chapter eight

Lukian Lebedev: Narrative and Exposure

Have you noticed, Prince, that in our century everyone is an opportunist! Especially here, in Russia, in our beloved fatherland. And how that’s come to be, I don’t know. It seems that everything stood so solidly, but what about now? Everyone is talking about it, and everywhere they’re writing about it. They are making exposures [Oblitchaiut]. In Russia everyone is making exposures [u nas vse oblichaiut].

— KOLIA IVOLGIN, The Idiot (8:113)

Shame works like the contents of Pandora’s box. Once released, shame affects everyone in its purview—exposed, exposers, and witnesses alike. Shame destabilizes. Shame’s very presence heralds the abrogation of social norms. Having no fixed script, shame deprives all parties of set responses. Shame thus contributes to the chaos of The Idiot, whose characters all participate at one time or another in shame scenes. Most characters participate passively as witnesses to others’ shame; many experience the pain of being exposed; some actively expose others. As I have shown, Dostoevsky implicates character-witnesses and readers alike in the text’s moral action by reducing the intersubjective space between those exposed and those who witness the exposure. We have all experienced shame, so we can all place ourselves in the position of the shamed—provided, of course, that the exposed person experiences shame. As Dostoevsky illustrates, a person’s shame sensitivity has a positive function. A person capable of shame is capable of change.

In chapters 4 and 6, I reveal how Dostoevsky creates reader sympathy for the two shamed liars, General Ivolgin and Stepan Verkhovensky, by showing their progression from denial or self-deception to acknowledgment of shame. While Ivolgin and Verkhovensky senior share a similar progression, Dostoevsky’s narrators treat them differently. The character-narrator of Demons creates an ambivalent sympathy for Stepan Verkhovensky. But when Stepan leaps with his creator and the authorial audience into the metaphysical realm of aesthetics and religious belief, he leaves his friend the narrator behind in the literal realm. The narrator is thus abandoned. As discussed, the semi-embodied
narrator of *The Idiot* initially creates sympathy for Prince Myshkin, but he gradually distances himself from the Prince, forcing a split between the narrative and authorial audiences. He treats General Ivolgin more reliably. As the General progresses from narcissistic grandiosity to grateful acknowledgment of others, the narrator portrays him more and more sympathetically. *The Idiot*’s narrator is equally reliable vis-à-vis Lukian Lebedev but not equally sympathetic. Lebedev begins and ends the novel as a shameless liar; the narrator thus keeps his distance, and so do readers.

This chapter focuses on Lukian Lebedev and the narrative dynamics of exposure, paying particular attention to shame’s role as a destabilizer. In the chapters that follow I show how Dostoevsky uses shame as a moral measure and how he uses shameless characters to highlight exposure at his novels’ mimetic, thematic, and synthetic levels.

While all literature in some ways involves exposure, that is, letting readers into characters’ spaces, making public that which is private, *The Idiot* consistently exposes, thematizes, and comments on the dynamics of exposure. Dostoevsky foregrounds exposure mimetically by creating numerous exposure scenes, thematically by having characters tell stories about exposure scenes, and synthetically by having character audiences comment on their interlocutors’ exposure narratives. As Dostoevsky shows in all of these cases, exposure cuts both ways. Those who expose others to the public eye expose themselves as well. This reciprocity works mimetically and thematically throughout the novel. Nastasia Filippovna, for instance, cannot expose the double standards and hypocrisy of the men trying to transfer control over her body without exposing herself as a fallen woman. Lebedev’s nephew cannot expose his uncle as an unscrupulous lawyer without exposing himself as an ungrateful dependent. Lebedev cannot expose Aglaia’s correspondence with either Gania or Nastasia Filippovna without exposing himself as a shameless spy.

In addition to numerous exposure scenes, *The Idiot* features many exposure narratives that display the novel’s poetics. Thus, for example, the Prince’s story about the seduced peasant girl Marie and his story of an execution contribute to the novel’s thematics of the fallen woman and condemnation to death; they also serve as moral tales that reflect on events in the novel. Like the inserted narratives in *Don Quixote*, the Prince’s stories serve as analogue texts, highlighting and commenting on the novel’s action. The Prince’s stories establish his credentials as a good narrator and Dostoevsky’s credentials as a metaliterary virtuoso. Aglaia exposes Myshkin as “The Poor Knight,” flagging the novel’s intertext *Don Quixote* and underlining the novel’s Pushkin connection. Ferdyshchenko’s parlor game about relating one’s most reprehensible act illustrates shame and narrative dynamics: narrative savvy enhances...
audience response while shamelessness estranges. Ippolit’s “Explanation” further demonstrates how a speaker’s narcissistic neediness leads him to ignore his audience. Ippolit pours out his most intimate thoughts and feelings to a largely hostile audience that is tired and restless. Not surprisingly, the hostile mock him, thus finalizing his decision to kill himself. Dostoevsky cannily replicates this action in a later scene when Ippolit, imitating his earlier detractors, mocks General Ivolgin, thereby precipitating the humiliated general’s flight to death. As these examples show, Dostoevsky inscribes his poetics into The Idiot’s mimetic action.

