrator.

Shame and Self-Awareness: The Private Sphere

The narrator also relates three moments of shame-induced self-awareness involving Stepan Verkhovensky’s personal relationship with Varvara Stavrogina. Because Stepan still believes in their secret romance (10:19;19), her repudiation devastates him: “Yes indeed, until then, until that very day, he had always remained certain of just one thing—namely, that despite all Varvara Petrovna’s ‘new views’ and ‘changes of ideas,’ he still had charms over her woman’s heart, that is, not only as an exile or as a famous scholar, but also as a handsome man. For twenty years this flattering and comforting conviction had been rooted in him, and of all his convictions it was perhaps the hardest to part with” (10:53;63–4).

The incident that provokes this revelation reveals the vital interconnection between Varvara’s and Stepan’s self-images. Varvara Stavrogina has identified herself so much with Stepan Verkhovensky that she bristles when others offend him, or, equally, when he does not act his part. Varvara perceives Julia von Lembke’s arrival with her relative Karmazinov, the famous writer, as a challenge to her social supremacy. She berates Stepan for having “gone to seed,” and she lambastes him for not living up to her, or his, ideals:

Now that all these Lembkes, all these Karmazinovs . . . Oh, God, how you’ve gone to seed! Oh, how you torment me! . . . I wished these people to feel respect for you, because they’re not worth your finger, your little finger, and look how you carry yourself! What will they see? What am I going to show them? Instead of standing nobly as a witness, of continuing to be an example, you’ve surrounded yourself with some riffraff, you’ve acquired some impossible habits, you’ve grown decrepit, you cannot live without wine and cards, you read nothing but Paul de Kock, and you write nothing, while there they all write; you waste all your time on chatter. (10:51;61)

This unvarnished truth shames and shatters Stepan. He can endure moments of self-awareness as long as he believes that Varvara values him. But to see himself through her critical eyes demolishes him: he even assimilates her language as he cries to the narrator “Mon cher, je suis un man gone to seed!” (10:53;63). Mired in his narcissism, Stepan does not grasp the social or political
dimensions of the incident: he cannot see that Varvara feels socially threatened and that she relies on his public image to maintain her social supremacy. Again, like Dostoevsky's other liars, Stepan Verkhovensky thinks only of himself.

Varvara Stavrogina next devastates Stepan Verkhovensky when she conceives her plan to marry Stepan off to her ward Dasha. Though she presents her decision as a practical solution to his money problems, Varvara actually arranges the marriage to terminate her son Nikolai's affair with Dasha, thereby freeing him to marry Liza Tushina. When informed of her plan, Stepan is crushed: “I . . . I could never have imagined that you would decide to give me in marriage . . . to some other . . . woman!” (10:61;74). Her refusal to meet with him compounds his shame. Yet, after Varvara changes their relationship, he starts to see it differently. He admits that he would like to marry, an admission that anticipates his proposal to Sophia Ulitina. His critical awareness leads to a desire for change. Dostoevsky thus offers his readers a program for reform—critical consciousness, however painful, can free us from unhealthy habits, thereby creating new possibilities for growth.

The last humiliating interview between Stepan Verkhovensky and Varvara Stavrogina ends not so much in a moment of self-awareness as in a profession de foi. Thus rejected by Varvara, Stepan can see clearly. When Varvara adopts the nihilists' materialistic language and reduces their relationship to finances, Stepan indignantly defends himself: “I may have had a myriad of weaknesses. Yes, I was sponging off you, I am speaking the language of nihilism, but sponging was never the highest principle of my actions. It happened that way, of itself, I don’t know how . . . I have always thought that between us remained something higher than food, and—never, never have I been a scoundrel!” (10:266;341). Stepan Trofimovich invokes their unspoken feelings for one another by citing two lines of Pushkin’s 1829 poem “Once There Lived a Poor Knight”: “Filled with love that’s pure/And true to the sweet dream” (10:266;341). As he bids farewell to his belief in Varvara’s secretly reciprocated love, Stepan clings to his self-image as knight. He does not deceive himself in this, however, for despite his many weaknesses, Stepan Verkhovensky remains a faithful defender of his, Dostoevsky’s, and Pushkin’s knight’s ideal—the Sistine Madonna.

In fact, when the political enters the personal realm and Varvara Stavrogina joins the ranks of his ideal’s detractors, Stepan Verkhovensky takes up arms. As Stepan walks into the room, he realizes, “The woman I saw was not the one I had known for twenty years. The fullest conviction that all was over gave me a strength that amazed even her” (10:262;336). Although fortified by his sense of finality, Stepan fights back only once Varvara speaks like a nihilist:
"You're terribly fond of exclaiming, Stepan Trofimovich. It's not at all the fashion nowadays. They talk crudely but plainly. You and these twenty years of ours! Twenty years of reciprocal self-love, and nothing more. Your every letter to me was written not for me but for posterity. You're a stylist, not a friend, and friendship is merely a glorified word, essentially a mutual outpouring of slops..."

"God, all in other people's words! Learned by rote! So they've already put their uniform on you, too! You too are in joy, you too are in the sun; chère, chère, for what mess of pottage have you sold them your freedom!"

(10:263;337)

Stepan Verkhovensky here reacts to his son Peter's words. He recognizes those charges of “writing for posterity” (10:162;199), “reciprocal self-love,” and “mutual outpouring of slops” (10:239;305) from earlier conversations with Peter (10:237–41;303–37). Stepan moves to the offensive, charging Varvara with adopting the nihilists’ crude language and donning their “uniform.” Employing a biblical allusion, he accuses her of having sold her freedom. He fights the language of atheism with the language of faith—a clue that this argument belongs to the novel’s larger political and metaphysical polemic.

In fact, this interchange reprises an 1860s polemic that Dostoevsky participated in as a journalist. In his 1861 article, “Mr. —bov and the Question of Art,” Dostoevsky challenges the utilitarian view that art must be useful to be good. He adopts not the traditional opposition view of “art for art’s sake” but a centrist position which claims that all art is activist and must be well made if it is to be useful, that is, act as a moral force. Dostoevsky links the aesthetic and the ethical, arguing that the better a work of art is, the more useful it is. Varvara Stavrogina voices the views and language of the utilitarian “Mr. —bov” (the radical critic Nikolai Dobroliubov), which she has acquired from Peter Verkhovensky. She declares the Sistine Madonna outdated—“No one, no one nowadays admires the Madonna anymore or wastes time over it” because “She serves absolutely no purpose” (10:264;338–9). In defending her position, she parrots the proposition of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, another utilitarian: “This mug is useful, because water can be poured into it; this pencil is useful, because everything can be written with it, but here you have a woman’s face that’s worse than all the faces in nature. Try painting an apple and put a real apple next to it—which would you take? I’ll bet you wouldn’t make any mistake” (10:264;339). Varvara Stavrogina’s receptivity to the utilitarian anti-aesthetic proves equal to her earlier receptivity to Stepan Verkhovensky’s aesthetic views. Offended by Stepan’s acquiescence to her demand that he marry Dasha, Varvara Stavrogina rejects beauty in favor of boots.
Stepan Verkhovensky, on the other hand, defends the views of Dostoevsky himself. In this confrontation, Stepan remains uncharacteristically laconic. By saving his full rebuttal of Varvara’s position for the fête, he demonstrates his understanding that his real quarrel lies with those whose materialist, utilitarian views she has adopted. At the fête, Stepan then argues that contemporary youth are pure-hearted but misguided:

The whole perplexity lies in just what is more beautiful: Shakespeare or boots, Raphael or petroleum? . . . and I proclaim that Shakespeare and Raphael are higher than the emancipation of serfs, higher than nationality, higher than socialism, higher than the younger generation, higher than chemistry, higher than almost all mankind, for they are already the fruit, the real fruit of all mankind, and maybe the highest fruit there ever may be! A form of beauty already achieved, without the achievement of which I might not even consent to live. . . . Do you know that mankind can live without . . . science, without bread, and it only cannot live without beauty, for then there would be nothing at all to do in the world! (10:372–3;485)

Stepan Verkhovensky articulates Dostoevsky’s aesthetic views in Dostoevskian language, making repeated use of climaxing lists, contrasts, and hyperbolic claims. Nonetheless, Stepan Verkhovensky as speaker differs from Dostoevsky the journalist in his narcissistic self-enclosure. Obsessed by the desire to proclaim his beliefs publicly, Stepan completely ignores his audience. His speech fails.

Shame and Self-Awareness: The Private Moves into the Public Sphere

By portraying the personal conflict between Stepan Verkhovensky and Varvara Stavrogina as one over aesthetics vs. utility, Dostoevsky signals readers that father and son are engaged in a battle over minds and souls. Varvara voices Peter’s ideas without considering their implications. Stepan, however, understands the underlying nontranscendent view of humankind. Concluding that he must defend his ideals, he decides that “defeated or victorious,” he will leave Varvara’s house to “go off on foot to end my life as a merchant’s tutor, or die of hunger somewhere in a ditch” (10:266;341)—a characteristically hyperbolic threat, but one upon which he unexpectedly acts. By siding against him, Varvara Stavrogina shames Stepan Verkhovensky. As in the past, Stepan responds to shame with rhetorical extremes. Because Stepan has repeatedly issued similar ultimatums in the past, Varvara, like the narrator,
underestimates the strength of his aesthetic convictions. Thus, like the narrator, she is completely stunned by his final departure and death. She does not realize that their private argument reflects a public polemic.14

In *Demons*, more powerfully than anywhere else in his oeuvre, Dostoevsky exposes the recursive relationship between private and public. He prepares readers for Stepan Verkhovensky’s final journey to Russia’s heartland, which is both a private as well as a political act, by describing the semiprivate, semi-public scandal scene in Varvara Stavrogina’s drawing room at the end of Part One. As in the scene just described, Stepan responds nobly to his humiliator, in this case his son. After Peter scandalizes Varvara by telling her the contents of the letter his father had sent him about marrying “someone else’s sins,” she banishes Stepan from her house. The narrator marvels at his dignity:

Where did he get so much spirit? One thing I discovered was that he had been undoubtedly and deeply insulted by his first meeting with Petrusha earlier, namely, by that embrace. This was deep, real grief, at least in his eyes, for his heart. He had yet another grief at that moment, namely, his own morbid awareness that he had acted basely; this he confessed to me later in all frankness. And real, undoubted grief is sometimes capable of making a solid and steadfast man even out of a phenomenally light-minded one, if only for a short time; moreover, real and true grief has sometimes even made fools more intelligent, also only for a time, of course; grief has this property. And, if so, then what might transpire with a man like Stepan Trofimovich? A whole revolution—also, of course, only for a time. (10:163;200)

While the narrator focuses here on grief, shame initiates the reaction he describes. When confronted by the truth, Stepan Verkhovensky experiences shame. His shame causes the deep grief that gives him the courage, albeit temporary, to voice the truth. This scene, in which his shame-induced grief provides Stepan with the courage to act nobly, prefigures his last interview with Varvara as well as his final wanderings.

**Fathers and Sons: The Battle over Language**

The drawing-room scene ends with a father-son exchange in which Peter fights, using blunt language and role-playing (10:162;199), while Stepan politely and sincerely defends himself (10:163;201). Their conflict involves a willful deception of others versus an akratic self-deception. In this fight, each generation’s rhetoric serves not only as a weapon but as the battlefield.

In *Demons*, father and son fight over rhetoric because rhetoric reflects worldviews, and the Verkhovenskys hold opposite views in the aesthetic conflict of
the 1860s. Stepan Verkhovensky voices the aesthetic position, telling Varvara Stavrogina that he will speak “precisely about that queen of queens, that ideal of humanity, the Sistine Madonna, who in your opinion is not worth a glass or a pencil” (10:265;340), while his son Peter advocates a utilitarian approach—“Send your article ahead of time, don’t forget, and try to do it without any humbug, if you can: facts, facts, facts, and, above all, make it short” (10:241;307). Yet Dostoevsky’s narrator also reveals intergenerational similarities. For example, he repeatedly comments on both Verkhovenskys’ narcissism and ignorance of reality. He exposes their preoccupation with their public and private images: both father and son are clothing- and image-conscious. Both idealize a significant other (Stavrogin) before whom they verbally abase themselves: Stepan calls Varvara “an angel of honor and delicacy, while he was just the opposite” (10:13;14); Peter says to Stavrogin, “You are a leader, you are a sun, and I am your wormlet” (10:324;418). Both enjoy card-playing. Praskovia Drozdova calls them both “professor” (10:102;126). Governor von Lembke’s assistant Blium confuses them (10:283;364). And both are shame-ridden and quick to take offense. They differ radically on theological and metaphysical grounds, however.

In general terms, Stepan Verkhovensky is an idealist who cherishes Christ, the Sistine Madonna, beauty. Unlike General Ivolgin, who is acutely aware of his fallen state and habitually intoxicates himself with lies, Stepan Verkhovensky thoroughly believes in his self-image. He has moments of vanity and conscious role-playing, as when he practices in front of a mirror before the fête, but for the most part he is a product of his manners and beliefs. The narrator emphasizes Stepan Verkhovensky’s idealism by stressing his emotional and aesthetic sensibilities. As he grows in self-awareness, Stepan Verkhovensky sheds his narcissism and adopts the elder Zosima’s theological position that all are responsible for all and thus that all must forgive others and hope for forgiveness in return. His son Peter, on the other hand, is a materialist driven by a will to power. He is capable of appealing to others’ ideals, as when he persuades Liza Tushina to join Stavrogin, but he generally debunks polite language and uses his own verbal skills to confuse, shame, and intimidate. He is a falsifier and a role-player. Finally, Peter never forgets or forgives a slight. His narcissism drives his will to power and acts as a force of discord and destruction.