Lebedev as Exposer

Although a minor character, Lebedev contributes significantly to the novel’s mimetics, thematics, and poetics. As a social climber, Lebedev exposes other social climbers. As a divided self, Lebedev articulates the thematics of doubleness. As a liar and copyist, Lebedev raises poetic questions of truth and verisimilitude. As a self-fashioned lawyer and prophet, Lebedev self-interestedly exposes self-interest. But all of these identities work two ways. Throughout the novel Lebedev exposes others, but he is also exposed—as honorless, shameless, mercenary, and false. The exposé/exposed dynamic reaches its peak in Dostoevsky’s Idiot when Lebedev’s forensic and prophetic rhetoric conjoin in his cannibal speech. Like Dostoevsky’s novel, my chapter builds toward that hilarious but serious speech. First, however, I show how Dostoevsky links Lebedev with the novel’s thematics and poetics of exposure.

Unlike General Ivolgin, who grew in importance as Dostoevsky wrote The Idiot, Lukian Lebedev appears early and remains minor but central. On page 3, the unnamed Lebedev intrudes upon a conversation between the novel’s two unnamed male protagonists, Prince Lev Myshkin and Parfen Rogozhin. His first words, “The veritable truth!” (Istiniaia pravda!), introduce Dostoevsky’s double-voicing. While Lebedev uses these cliché words to flatter Rogozhin and thus enter the conversation, Dostoevsky uses them to introduce the novel’s thematics of truth and justice, all in the context of Russia’s relationship to the West, another of the novel’s thematics. The narrator interrupts to describe Lebedev as a “poorly dressed man, something on the order of a bureaucrat calloused by service as a copy clerk, forty years old, strongly built, with a red nose and a pimply face.” In describing his rank, Dostoevsky’s narrator uses the words zakoruzlogo v pod’iachestve chinovnika, labeling Lebedev as a low-level civil servant, probably a copy clerk (pod’iachestvo is a collective term for scribes). His copy-clerk identity grounds him in nineteenth-century Russian reality, where this was a large class, and reveals his connection to the written word and thus his synthetic function.4
Lebedev repeats the tautological cliché containing the adjectival form for the biblical word for truth (istina) and the unmarked noun pravda that means both “truth” and “justice”: “The veritable truth, sir, only they (Europeans) keep senselessly transferring all those Russian resources to themselves!” (Istinnaia pravda-s, tol’ko vse russkie sily darom k sebe perevodiat!). Lebedev’s words represent a sycophantic response to Rogozhin’s assertion that Myshkin’s benefactor had wasted his money on the Prince’s European doctor. Thus, while the narrator marks Lebedev as someone who supports himself copying others’ words, Lebedev’s own words mark him as a derivative flatterer. Lebedev concludes his second intrusion into the conversation with the cliché “poverty is no vice,” again marking himself as a verbal borrower. Finally, in his third intrusion, Lebedev exposes himself by projecting his own excess of imagination onto the Prince, just as earlier he had projected his own parasitism onto Europe.

Lebedev’s three intrusions are all forms of oblichitel’naia literatura, prose that exposes (what is currently called investigatory journalism), a popular genre in 1860s Russia. Lebedev exposes Europeans as parasites on Russians; he exposes the Prince’s poverty; and he falsely accuses the Prince of fabricating relationships. By associating Lebedev with the unscrupulous investigatory journalists of his time, Dostoevsky ties him to the novel’s thematics of exposure. By having his narrator interrupt Lebedev’s first interruption, Dostoevsky immediately flags the novel’s synthetic dimension, where Lebedev figures prominently. Dostoevsky clearly identifies Don Quixote as one of The Idiot’s major intertexts. He fashions Lebedev’s rhetorical rivalry with General Ivolgin and the class tensions between them to echo the relationship between Sancho Panza and Don Quixote. He also gives Lebedev roots in the Russian literary tradition. His name derives from lebed’, the Russian word for “swan,” and is one of many bird names in the novel. It thus evokes both Gogol, whose name means “golden-eye” (a kind of duck) and Derzhavin, who wrote many poems with birds’ names as titles. Lebedev’s rhetorical excesses, digressions, and self-interested plotting recall Nozdrev, the compulsive, calculating, yet ineffective liar in Gogol’s Dead Souls. His name recalls one of Derzhavin’s poems, titled “Lebed’.” In this 1804 poem, Derzhavin compares himself to a swan and claims that his poetic status will elevate him over his social superiors; accordingly, in Dostoevsky’s 1868 novel, Lebedev is obsessed with using his verbal skill to raise himself socially. While Dostoevsky will make his next swan, Captain Lebiadkin from Demons, a parodic poet whose verses are modeled on Derzhavin’s, he makes Lebedev a parodic prophet (the other standard role of Russia’s poets) whose speeches contain the mixture of high and low styles characteristic of Derzhavin and of Dostoevsky himself.
In creating Lebedev, Dostoevsky exploits the double-edged narrative dynamic in which exposer stands exposed. Time and again Lebedev eagerly exposes others to promote himself. Yet unlike General Ivolgin, who becomes increasingly shame-sensitive during the course of the novel, Lukian Lebedev remains unabashedly shameless. Lebedev’s shamelessness is not an immunity to shame, however, but a defense against it. As Bernstein has shown, Lebedev is an abject character who “suffers constantly new, and usually externally imposed, slights and degradations.” Lebedev protects himself from real and perceived slights by shameless self-promotion; he willingly abases himself to achieve his ends. By revealing the sociopolitical roots of Lebedev’s shameless opportunism, Dostoevsky exposes the destabilizing class antagonisms in nineteenth-century Russia.