Significantly, in recounting his life story, Stepan Verkhovensky omits mention of his paternal role. On this score, Stepan harbors no illusions. The narrator reveals that Stepan sent Peter away and only visited him once in sixteen years. When they meet again, Peter revenges his father’s neglect: he rejects his father’s overtures, shames him publicly, and destroys his relationship with Varvara Stavrogina. Dostoevsky, whose Diary writer proclaims that
parent-child bonding results from “the ceaseless labor of love” (22:70), holds Verkhovensky senior responsible not only for abandoning his son, but also, and perhaps more importantly, for his failure to foster Peter’s aesthetic sensibility. All of Stepan Verkhovensky’s substitute children—Stavrogin, Dasha, and Liza—receive an aesthetic legacy from their teacher. Yet when Stepan Verkhovensky visits Peter in Petersburg, he is disgusted by his son’s aesthetic inadequacy: “Enfin, no sense of elegance whatsoever, that is, of anything higher, essential, of any germ of a future idea . . . c’était comme un petit idiot” (10:75–6; 92). In criticizing his son, Stepan convicts himself: what he has given to others, he has not shared with his own son.

As a utilitarian, Peter employs language expeditiously. He speaks rudely when he wants to strip away the social veneer provided by good manners. Calling his father’s and Varvara’s friendship “a mutual outpouring of slops,” he tells Stepan: “I proved to her like two times two that you’d been living for your mutual profit: she as a capitalist, and you as her sentimental clown” (10:239; 305). He speaks rudely to shame others into doing his bidding. Thus, he intimidates the group of five into murdering Shatov by threatening their safety. As the narrator notes, “Peter Stepanovich was unquestionably guilty before them: it all could have been handled with much greater accord and ease, if he had only cared to brighten the reality at least a little. Instead of presenting the fact in a decent light, as something Roman and civic or the like, he had held up only crude fear and the threat to their own sins, which was simply impolite” (10:421; 550–1). The narrator’s extraordinary comment, that Peter’s failure to provide an ideological justification for Shatov’s murder is “impolite” (чтo бyло ужe пpостo нeвeзeблyвo), emphasizes the novel’s aesthetic polemic. Stepan Verkhovensky’s politeness, good manners, and elevated language express his idealism. Peter’s verbal and physical crudeness underline his materialism and will to power. His bad manners, here revealed as brutal truth-telling, betray him.

**Varnished vs. Unvarnished Truths**

Stepan’s politeness and Peter’s rudeness also exemplify disputes concerning truth-telling. In his article, “Something about Lying,” Dostoevsky’s Diary writer declares that most social interactions contain some hyperbole and that hyperbole is not necessarily a bad thing, but rather a sign of tact (21:119). He argues that this is because Russians do not consider the unvarnished truth sufficiently interesting. Moreover, as David Nyberg points out, telling the truth about everything all the time is not only impossible but probably also undesirable. We would not want to appear in public without our public persona any more than we would want to appear without our clothes.
Peter Verkhovensky repeatedly uses truth-telling to strip others of their protective covering and thus humiliate them. When it suits his purposes, Peter supplies protective fictions. He romanticizes Stavrogin’s behavior for his mother; he suggests an opera plot to Liza, thereby inspiring her self-sacrifice. Yet he brutally humiliates the group of five: “Stavrogin’s flight stunned and crushed him. . . . That was why he was unable to be very tender with our people” (10:421:550–1). The narrator sardonically notes the correlation between private and public: when shamed, Peter shames others. He can encourage others’ fictions to serve his own ends; but when shamed by the truth, he tells the truth to pass on the shame.

Peter enjoys shaming others. He shames the Lembkes, Lebiadkin, Karmazinov, the group of five. He particularly delights in shaming his father, who finally responds by raising doubts about Peter’s legitimacy. In doing so, Stepan begins a dispute over the preservation and breaking of social taboos. When Peter reciprocates by vilifying both parents, Stepan orders his son to be silent. But Peter rejoins that Stepan was the first to violate the taboo—this time and previously. Peter informs the narrator that when Stepan visited him, he used to wake his son twice nightly: “and what do you think he told me those nights? These same indecent anecdotes about my mother” (10:240:307). Peter uses the adjective “skoromnye,” a word denoting food proscribed during fast periods, such as Lent. Stepan responds: “Oh, that was in the loftiest sense! Oh, you didn’t understand me! Nothing, you understood nothing” (10:240:307). Given Stepan’s romantic imagination, readers can picture him fabricating tales of a tragic love triangle in which he ceded to the other man. But given his readiness to project blame, readers can imagine him slandering his wife. Given his own materialism, Peter would naturally seize on the more accusatory parts. Their argument pertains to varnished versus unvarnished truths.

Peter accuses his father of hypocrisy: “But, still, it comes out meaner your way than mine, meaner, admit it” (10:240:307). Stepan certainly erred in confiding his doubts about his wife to his child. The narrator notes that this is a repeated mistake. Stepan acted similarly with Stavrogin: “More than once he awakened his ten- or eleven-year-old friend at night only to pour out his injured feelings in tears before him, or to reveal some domestic secret to him, not noticing that this was altogether inadmissible” (10:35:40). Stepan Verkhovensky is weak-willed. He disregards the social conventions that protect children from inappropriate disclosures. He slanders Peter’s mother, then condemns his son for doing the same.

Peter has more grievances against his father, however. Stepan Verkhovensky’s inappropriate confidences raise questions about Peter’s legitimacy and thus his identity. Peter denies his hurt, but it is palpable: “From my viewpoint,
don't worry: I don't blame mother; if it's you, it's you, if it's the Polack, it's the Polack, it makes no difference to me. . . . And does it make any difference to you whether I'm your son or not?” (10:240;307). Peter thus identifies the real issue. He turns to the narrator: “'[H]e didn't spend a ruble on me all his life, he didn't know me at all until I was sixteen, then he robbed me here, and now he shouts that his heart has ached for me all his life, and poses in front of me like an actor. Really, I'm not Varvara Petrovna, for pity's sake!’” (10:240;307). Peter's statement reveals that he still feels abandoned and dispossessed. Peter's wounded vanity thus motivates his rage for revenge. He tells the hurtful truth to pass on a true hurt.

While Peter uses rude language to wield power, he uses obfuscating rhetoric to reveal and conceal his political purposes: “'In fact I have a tactic: I blab and blab [ia vru i vru], then suddenly I say some intelligent word, precisely when they are all searching for it. They surround me, and I start blabbing again [ia opiat’ nachnu vrat]’” (10:179;225–6). In this speech to Stavrogin, Peter uses the verb vrat' in its sense of “blab, blather, bullshit,” that is, he speaks without reference to truth. As he explains earlier to Stavrogin, “'For pity's sake, who's going to start suspecting you of mysterious designs after that?'” (10:176;221). Peter deploys blather as a deceptive cover for his political activities.

Peter also uses obfuscating rhetoric to manipulate others. He explains to Kirillov: “'In order to be believed, you must be as obscure as possible, exactly that, with hints alone. You must show only a little corner of the truth, just enough to tease them. They will always lie to themselves more than we can and, of course, believe themselves more than us’” (10:473;621). Peter's words expose him as a falsifier. He blathers to obfuscate the truth, but he also deliberately refers to the truth, only to lead his interlocutors astray. This latter rhetorical strategy of Peter’s works on a fill-in-the-blank principle—hint at something and let your interlocutor elaborate. Peter deploys this strategy with Julia von Lembke, overtly manipulating her propensity for self-deception.