The Russian Social Contract and the Politics of Exposure

Dostoevsky wrote in a period of social change that witnessed the emancipation of the serfs and the rise of industrial capitalism, both of which affected the composition of the social classes and contributed to the breakdown of Russia’s rigid hierarchies. As an ambitious government clerk, Lebedev resents his social superiors. He thus embraces the unwritten rule of social interaction that Dostoevsky identifies in his 1873 article on lying and that I call the Russian social contract—lie and let lie. Dostoevsky calls this unwritten rule “the first condition of Russian society.” Significantly, in Dostoevsky’s formulation, the Russian social contract involves narrative—I’ll tell you a story and let you tell one; I’ll embellish the truth and let you do so. You believe me, and I’ll believe you.

Like Rousseau’s social contract, Dostoevsky’s redresses inequities of birth, social station, and wealth by creating equality—not in the political, but in the social sphere. By establishing norms of reciprocity and trust, the Russian social contract undermines social hierarchies and creates democratic expectations about social interactions. But, as Dostoevsky shows repeatedly in The Idiot, the social harmony resulting from the reciprocity of lie and let lie can only work among actual social equals or those who agree to behave as equals while maintaining their social hierarchy (as in the engagement party in the Epanchins’ drawing room). Social inequity fuels violations of the Russian social contract.

As Dostoevsky demonstrates in The Idiot, the Russian social contract breaks down under the strain of rhetorical and sociopolitical rivalry, especially, but not exclusively, in the rivalry between his two comic liars, Lukian Lebedev and General Ivolgin. In portraying their interaction, Dostoevsky dramatizes
how class resentment disrupts the Russian social contract. In making their rhetorical rivalry echo that of Sancho Panza and Don Quixote, Dostoevsky lodges his own polemics on truth and verisimilitude in a metalinguistic context. In portraying their class rivalry, Dostoevsky thematically reflects the tension between individual desires and collective harmony. In contrasting their responses to being exposed as liars, Dostoevsky establishes the positive value of shame as a measure of moral worth and thus of reader sympathy. Unlike General Ivolgin, whose sense of shame increases as the novel progresses, Lebedev remains shameless. Thus, while Dostoevsky’s narrator creates increasing sympathy for General Ivolgin, his constant revelations of Lebedev’s shameless opportunism keep readers at arm’s length. In examining Lebedev’s roles and rhetoric, I show how Dostoevsky inscribes his own awareness of the recursive relationship obtaining among storyteller, audience, and story by showing how that relationship breaks down and what happens when it does.

**Rhetorical Rivalry**

Dostoevsky embeds Ivolgin’s and Lebedev’s class rivalry in their rhetorical rivalry. Ivolgin breaches the Russian social contract and exposes Lebedev’s rhetorical pretensions both times that Lebedev claims prophet status. The second, when Lebedev makes his cannibal speech, occurs at the Prince’s birthday party and thus on the terrace of Lebedev’s house. The company has been discussing Lebedev’s interpretation of the Revelation of St. John, particularly his view that the Star of Wormwood has become manifest as Russia’s network of railroads. Lebedev claims that contemporary Russians have lost touch with the transcendent. He argues that the railroads signal humanity’s move toward materialism, that is, food for the body, and away from belief in a higher idea, that is, food for the soul. He illustrates his argument with the story of an aging twelfth-century cannibal who surrenders to the Inquisition for having in his lifetime killed and eaten sixty monks and six babies.

General Ivolgin immediately responds: “That can’t be! . . . I frequently discuss and argue with him, gentlemen, and all about similar ideas. But most of the time he presents such absurdities, that you can’t believe your ears, not an ounce of verisimilitude!” (8:313). Ivolgin thus publicly refutes Lebedev’s story and exposes him as a habitual liar (and not for the first time). But Lebedev refuses to be embarrassed. He reminds the General of the social contract: “General! Remember the siege of Kars, and you, gentlemen, will recognize that my story is the naked truth. For my part I note that almost every reality, though it has its own immutable laws, is almost always incredible and lacking in verisimilitude. And even the more real it is, then sometimes it’s also more...
lacking in verisimilitude” (8:313). Lebedev fights exposure by insisting on mutual hospitality: if he agrees to believe the General’s war stories, the General must reciprocate. Social harmony demands generosity of spirit. But reciprocity breaks down in a hierarchical society. The fathers retain control of their wealth, power, and words. Though they agree to play Ferdyschenko’s truth-telling game, Generals Epanchin and Tosky do not follow the rules: they recount their reprehensible deeds only to relate their praiseworthy actions. Though General Tosky seduces his ward Nastasia Filippovna, he does not marry her. Though he demands Lebedev’s belief, General Ivolgin does not believe him. Rhetorical exchanges thus become battlegrounds for class and gender confrontation. Lebedev defends himself against Ivolgin by exposing the double standard.