Varieties of Self-Deception

Like Stepan Verkhovensky, Julia von Lembke is a self-deceiver who is seduced by a social role. Upon becoming the governor’s wife, Julia Mikhailovna felt that she had been “called, almost anointed, one ‘o’er whom this tongue of flame blazed up.’” Quoting from Pushkin’s 1830 poem “The Hero,” the narrator ironically conveys Julia’s grandiose sense of social role. Moreover, the narrator reveals her rather confused and contradictory self-image: she wants to uncover a conspiracy in the provinces, thereby earning recognition and thanks from Petersburg, yet she wants to save the youthful
conspirators. She plans to both report on them and save them, “and even history and all of Russian liberalism would perhaps bless her name” (10:268;345). By encouraging her self-deception, Peter gains a hold over her.

Julia von Lembke easily succumbs to manipulation because, unlike Stepan Verkhovensky, she lacks conviction. Furthermore, she completely underrates the power of language. For instance, she believes that “phrase-mongers are not dangerous” (10:248;316). Unlike Stepan Verkhovensky, who gradually relinquishes his self-deception, Julia von Lembke obstinately clings to hers. When Peter lies outright to her at the fête, the narrator comments, “Alas, the poor woman still wanted so much to be deceived!” (10:378;493). But when Peter blames her for the morning’s disaster, she must face the truth: “In fact you are lying to my face” (10:380;495). Nonetheless, Julia agrees to attend the ball, thereby becoming the scapegoat for Peter’s radical activities. Then Julia von Lembke must face the price of her willful self-deception: her husband’s mental health. By clinging to her fantasy self-image, she completely destroys her chances of fulfilling her own political ambitions and almost kills her husband.

Stepan Verkhovensky, on the other hand, fully appreciates rhetoric’s power. He may be a self-deceiver, but he also has unshakable aesthetic and ethical beliefs. In contrast to his son, who believes that all human beings act out of self-interest, Stepan Verkhovensky vacillates between idealizing and denouncing others. Stepan strains to find a positive message in his son’s blather: “My friend, the real truth [pravda] is always implausible, did you know that? To make the truth [pravda] more plausible, it’s absolutely necessary to mix it with lies [lzhi]. People have always done so. Perhaps there’s something here that we don’t understand. What do you think, is there something in this victorious squealing that we don’t understand? I wish there was. I do wish it” (10:172;216). Yet, by the time he reaches the fête, Stepan Verkhovensky promptly announces: “Ladies and gentlemen, I have solved the whole mystery. The whole mystery of their effect lies—in their stupidity!” (10:371;484).

To attain this understanding, Stepan Verkhovensky turns to the radicals’ catechism, Chernyshevsky’s novel, What Is To Be Done?: “I guessed that he had obtained and was studying the novel with a single purpose, so that in the event of an unquestionable confrontation with the ‘squealers,’ he would know their methods and arguments beforehand from their own ‘catechism,’ and, being thus prepared, would solemnly refute them all in her eyes” (10:238;303–4). Stepan unexpectedly discovers that “It’s our same idea, precisely ours; we, we were the first to plant it, to nurture it, to prepare it” (10:238;304). Yet the rhetoric appalls him: “‘But, God, how it’s all expressed, distorted, mangled! . . . Are these the conclusions we strove for? Who can recognize in this the initial thought?’” (10:238;304). The utilitarian materialism
of Peter’s generation distorts Stepan’s social ideals: “The enthusiasm of modern youth is as pure and bright as in our time. Only one thing has happened: the displacing of purposes, the replacing of one beauty by another! The whole perplexity lies in just what is more beautiful: Shakespeare or boots, Raphael or petroleum?” (10:372;485). Stepan fights the younger generation’s materialism by defending beauty.

Peter’s self-image reflects his materialism. He repeatedly calls himself a “fraud, not a socialist.” When proposing his pretendership plan to Stavrogin, he argues that the most effective means of subordinating others are: (1) uniforms (i.e., roles and role-playing); (2) sentimentality; (3) frauds (i.e., a useful bunch for manipulating others); and, most critically, (4) shame of one’s own opinion, the cement that binds: “I can get someone to go into the fire if only I shout at him that he is not liberal enough” (10:298–9). Peter himself deliberately plays a role; advises Stavrogin to do so (10:300;386); appeals to Liza’s sentimentality (10:401;523); calls himself a fraud (10:324;418); and bullies others by shaming them (10:316;407, 10:421;549).23

In contrasting father’s and son’s rhetoric, Dostoevsky shifts readers’ attention from the political to the metaphysical. Where Peter uses rhetoric to shame others, Stepan uses it to inspire them: Peter reminds others of their fallen natures, Stepan of the divine spark within. Where Peter appeals to food and money, Stepan invokes love and higher ideals. Throughout the novel, Dostoevsky highlights the theological implications of the father-son conflict. In an exchange with Kirillov, for example, the materialistic Peter denies that language has figurative content, emphasizing, rather, its utilitarian aspect: “You know these are only words” (10:469;614). Kirillov, an idealist who has accepted materialism intellectually but struggles with it emotionally, protests by articulating the human need for the transcendent: “All my life I did not want it to be only words. This is why I lived, because I kept not wanting it. And now, too, every day I want it not to be words” (10:469;614). Kirillov’s materialism costs him his life. In accepting it, Kirillov denies the possibility of transcendence:

Listen to a big idea: there was one day on earth, and in the middle of the earth stood three crosses. One on a cross believed so much that he said to another: ‘This day you will be with me in paradise.’ The day ended, they both died, went, and did not find either paradise or resurrection. What had been said would not prove true. Listen: this man was the highest on all the earth, he constituted what it was to live for. Without this man the whole planet with everything on it is—madness only. There has not been one like Him before or since, not ever, even to the point of miracle. This is the miracle, that there has not been and never will be such a one. And if so, if the laws of nature did not
pity even *This One*, did not pity even their own miracle, but made *Him*, too, live amidst a lie and die for a lie, then the whole planet is a lie, and stands upon a lie and a stupid mockery. Then the very laws of the planet are a lie and a devil’s vaudeville. Why live then, answer me, if you’re a man. (10:471;617)

With Kirillov’s suicide, Dostoevsky demonstrates the life-and-death consequences of language and belief. Without the transcendent that Stepan Verkhovensky proclaims essential for life, Kirilov chooses death. Stepan contends with his son because he believes that it is not “only words”; he believes in the figurative behind the literal, the metaphysical behind the physical.

Dostoevsky illuminates the theological implications of the father-son conflict by outlining the trajectory of their lives. During the course of the novel, Stepan Verkhovensky changes; he is portrayed as a knight who errs but moves ever closer to the truth. Stepan Trofimovich thus dies, like the world’s most famous knight, Don Quixote, expressing the hope that others will learn from his mistakes. Throughout the novel, Dostoevsky connects Stepan Verkhovensky with knight imagery. Stepan publishes a treatise on knights in a progressive journal (10:9;9). When Varvara Stavrogina adopts utilitarian rhetoric, he declares himself a knight (10:266;341). To prove he loves Varvara, he quotes Pushkin’s 1829 poem about the Poor Knight (10:266;341). Like Prince Myshkin, the character associated with Poor Knight imagery in *The Idiot*, Stepan Verkhovensky defends a mother’s name against a son’s slander.24 Treating Varvara as his lady, Stepan regards his speech at the fête as a last chance to “solemnly refute” the “squealers” “in her eyes” (10:238;304). Finally, just like Don Quixote, for the last week of his life Stepan Verkhovensky is confined to his bed by a fever, experiences a deathbed conversion, repents of his former life, calls it a lie, confesses to his friends and to a priest, and dies three days later.

In the end, Stepan Verkhovensky emerges from his narcissistic self-enclosure, preaches universal responsibility and forgiveness, and embraces God. He confesses to Sophia Matveevna: “My friend, I have been lying [*Idiat*] all my life. Even when I was speaking the truth [*pravdu*], I never spoke for truth’s sake [*dlia istiny*], but only for my own. I did know it before this, but I only see it now” (10:497;651). He acknowledges the consequences of his self-referentiality and reaches out to others: “He suddenly remembered *Lise*, their meeting the previous morning: ‘It was so terrible and—there must have been some misfortune, and I didn’t ask, I didn’t find out! I thought only of myself!’” (10:496;650). He assumes responsibility for his own actions and sees his connection to others: “Nous sommes tous malheureux, mais il faut les pardonner tous. Pardonnons, *Lise*, and be free forever. To settle accounts with the world and be fully free—*il faut pardonner, pardonner, et pardonner!*” (10:411;537); “Oh, let’s forgive, forgive, let’s first of all forgive all and always. . . . Let’s hope
that we, too, will be forgiven. Yes, because we are guilty one and all before each other. All are guilty!” (10:491;644). Like St. Paul in First Corinthians, Stepan affirms love as the highest virtue: “And what is more precious than love? Love is higher than being, love is the crown of being, and is it possible for being not to bow before it?” (10:505;662). Moreover, he renounces his atheism: “‘My friends,’ he said, ‘God is necessary for me if only because He is the one being who can be loved eternally. . . . ’” (10:505;662).

His son Peter, on the other hand, does not change. The narrator portrays him as a rhetorical tempter with a serpent’s tongue (10: 144;180) who seeks power over others. The narrator reveals that Peter tempts Stavrogin with three offers—Liza, the Lebiadkins’ deaths, Shatov’s life. Like the devil he resembles, Peter systematically deceives and destroys. On a more banal level, Peter never forgives a slight; he has Shatov murdered, for example, partly because Shatov spit in his face in Geneva (10:466;611). Finally, Peter proposes to substitute an earthly pretender for God.

The way father and son exit the novel thematically underscores their differences. Peter departs by train (a form of transportation associated with apocalyptic imagery in The Idiot) to the European capital of Russia, St. Petersburg. Furthermore, he abandons the loyal Erkel on the railroad platform to play cards in first-class. He eventually flees Russia. Stepan, on the other hand, goes on a pilgrimage to Russia’s heartland. He sheds his European self-image and seeks union with the Russian Bible peddler, Sophia Matveevna Ulitina. Furthermore, he turns his dying thoughts toward others:

The whole law of human existence consists in nothing other than a man’s always being able to bow before the immeasurably great. If people are deprived of the immeasurably great, they will not live and will die in despair. The immeasurable and infinite is as necessary for man as the small planet he inhabits. . . . My friends, all, all of you: long live the Great Thought! The eternal, immeasurable Thought! For every man, whoever he is, it is necessary to bow before that which is the Great Thought. Even the stupidest man needs at least something great. Petrusha . . . Oh, how I want to see them all again! They don’t know, they don’t know that they, too, have in them the same eternal Great Thought! (10:506;663)

Stepan Verkhovensky’s last words echo Dostoevsky’s declaration in his 1861 article that art and beauty are as necessary to human existence as food and water. They also address the political and metaphysical conflicts between father and son. To Peter’s call for an earthly pretender, Stepan counterposes belief in the transcendent. His words explain Kirillov’s mad suicide as a longing for God.
Lying and Truth

In *Demons*, the Bible ultimately serves as the vehicle for Stepan Verkhovensky’s self-understanding. Stepan’s dying words refer back to the political and metaphysical revelation he experiences upon hearing the Gospel passage about Christ’s exorcism of demons. As Nina Perlina observes, biblical quotation has the highest moral authority in Dostoevsky’s poetics. Biblical epigraphs are meant to shape readers’ interpretation of the novel’s events, and characters who know, quote, or understand the Gospels correctly have a special moral status. Dostoevsky thus illustrates Stepan’s spiritual progress by having him move from the self-serving declaration that he will “correct the errors of that remarkable book” (10:491;645) to astutely interpreting the novel’s epigraph (Luke 8:32–6). Yet as readers we often forget that Luke 8:33–36 is the third biblical text that Sophia Matveevna reads to Stepan Verkhovensky. The two preceding texts—the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5.1–7.27) and the lukewarmness passage (Revelation 3:14–17)—influence his exegesis.

By confessing, Stepan Verkhovensky acknowledges and overcomes his shame, thus enacting a positive model for Dostoevsky’s authorial audience. The psychologist Michael Lewis explains that confession allows the self to bridge the gap between self and other. If we violate the standards, rules, and goals of the other, which we have accepted as our own, then we feel shame. By admitting to past error a person may distance the present self from the past self, thus moving from the erring self’s position—the source of shame—to the other’s position. Furthermore, since confession conduces to forgiveness and love, it dissipates shame through redemption.

Stepan Verkhovensky confesses to lying three times: twice to Sophia Matveevna (named for Russian Orthodoxy’s intermediary between God and his creation) and once to Varvara Stavrogina. He confesses twice in one scene: once before Sophia reads the Sermon on the Mount, once after. He confesses for the third time after she has read all three Gospel texts. Stepan’s new understanding of the Gospel texts marks how his final two confessions differ from his first confession to Sophia, which resembles his earlier outpourings to Varvara. While I have cited the first two earlier, I cite all three together here:

1. To Sophia Matveevna: “I lied to you earlier, all of it—for glory, for magnificence, out of idleness—all, all, to the last word, oh, blackguard, blackguard!” (10:496;651).

2. To Sophia Matveevna: “‘My friend, I’ve been lying all my life. Even when I was telling the truth, I never spoke for truth’s sake, but only for my own, I...”
knew that before, but only now do I see... Oh, where are those friends whom I have insulted with my friendship all my life? And everyone, everyone! Savez-vous, perhaps I'm lying now; certainly I'm also lying now. The worst of it is that I believe myself when I lie. The hardest thing in life is to live and not lie... and... and not believe one's own lies, yes, yes, that's precisely it! But wait, that's all for later... You and I together, together!' he added with enthusiasm" (10:497;651–2).

(3) To Varvara Stavrogina: "'[M]y friend, when I understood... that turned cheek, I... right then I also understood something else... J'ai menti toute ma vie all, all my life! and I'd like... tomorrow, though... Tomorrow we shall all set off’” (10:505–6;664).