However comic Lebedev’s counterattack, those familiar with Dostoevsky’s work will recognize in the second part of his defense—the inverisimilitude of reality—Dostoevsky’s response to his own critics, who accused him of complete inverisimilitude even when he took his facts from the newspapers.11 Dostoevsky thus provides Lebedev with an unexpected defender—Prince Myshkin. Myshkin’s position resembles that of the narrator of Apuleius’s Golden Ass, who addresses a scoffer, “But for you, sir, with the dense ears and the firm prejudice, you are rejecting a story which may very well be true. By Hercules, you are ignorant that man’s debased intelligence calls all those matters lies which are either seldom seen or heard, or which exist on heights beyond the narrow cast of his reason. And yet if you probe these matters closely, you will find them not only understandable and clear, but even easily beheld.”12 Myshkin’s support is more qualified, however: “That there were cannibals, and perhaps, very many, in that Lebedev is undoubtedly correct; only here’s what I don’t know, namely why did he mix monks into this and what does he mean by that?” (8:313). By defending Lebedev’s mimetic truth but questioning his poetic intent, Myshkin accentuates the novel’s poetics.

Myshkin’s enigmatic response reveals the gap between Lebedev and himself as storytellers. Myshkin masterfully fashions his own experiences into stories with moral import. Though Lebedev’s cannibal speech illustrates a moral concept dear to Dostoevsky, the nineteenth century’s loss of belief in God, Lebedev’s motive for introducing it is suspect. Lebedev delivers his speech like a prophet, but he represents himself as a lawyer—a clue to Lebedev’s rhetorical ambition and ethical bankruptcy. The drunken Lebedev exposes himself as a false prophet: he may speak the truth, but not for truth’s sake. He speaks, rather, to kindle audience admiration for his rhetorical skill. Unlike Myshkin and Dostoevsky, who tell stories meant to involve their audiences thematically and ethically, Lebedev tells stories to gain audience approval and social acceptance.
Lebedev: Liar Lawyer and Swan Prophet

Although Lebedev’s rhetoric exposes him, so does Dostoevsky’s narrator. In fact, the narrator’s continual exposure of Lebedev prepares for the exposures that follow his cannibal speech. The narrator first exposes Lebedev’s rhetorical ambitions in Book Two, when Myshkin returns to Petersburg and pays him a surprise visit. The narrator notes that Lebedev is repeating (for the fifth time) his successful courtroom speech that allowed the moneylender Zaidler to defraud an old woman of her entire 500-ruble fortune. Lebedev’s insolent nephew contributes to this exposure by revealing his uncle’s rhetorical vanity ("he has set out on the path of eloquence and speaks with elevated diction all the time with his children at home" [8:161]) as well as his mercenary motives ("And who did he decide to defend: not the old woman, who begged him, . . . but that very money-lender . . . because he promised to give him fifty rubles" [8:161]). His nephew’s criticism anticipates Keller’s later charge that Lebedev is a mercenary. Furthermore, the Prince’s discovery that Lebedev lends money (8:368) identifies Lebedev’s argument that the moneylender lives by "honest labor" as a self-defense. Though Lebedev later represents himself as a prophet and thus a social conscience, he proves to be a lawyer and thus a “hired conscience.” This early scene reveals a social dynamic that Dostoevsky depicts repeatedly: socioeconomic inequity fuels rhetorical rivalry. Characters who resent Lebedev discredit his rhetoric as well as his ethics. Like Cervantes, Dostoevsky utilizes scenes of exposure as opportunities for meta-literary commentary. As characters tell one another how their rivals’ rhetoric fails, Dostoevsky shows how his succeeds.

During Myshkin’s surprise visit, Lebedev also boasts of his skill at interpreting Revelation, claiming fifteen years of experience: “I believe and I interpret. For poor am I and naked, and an atom in people’s orbit. And who respects Lebedev? Everyone mocks him and the only thing they don’t do is accompany him with a kick.13 Yet there, in yon interpreting, I am equal to a grandee. For my mind!” (8:168). Lebedev thus reveals his craving for respect. Like Ivolgin, who tries to enhance his public image by telling stories, Lebedev tries to establish his prophetic credentials by telling one. He recounts that three years earlier, his superior at work had asked Lebedev, “Is it true, that you are the Antichrist professor?”