As the narrator observes, when Stepan Verkhovensky first confesses to Sophia Matveevna, he behaves just as he has with Varvara Stavrogina for twenty years (10:496;650): after shame-filled encounters with Varvara, Stepan would rage and slander her, then confess (10:13;14). In similar fashion, the day after recounting his life story to Sophia Matveevna, Stepan Trofimovich throws himself at her feet, calls her "une marquise" and himself "a blackguard," and confesses his failings to her.

After Stepan Verkhovensky falls seriously ill for the next two days and they miss the ferry to Spasovo (Savior's), he asks Sophia to read from the Gospels.29 Stepan's request shows that he is returning to his Russian roots; it thus exemplifies Dostoevsky's antidote to the otorvannost'—the deracination or alienation—of the Russian intelligentsia, who have lost their ties to the Russian soil. Sophia Matveevna's name recalls Wisdom (Sophia) and the Gospels (Matveevna—daughter of Matthew). As a woman whose husband died during the Crimean War, she represents Russian patriotism. As a Bible peddler, she embodies a bridge between the Russian people and the upper classes. When Stepan Trofimovich asks her to read from the Gospels, Sophia reads him the Sermon on the Mount.30 Following her reading, Stepan confesses to her the second time (10:497;651). The Sermon sensitizes him to his narcissism: he has served not his ideals but his self-image. Accordingly, he reaches out to others: "'Oh, where are those friends... And everyone, everyone!"’ (10:497;651). After the Gospel reading, Stepan recognizes that he must break the cycle of self-enclosure: "'The hardest thing in life is to live and not lie... and... and not believe one's own lies, yes, yes, that's precisely it!'” (10:497;651). With these words, Stepan Verkhovensky acknowledges his self-deception as well as the lies that facilitated it.

In his confession to Varvara Stavrogina, Stepan Verkhovensky again refers to the turned cheek passage from Matthew. The Gospel has sensitized him to
the narcissism of his normal responses. It teaches him that one must not pass on harm or humiliation. Christ’s sermon thus prepares him to embrace the Elder Zosima’s command to actively love one’s neighbor—love as hard work, love as a placing of others before self. He closes his confession by expressing repentance and a desire to begin anew.

Stepan Verkhovensky’s confessions also problematize truth’s role in the novel. In Demons nothing is as it seems. The narrator proceeds by indirectness, providing rumors, speculation, and conflicting interpretations along with his own interpretation of events. So how does the reader distinguish truth from falsity in Demons? A quick return to “Something about Lying” provides some guidance. First, as the novel shows, Stepan Verkhovensky is not a falsifier, like his son Peter, but a liar. Moreover, he is a master hyperbolizer, an epideictic rhetor, like Dostoevsky himself. Yet he dramatically differs from Dostoevsky. His speech fails because he doesn’t consider his audience. Stepan Verkhovensky hopes to win over his audience only because he wants to triumph over his enemies and vindicate himself “in her eyes.” Reading his hyperbolic deathbed epiphany—“I never spoke for truth’s sake, but for my own” (emphasis mine)—as a gloss on Stepan’s defense of beauty at the fête allows readers to view it as a selfish act, truth spoken for the sake of upholding his self-image.

Yet if we accept Stepan Trofimovich’s hyperbolic disclaimer as a simple fact, we oversimplify his character. His defense of beauty at the fête is, paradoxically, a case of a truth spoken for its own sake. For in speaking of his ideals, Stepan Verkhovensky runs the risk that his audience will not only disagree with him but mock him, as it does. Furthermore, his hyperbole enables him to express something not entirely accessible to language. Stepan Verkhovensky uses hyperbole in the way that Razumikhin describes it—as a means to arrive at the truth. His hyperbole thus originates in metaphysical, not physical, desire.

A further question arises: for Dostoevsky, is truth spoken for its own sake really truth? To consider this, readers must refer to another passage, one very dear to Dostoevsky’s heart. While reconciling with Stavrogin, Shatov paraphrases a thought from Dostoevsky’s own letter to Fonvizina (28.I:176), attributing it to Stavrogin: “But wasn’t it you who told me that if someone proved to you mathematically that the truth is outside Christ, you would better agree to stay with Christ than with the truth?” (10:198;249). For Dostoevsky, truth is never merely statically factual. Truth is spoken or lived; it is embodied and dynamic; it always matters who says things and to what end. Shatov, who often voices authorial beliefs, associates the truth with mathematical proofs and thus with rationalist thought. Dostoevsky, not a Kantian, top-down thinker, himself favored a more intuitive mode. He
rejects the proposition that truth as an abstract principle has an absolute moral force. A bottom-up thinker, Dostoevsky examines individual cases to make moral judgments. For Dostoevsky, truth is embodied and dynamic, not abstract and static. Dostoevsky thus embraces Christ as an incarnate ideal.

By having a compulsive liar recognize the role of rhetoric in self-deception, Dostoevsky warns readers that self-fashioning is risky and self-examination is essential. Stepan's confessions to Sophia prove necessary to the self-examination that precedes his full conversion, political as well as religious. Before he can see himself in the broader sociopolitical context, however, Stepan needs further exposure to the Bible. Sophia next reads to him from Revelation: “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot! Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (10:497;652). Stepan Trofimovich becomes very excited about the message he sees for others: “I never knew that great passage! Do you hear: sooner cold, sooner cold than lukewarm, than only lukewarm. Oh, I’ll prove it” (10:497–8;652). While he hails the passage as a commentary on the materialists, the last verse describes the willful blindness to one's own spiritual state that constitutes self-deception; it thus further prefigures Stepan's epiphany about what he shares with the younger generation. Stepan sees the materialists' satisfaction with material goods as ignorance of their spiritual poverty. Yet this passage, taken together with the Sermon on the Mount, reveals to Stepan his own spiritual poverty: he embraces and preaches higher ideals but does not live accordingly.

Like Stavrogin, the truly lukewarm figure in the novel, Stepan Verkh-ovenovsky causes suffering by his non-action. On his deathbed, he comprehends that he, too, is possessed—by the same narcissism he sees in the younger generation. When Sophia Matveevna reads him the passage he requests from the Gospel of Luke, he identifies with his spiritual children. Drawing an analogy between the possessed man and Russia, he identifies the demons who leave him and enter into the swine as “all the sores, all the miasmas, all the uncleanness, all the big and little demons accumulated in our great and dear sick man, in our Russia for centuries, for centuries!” (10:499;654). He further identifies the demon-possessed as “us, us and them, and Petrusha... et les autres avec lui, and I, perhaps first, at the head, and we will rush, insane and raging, from the cliff down into the sea, and
all be drowned, and good riddance to us” (10:499;654). Once he avows that he will be saved by the divine spark within himself, he casts off his narcissism. He dies praying that others also will be saved: “Oh, how I want to see them all again! They don’t know, they don’t know that they, too, have in them the same eternal Great Thought!” (10:506;665). Like Dostoevsky, Stepan Verkhovensky thus identifies the transcendent as a moral force on earth.

**Narrative Vision**

Stepan Verkhovensky’s last words reveal the novel’s narrative dynamics, for they illustrate the expansion of his vision. A larger vision is just what Dostoevsky’s narrator lacks and what we, the authorial audience, have gained—for during the course of the novel Dostoevsky has trained us to see. As mentioned earlier, the narrator’s treatment of Stepan recapitulates, with a difference, a narrative pattern Dostoevsky worked out in *The Idiot*. Along with the narrator, we stay close to a positive character for the greater part of the novel. Then the narrator distances himself from that character, and we in the authorial audience distance ourselves from the narrator. This dynamic can be explained in terms of narrative vision. The narrator persists in seeing Stepan Verkhovensky in light of past behavior patterns. This perspective works in Lebiadkin’s case—when Lebiadkin has money, he drinks and boasts. Thus he dies. But this perspective does not accommodate Stepan Verkhovensky. Stepan experiences a conversion—figuratively, he turns around, a move that enables him to see beyond his narcissistic prison. He, in turn, expands our vision.

That Dostoevsky consciously aims to expand his readers’ vision can be seen more clearly in his journalism. In an 1873 *Diary of a Writer* article about the new jury system, tellingly titled *Sreda* (“The Milieu”), Dostoevsky as *Diary* writer urges his readers (narrative and authorial audiences combined) to adopt a broad view of citizenship (such as that held by English juries, for instance) when pronouncing judgment. He gives the example of the Saiapin jury, which tried the peasant Saiapin for so cruelly and repeatedly abusing his wife that she hanged herself. The *Diary* writer argues that the jury exercises false compassion when they adjudge the criminal guilty but “worthy of leniency.” This, the *Diary* writer points out, is a form of tunnel vision—which we can compare to the narrator’s vision in *Demons*. The *Diary* writer urges his readers to see the crime in a larger context—to imagine the consequences of leniency, which, in his view, would spell certain death for Saiapin’s daughter. He wants to deter jurors from engaging in the false compassion to which Saiapin’s lawyer appeals: “Backwardness, ignorance, have some pity, it’s the
milieu.” He counters by morally contextualizing Saiapin’s actions: “Yet millions of them live and not all hang their wives by their heels!”

By sharing this larger vision of individuals in relation to others, Dostoevsky hopes to nurture true compassion in his authorial audience. Dostoevsky develops his highly subjective narrator for just this purpose—to teach us to see the person standing in front of us not as an isolated figure, but as a member of the human community. Dostoevsky hopes that we, like Stepan Verkhovensky on his deathbed, can look beyond ourselves and see the larger moral and metaphysical picture.

**Lying and Self-Deception**

The Dostoevskian liar whom Stepan Verkhovensky most closely resembles is General Ivolgin. Though Ivolgin is a military man and Stepan Verkhovensky is a civilian, they both come from good backgrounds and have the manners and education that make them at home with their social superiors. They are both prone to sentimentality and hyperbole. They are both consumers of romanticism; in fact, they even tell similar clichéd lies about their romantic rivalries. Ivolgin, for instance, tells Prince Myshkin that he had almost fought a duel with Myshkin’s father over Myshkin’s mother but that their friendship had restrained them; at the last moment, they simultaneously dropped their guns and embraced, ceding her to each other (8:81). Stepan Trofimovich tells Sophia Matveevna that Varvara Petrovna’s “husband had died, ‘cut down by a bullet at Sevastopol,’ solely because he felt unworthy of her love, giving way to his rival—that is, to the same Stepan Trofimovich” (10:494;648). Both stories function as analogues to the action in their novels’ main plots. Ivolgin’s story, ending with the rivals’ embrace, anticipates Myshkin’s and Rogozhin’s brotherly embrace over the dead body of the woman they both love. Stepan Verkhovensky’s story prefigures his own story—relinquishing the beloved (Varvara Stavrogin) to a rival (in this case, an ideological rival, his son Peter) results in the lover’s death (his own).

When they have sympathetic audiences, both General Ivolgin and Stepan Verkhovensky exaggerate: Sophia Matveevna’s shy pleasure in his love story sends “Stepan Trofimovich into utter admiration and inspiration, so that he even added quite a lot [prilgnut]” (10:494;648). In Stepan’s telling, Varvara Stavrogin, whom the narrator describes as “a tall, yellow, bony woman with an exceedingly long face recalling something horselike” (10:18;18), becomes “a most lovely brunette (‘the admiration of Petersburg and a great many European capitals’)” (10:494;648). Furthermore, once successful with their audiences, both General Ivolgin and Stepan Verkhovensky start to believe themselves: Stepan Trofimovich “exclaimed to Sophia Matveevna, himself almost
believing everything he was telling her” (10:494–5;648). Finally, both General Ivolgin and Stepan Verkhovensky reveal their Western educations as they acknowledge themselves as liars by using the French verb mentir. While confessing to the lower gentry Russian Bible peddler, Sophia Matveevna, Stepan Verkhovensky uses the Russian verb lgat’. When he confesses to the upper-class Varvara Stavrogina, however, he uses French: “J’ai menti toute ma vie, all, all my life!” (10:505–506;662). This persistent use of French resonates ideologically in the novel, illustrating the alienation of the upper classes from the Russian people.

For both General Ivolgin and Stepan Verkhovensky, a combination of externally and internally induced moments of shame provokes identity crises that lead to deathbed revelations and acceptance of responsibility for their actions. Near their lives’ ends, each tells an extended lie about himself to a sympathetic audience: Ivolgin tells Myshkin that he served as Napoleon’s page boy; Stepan Verkhovensky tells Sophia Ulitina that he was a civic figure and an unrequited lover. Each gets transported by his storytelling. Their hyperbole gives rise to shame. Shame leads them to confess and to express concern for their families.

Their stories differ in scope. In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky subordinates the father-and-children plot to the romantic triangle at the novel’s center. In *Demons*, however, Dostoevsky foregrounds the father-and-children plot. Stepan Verkhovensky acts as the novel’s representative father—both literally and figuratively. In *The Idiot*, General Ivolgin curses his son Gania. In *Demons*, Stepan Verkhovensky curses his son Peter’s whole generation and its followers. He curses his son at home (10:240;307) and his ideological children at the fête (10:374;487). Furthermore, his deathbed revelation carries a public message. Stepan Verkhovensky voices the prophecy that Dostoevsky the *Diary* writer will proclaim in “The Golden Age in Our Pockets”: that we all carry the divine within us, and that we would all be happy on earth if only we could see it (22:13). In this tragic novel, Stepan Verkhovensky dies with a message of hope for all.

While Stepan Verkhovensky most resembles *The Idiot*’s General Ivolgin as a liar, Dostoevsky also reveals striking similarities between him and Captain Lebiadkin, the comic liar in *Demons*. In the private sphere, both Stepan Verkhovensky and Lebiadkin desire personal recognition from women and position themselves as rivals for Stavrogin’s women: Stepan Verkhovensky for Dasha, Lebiadkin for Liza. Both drink too much. Both refer to themselves as cockroaches: Lebiadkin to Varvara Stavrogina in his ludicrous cockroach poem, Stepan Verkhovensky to the narrator (10:99;122). Their financial dependence on the Stavrogins links both characters to the novel’s broader thematics of political parasitism. Dostoevsky associates both Stepan Verkhovensky and
Lebiadkin with poet imagery, that ultimate fusion of personal and political in Russian literature. Lebiadkin calls himself a poet; Varvara Stavrogina calls Stepan Verkhovensky one (10:57;68). Both crave public recognition for their verbal talents. Finally, both blame Russia for their failure (Lebiadkin, 10:141;175; Stepan Verkhovensky, 10:494;648). By drawing these parallels, Dostoevsky repeatedly highlights the novel’s political thematics and emphasizes the links between the private and public spheres.