And I didn’t conceal: “I am, I say,” and I expounded and performed, and did not mitigate the terror, but mentally, unfurling the allegorical scroll, intensified it even more and correlated the numbers. And he laughed, but at the numbers and such like he started to tremble, and he asked me to close the book and leave, and he designated a reward for me for Easter week, and he gave up his soul to God on Thomas’ Sunday. (8:168)
Lebedev’s story clearly serves as a wish fulfillment as well as a self-vindication. In his telling, his department chief first mocks him but then respects and rewards him. Furthermore, his immediate supervisor credits Lebedev with foretelling their mutual superior’s death. Lebedev thus portrays himself as a mocked figure who, by dint of his rhetorical talent and prophetic ability, wins the respect (even fear) of his social superiors. Lebedev elevates himself with elevated diction. His story enacts his victory, thereby justifying his worthiness to cross class boundaries.

Dostoevsky’s version of Lebedev’s story establishes the connection between Lebedev’s rhetoric and his self-image: he adopts the role and rhetoric of a prophet to overcome his social shame. Dostoevsky also exposes him as a parodic imitator of the text he interprets. For instance, Lebedev swells with pride when identified as “the Antichrist professor” and grandiosely responds with biblical language “I am” (Az esm’). His claim to poverty also employs biblical language—“poor and naked” (nishch i nag). His claim to superiority employs the high-style noun “grandee” (velmozh), a noun used frequently by Gavrila Derzhavin. In addition to reflecting the ongoing vacillation between his self-abasement and self-promotion, Lebedev’s imagery and language reveal Dostoevsky’s parodic hand. Derzhavin’s “Swan” poem, for instance, contains the line “To other grandees I am not equal.” Derzhavin uses it to show that while the poet may be lower born, his poet’s status elevates him. Dostoevsky, however, attributes this language to Lebedev both to reveal his obsession with social status and to emphasize his rhetoric’s archaic and portentous nature. Dostoevsky also uses parody to provoke a comparison. At the beginning of this subchapter, Lebedev fashions himself as a lawyer; here at the end he fashions himself as a prophet. Once he adopts these roles, readers compare him to their prototypes. Other characters continue this comparison as they reveal the gap between Lebedev’s actual and projected self-images. Dostoevsky thus unmasks Lebedev as he assumes his roles.

Shame of Origins

Dostoevsky further reveals his authorial hand when Lebedev’s nephew exposes his uncle as a drunkard, citing his nightly prayers for the Countess du Barry as evidence. While the nephew’s exposure backfires because Lebedev’s identification with the beautiful, anguished sinner earns Myshkin’s admiration, Dostoevsky’s exposure succeeds. In identifying with the high-class prostitute who was elevated to the rank of countess to become Louis XV’s mistress, Lebedev betrays his willingness to sell himself to transcend his class limits. In telling her story, Lebedev portrays Mme. du Barry as someone who escaped from ignominy (iz pozoru vyidia) and rose to the apex of the social ladder and to dazzling sociopolitical heights.
She thus embodies an ideal success: Lebedev wants to escape the shame of his origins; he aspires to social respectability and power; and he is willing to sell himself to get them. Lebedev thus defends his prayers for the Countess du Barry:

She died so that after such honor, such great former sovereignness, the executioner Sanson dragged her to the guillotine, for no fault of her own, for the amusement of the Parisian market women [poissards], while she does not even understand what’s happening to her, from terror. She sees that he’s placing her neck under the blade and urging her with kicks,—while those there laugh—and she begins to cry out: “Encore un moment, monsieur le bourreau, encore un moment!” Which means: “Wait one more moment, Mr. Executioner, just one more moment!” And it’s for that minute there that perhaps God will forgive her, for greater misery than that it’s impossible to imagine with the human soul. Do you know what the word misery means? Well, there it is, misery itself. From that cry of a countess, at the single moment that I read it, I felt exactly as though my heart were seized by pincers. And what’s it to you, worm, that I, going to sleep at night, thought to remember her, a great sinner, in prayer. For perhaps I remembered because for her, since time immemorial, probably no one has ever bowed his forehead in prayer, nor even thought about it. On the contrary it will be pleasant for her in the other world to feel that there has been found such a sinner as her, who at least one time on earth has prayed for her. (8:165)

Since the Prince acts as a model audience, his sympathetic response helps create some reader sympathy for Lebedev. Lebedev’s story acts as an early variant of Grushenka’s onion story: the speaker (Lebedev/Grushenka) earns the admiration of his/her audience (Myshkin/Alesha) for telling the story of a great sinner saved by her own experience (a moment of great suffering/one good deed). Lebedev’s blow-by-blow account of her last moment, told in the present tense, creates a dramatic immediacy that touches the Prince. Lebedev’s story also echoes the Prince’s obsession with executions and violent deaths, guaranteeing its efficacy. The Prince’s sympathetic listening to Lebedev’s story counteracts his nephew’s hostility.

Nonetheless, Lebedev’s obsession with rank diminishes reader sympathy. In Lebedev’s account, Mme. du Barry keeps the title that she acquired to become Louis XV’s lover—that of countess. From the novel’s first pages, the narrator exposes Lebedev’s passion for knowing anything and everything about his social superiors. The narrator classifies him as a type: “these Mr. Know-it-alls” (eti gospoda vseznaiki) (8:7). As a commoner who went from rags to riches, Mme. du Barry makes the world of wealth and prestige seem
more accessible to Lebedev, who is not a democrat, like the Prince, but a social climber. He calls her a “sinner” but does not mention her early profession, her extravagant expenses, or her passion for jewelry. As he describes her second reversal of fortune (from power to powerlessness), Lebedev reveals his identification with her by repeating his earlier self-description: she is laughed at and kicked. Lebedev may also identify with Jeanne Bécu (Mme. du Barry) because she had natural talents (good taste and an aptitude for good diction), and because she was lucky: early in her career she happened to be in the right place at the right time. Lebedev clearly views himself as a man rhetorically gifted, whose appearances on the Warsaw–Petersburg train enabled him to meet the two men who make his fortune, however small. He keeps hoping that proximity to money and nobility will elevate him financially and socially.

Lebedev’s prayers for Mme. du Barry also express his bereavement. Between Books One and Two, Lebedev’s wife dies in childbirth. When the Prince arrives at the beginning of Book Two, Lebedev has already been mourning for five weeks. His grief, and probably guilt, over his wife’s death drive him to drink. The nocturnal activities his nephew mocks—his searches for robbers and for his daughter’s hidden lovers as well as his thrice-nightly prayers—are actually symptoms of his grief and anxiety. His wife’s death was unexpected—after all, she had given birth without complication three times before. Thus, like Mme. du Barry’s death, which Lebedev attributes to the bloodlust of the Parisian mob, his wife’s death must strike him as unjust. These unexpected deaths fuel Lebedev’s apocalyptic anxiety: how do you avoid the horseman of death? His prayers for Mme. du Barry seem like insurance for the future—an onion proffered by one poor sinner to another.

Finally, Lebedev’s version of Mme. du Barry’s story demonstrates his complexity: he can feel compassion for those less fortunate than himself, while exploiting those more fortunate—here, the Prince. Unlike General Ivogin or Stepan Verkhovensky, Lebedev calculates as he lies. In using Prince Myshkin’s compassion for Mme. du Barry to snare him as his tenant at Pavlovsk, Lebedev diminishes reader sympathy.

His self-confessed opportunism further reduces reader sympathy. As he explains to the Prince, good and evil war in his soul: “Well, here it is, for you, for you alone, I will pronounce the truth [istina], because you fathom a man: both word and deed, and lie [lozh'] and truth [pravda], are all together in me, and completely sincere. Truth and deed in me are made up of true [istinnom] repentance, believe it or not, I swear, and words and lie [lozh'] in me are made up of a hellish (and always immanent) thought: how can I ensnare a person even at that very moment, how can I gain something through tears of repentance! I swear to God, it’s so! I would not tell anyone else, they’d laugh or spit;
but you, Prince, you will judge humanely” (8:259). Lebedev’s dual agenda, as well as his capacity to serve two very different masters—Myshkin and Rogozhin—makes him emblematic of the duality of human nature—one of the novel’s themes. Yet even Lebedev’s self-awareness does not create reader sympathy. The Prince also confesses to dual thoughts, but he feels shame at his negative thoughts. Lebedev, however, feels no shame.

Lebedev’s self-awareness and his self-confessed opportunism differentiate him from the narcissistically injured General. Ivolgin is an “innocent” liar; Lebedev is a role-player. Where Ivolgin is naively sincere, Lebedev is not. Where Ivolgin feels shame, Lebedev feigns it. While Ivolgin expects audience sympathy and is always surprised by audience hostility, Lebedev mostly expects hostility. While Ivolgin’s narcissism makes him insensitive to others, Lebedev’s class consciousness makes him hypersensitive. Most significantly, Ivolgin cherishes his honor, whereas Lebedev willingly abases himself for money.19 He preaches the importance of the spiritual but sells himself for a profit.

My Client, My Self

Readers can thus understand why Lebedev defends the twelfth-century cannibal. He chooses as his client a man who combines good and evil in himself. In Lebedev’s account, the cannibal commits evil deeds (66 murders!) but repents. For Lebedev, the cannibal’s sincere repentance and desire for absolution mitigate the evil of his past actions. Lebedev thus presents himself as the defender of a client whom he fashions in his own self-image. Furthermore, Lebedev represents his client as a man who, while persisting in his sins, nonetheless experiences pangs of conscience:

We see that the criminal, or, as they say, my client, despite the complete impossibility of finding something else edible, a few times, in the course of his curious career, displayed the desire to repent and abstained from clergymen. We see this clearly from the facts: it’s been mentioned that he nevertheless ate four or six babies, a comparatively insignificant figure, but for all that significant in another respect. It’s evident, that, tormented by terrible pangs (for my client is a religious and conscientious person, as I will prove) and in order to diminish his sin as much as possible, he, as a kind of experiment, exchanged a clerical for a lay diet six times. That it was a kind of experiment is again indisputable; for if it was only for gastronomic variety, then the number six would be much too insignificant: why only six figures and not thirty? (I take half and half.) But if it was only an experiment solely from despair before the terror of blasphemy and ecclesiastic offense, then in that case the number six becomes very understandable; for six experiments to satisfy the
pangs of conscience is more than enough, because the experiments could not be successful. (8:315)