By including Stepan Verkhovensky among his novel’s liars, Dostoevsky underlines the connections between narcissism and lying. Stepan Verkhovensky always places himself first: a widowed father, he abandons his son Peter and becomes Stavrogin’s tutor; a liberal, he loses his serf Fedka in a card game; a gentleman, he wounds Dasha by his selfishness. When upset, he locks himself away. Enamored of his roles as persecuted liberal and misunderstood lover, he ignores others and their needs. Stepan Verkhovensky also violates the Russian social contract: he hyperbolizes but does not allow Varvara Stavrogina to do the same: “When you returned from abroad, you looked down your nose at me and wouldn’t let me utter a word, and when I myself came and spoke with you later about my impressions of the Madonna, you wouldn’t hear me out and began smiling haughtily into your tie, as if I really could not have the same feelings as you” (10:264;338). Stepan Verkhovensky’s narcissism thus returns to haunt him. Varvara Stavrogina succumbs to Peter Verkhovensky’s rhetoric and ideas because his father has failed to cultivate his own garden.

Even on his deathbed, Stepan Verkhovensky reveals his narcissism. He ignores Sophia’s practical difficulties as he feverishly indulges in his final romance. Stepan’s deathbed epiphany recalls the narrator’s words about the temporary effects of great grief and its power to change a person. In these last moments, Stepan acknowledges the difficulty of sustained effort: “The hardest thing in life is to live and not lie . . . and . . . and not believe one’s own lies” (10:497;652). In his next breath, however, he proclaims that he and she will journey together. Stepan understands and repents his lifelong practice of self-deception, and he understands what the cure requires. But old habits are not easily shaken. Stepan can only envision a new life of serving others by fabricating a romance. He needs a little fiction to help him on the path to truth.

In the end, Stepan Verkhovensky’s idealism triumphs. When faced with shameful truths about his actual self, Stepan Verkhovensky invokes his ideal self-image and tries to realize it. In this scenario, shame works as social conscience, inducing him to abandon his narcissistic self-enclosure, to view himself in relation to others, and to do the right thing. This scenario triumphs over his habitual vacillation between self-aggrandizement and self-abasement. Dostoevsky thus closes his Stepan Verkhovensky plot with the triumph of Stepan’s ideal self, the only positive death in Demons.
Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky: Leaving the Narrator Behind

In this novel of father and children, the father dies. But so do his progeny. Stepan Verkhovensky’s deathbed idealism may bear fruit in Dostoevsky’s readers’ hearts, but his abdication of parental responsibility in the novel yields tragedy. The man who idealizes the Sistine Madonna, an icon of mother-child love, fails to transmit that ideal to the next generation. He vacillates between idealizing and vilifying two mothers—Peter’s and Stavrogin’s. Worse, he vilifies the mothers to their sons, thus weakening familial bonds. Stepan Verkhovensky passes on a powerful legacy of destructive selfishness. He dies faithful to his ideal. But Dostoevsky does not end his novel with Stepan’s death. The novel’s flesh-and-blood madonna (Marie Shatov) and her child (Stavrogin’s) die when political fratricide destroys their family unit. The atheistic sons, who have rejected religious icons (Madonna and child/Christ), perpetuate the father’s job of destroying social bonds. As he recognizes on his deathbed, Stepan Verkhovensky has advocated idealism but has sown schism.

Stepan Verkhovensky’s deathbed epiphany completes the progression wherein Stepan repeatedly confronts the gap between his professed idealism and his actual life. It also highlights the narrator’s role as exposé of his friend’s self-deception and shame. While the narrator uses irony to create a critical distance between his narrative audience and his friend, his narrative strategy exposes him to analogous treatment. In exposing his friend, the narrator exposes himself. His absence from the deathbed scene is thus marked. In joining the ranks of helpers at the fête, and thus identifying himself, however tenuously, with the enemy camp, the narrator loses his access to Stepan Verkhovensky. After his speech fails, Stepan Verkhovensky locks himself away—denying the narrator access to himself, his thoughts, and his actions. While the narrator represents this exclusion as part of a pattern, Dostoevsky clearly shows that Stepan’s decision marks a significant break with the past. At this point, the narrator loses us. He has created sufficient sympathy for Stepan so that when Stepan distances himself from the narrator, the authorial audience follows suit. While we may have accepted him as our travel guide up to this point, we part company with him when Stepan does. We reject his view that in journeying to Russia’s heartland, Stepan is merely acting out of habit, distancing himself from those who would expose him.

Stepan Verkhovensky’s deathbed confession highlights his motives and thus the gap between character and author. Making astute use of what Bakhtin has called the “double-voiced word,” Dostoevsky encourages the authorial audience to regard Stepan Verkhovensky’s farewell speech at the fête through the prism of his deathbed confessions. On this reading, the authorial audience judges a speaker’s message by his motives. Here Frankfurt’s analysis of bullshitting elucidates Dostoevsky’s narrative strategy. Frankfurt argues that the bullshitter does not necessarily get things wrong;
rather bullshitting differs from other forms of discourse in how it is made and what motivates it. Stepan Verkhovensky’s message is heartfelt, yet his apparently altruistic motives are largely selfish. By double-voicing Stepan’s defense of beauty, Dostoevsky has Stepan say all the right things but for the wrong reasons. Dostoevsky, by contrast, places these words in his character’s mouth for all the right reasons. He appeals to the authorial audience’s aesthetic and moral sensibilities to create a sense of *communitas* based on shared values. And he reveals his metaliterary hand: Stepan Verkhovensky’s speech fails because Stepan, unlike Dostoevsky, ignores his audience.

*Demons* can be read as a novel about rhetoric gone awry. It is about lying and falsification. Yet it also supplies the rhetoric that can exorcise the narcissism of the possessed. Almost all of the novel’s characters are possessed or obsessed, or both. They deceive themselves and typecast others. They regard others as reflections or reflectors of themselves. They lie to one another unconsciously or deliberately to enhance their own self-image or their political power and position, or both. They rarely listen to one another. Yet Dostoevsky creates a model audience. Sophia listens to Stepan. He lies with lofty language, fashioning an ideal self-image. He chooses Sophia because she intuitionally understands and because she disseminates the powerful rhetoric and message of the Bible. He lies, he confesses, and then he asks her to read. Most importantly, he listens. At first he hears the holy words only as they pertain to others, but then they speak to him. Sophia (Wisdom), mediator between the fallen world and the transcendent truth, daughter of Matthew, God’s chosen scribe, listens empathically. Then she reads the Bible, thereby inspiring Stepan Verkhovensky to escape his narcissistic self-enclosure. He thinks of others, and accepts responsibility for the legacy of his selfishness. He dies praising the divine. He speaks his last words not for his own but for truth’s sake.