Like Ivolgin, who fashions Napoleon in his own image, Lebedev fabricates a client who resembles himself. Like his cannibal, Lebedev feels a need to confess his wrongdoings. At the opening of Book Two, Myshkin exposes him: he sees that while Lebedev wrote him a letter, he did not expect him to return to Petersburg. The Prince then accuses him of writing “to cleanse his conscience” (dlia ochistki sovesti) (8:166).20 In Book Four, the narrator exposes Lebedev: “Afterwards, almost on the wedding day itself, when Lebedev came to the Prince to pour out his repentance (he had the invariable habit of always coming to pour out his repentance to those against whom he intrigued, especially when it didn’t come off)” (8:487). These incidents demonstrate Lebedev’s habit of confessing, thereby providing readers with textual evidence that Lebedev has created his cannibal client in his own image. Lebedev’s defense of the cannibal can thus be read, like his defense of the moneylender, as a self-defense.

Unlike Lebedev’s cannibal speech, Dostoevsky’s cannibal speech parodies forensic rhetoric. Like the lawyers Dostoevsky’s Diary writer exposes as “hired consciences,” Lebedev disregards ethics. He uses scientific language and statistics to neutralize the horror of his client’s crime, a rhetorical strategy the Diary writer repeatedly denounces. In a speech identifying belief in God as the basis for ethical action, Lebedev identifies his client’s consumption of babies not as a case of murder but as proof of the latter’s desire to repent and change his ways. Dostoevsky introduces babies to augment the horror of the crime; Lebedev introduces babies to diminish it. Lebedev quantifies and reifies the babies, claiming that the cannibal’s fare substitution necessarily failed: “For, in the first place, in my opinion, a baby is too small, that is, not big in size, so that for a defined period it would take three to five times as many lay babies as clerics, so that the sin, if diminished on one side, is nonetheless augmented on the other, not in quality, but in quantity” (8:314–15). By quantification, Lebedev deflects attention away from the fact that he is talking about murder victims. He even calls the innocent babes in question “numbers” (shest’ numerov) (8:314). Dostoevsky thus makes Lebedev the early prototype for the lawyers with whom he polemicizes in later works. He discredits Lebedev’s pseudoscientific rhetoric by demonstrating its ethical inadequacy. He also shows how Lebedev’s rhetoric reflects his claim to be an “Antichrist professor”: Lebedev chooses sixty-six as the number of murders—a clear reference to 666, the number of the beast in Revelations. Dostoevsky thus reveals the ethical ramifications of Lebedev’s identification with his cannibal. Moreover, Dostoevsky’s juxtaposition of the argument’s defense of a
transcendent idea with its rhetorical strategies of quantification and reification reinforces the image of Lebedev as a shameless opportunist. The cannibal defense speech also contains within itself the mix of truth and lies that characterize its speaker. In exposing the cannibal to his audience, Lebedev exposes himself.

**It Takes One to Know One**

Throughout the novel, the boxer Keller serves as a parody of Lebedev. Both are self-taught wordsmiths who delight in language; both crave recognition for their rhetorical skills; and both love learned conversations. Yet Keller also serves as a foil of Lebedev: though both can be calculating, Keller is also sincere. More importantly, Keller has a sense of honor, however flawed.

Ferdyshenko’s game at Nastasia Filippovna’s in Part One and the reading of Keller’s article in Part Two highlights the novel’s thematic and poetic interest in scenes of exposure. Keller’s article clearly parodies *oblichitel’naia literatura*—prose that exposes. Written in cliché-ridden and bombastic prose, the article is meant to expose the corrupt morals of the upper classes. By leaving its targets (Myshkin, Myshkin’s father, Pavlishchev, and Burdovsky’s mother) unnamed, the article both reveals and conceals. Hoping to expose the Burdovsky crowd as unscrupulous slanderers, undeserving of the Prince’s largesse, Lebedev hands it to Mme. Epanchina. Enraged by its contents, she forces Kolia to read it aloud. But exposure always cuts both ways, and neither Mme. Epanchina nor anyone else is prepared for the resulting shame reaction. The narrator, however, reports it in detail, describing Kolia’s response as a fall from childlike innocence to shameful knowledge. He observes that Kolia runs to a corner and covers his face from shame: “He was unbearably ashamed, and his childlike impressionability, which had not yet gotten used to filth, was distressed beyond all measure. It seemed to him that something extraordinary had happened, something which had destroyed everything at once, and that he was practically the cause of it for the sole reason that he had read it aloud. But everyone else, it seemed, also felt something similar” (8:221). By having his narrator observe the general shame response, Dostoevsky dramatizes shame’s contagious force.

The exposers in this scene are likewise exposed. Keller shamelessly admits authorship. Ippolit informs Mme. Epanchina that Lebedev had collaborated with Keller, and she announces it out loud. Keller reveals that he paid Lebedev six silver rubles for such “facts” as the foreign shoes the Prince was wearing when he arrived in Russia, the Prince’s enormous appetite at Schneider’s (a fabrication), and some numerical alterations: “in a word, all that aggregation [gruppirovka], all of that belongs to him, for six silver rubles, he didn’t
correct the diction, however.” Lebedev responds with a counter-exposure: “I
didn’t correct the second half, sir, so that all that’s illiterate (and there’s illiter-
ate stuff there!), so after all don’t attribute that to me, sir . . . ” (8:242). In
addition to parodying radical prose, Dostoevsky here underscores the
sociopolitical rivalry that hinders social harmony. The article’s authors and
those whom it was intended to benefit (Burdovsky and company) all belong
to the lower classes, while their targets belong to the nobility.

Exposure does not stop with mutual recrimination—the obverse of the
Russian social contract. Dostoevsky highlights the ethics of the exchange by
having Mme. Epanchina emphasize Lebedev’s concern—not with the article’s
slanderous content, but with its diction: “ ‘Look at what he’s worried about!’
exclaimed Lizaveta Prokofievna” (8:242). She focuses attention on the
authors’ ethics or, rather, their lack of ethics. Both Keller and Lebedev shame-
lessly disregard the article’s slanderous content, focusing instead on their own
rhetorical contributions to it. Lebedev’s treacherous collaboration (for six sil-
ver rubles, the sign of a cheap Judas) not only emphasizes his moral bank-
ruptcy but also suggests a relationship between class status and shamelessness.
Mme. Epanchina’s indignation at the Prince for forgiving Lebedev derives
from a sense of personal honor. She clearly believes that base action springs
from base character.

Once Lebedev’s co-authorship is exposed, readers easily find traces of his
rhetoric, particularly the detail about Burdovsky’s mother being crippled
(repeated twice). Lebedev used the expression “crippled” (literally “without
legs,” bez nog) in an earlier scene to characterize his wife, who was still alive,
pregnant, and presumably whole-bodied. After Nastasia Filippovna throws
the 100,000 rubles into the fire at her birthday party, Lebedev wails: “Little
Mother! Gracious One! Order me into the fireplace: the whole of me will
crawl in, I will put my entire gray head into the fire! . . . A sick crippled wife,
thirteen children—all orphans, I buried my father last week, he’s sitting hun-
gry, Nastasia Filippovna!” (8:145). The first part of Lebedev’s appeal reveals
his willingness to abase himself for money. While Nastasia Filippovna tests
Gania’s honor, Lebedev demonstrates that he has none. Here, as elsewhere,
Lebedev’s shamelessness rouses readers’ contempt.

Lebedev’s last sentence betrays his rhetorical tactics. First, Lebedev uses
physical disability to elicit audience pity—in this case for his supposedly
unfortunate wife, in Keller’s article for Burdovsky’s supposedly dying mother.
But women are not the only disabled characters in Lebedev’s repertory. He
represents the moneylender Zaidler as a “sad old man, crippled, making a liv-
ing by honest labor” (8:161). Lebedev also claims to General Ivolgin that
during the Napoleonic invasion one of his own legs was shot off by a cannon (he
specifies which one); that he buried it in a Moscow cemetery and visits it
and that he sported a Chernosvitov leg that was so convincing that his wife never knew of his physical defect. Such statements reveal his blatant disregard for verisimilitude as well as truth. Lebedev appeals to his audience’s emotions, not their reason.

In retrospect, this scene also reveals Lebedev’s numerical exaggerations and his preoccupation with food. At the time Lebedev makes his anguished plea to Nastasia Filippovna, he has three, not thirteen children (in Book Two, he has a fourth). Later Keller reports Lebedev’s claim that the Prince sent Burdovsky only fifty rubles, when in fact the Prince had sent two hundred fifty. In both cases, Lebedev manipulates numbers for rhetorical effect. These scenes thus prepare for Lebedev’s use of statistics in the cannibal speech. Lebedev also characterizes his father as hungry, again a clear plea for audience sympathy. Keller’s article claims that the Prince ate huge amounts at the doctor’s in Switzerland, a detail Lebedev fabricates to portray the Prince as a parasite. This claim thus links the Prince with Pavlishchev, whom the article overtly labels a parasite, *lezheboka i tuneiadets* (literally, a “lie-a-bed” and a parasite), and with two other social parasites—the Prince’s grandfather, who is labeled a spendthrift, and the Prince’s father, who is labeled a thief. Lebedev’s fabrication reveals the resentment of the disenfranchised. Yet his accusation is ironically self-condemnatory, for other characters unceasingly expose Lebedev as a parasite.

Finally, in Lebedev’s wail to Nastasia Filippovna, he claims that his children are all orphans because he buried his father the week before (a non sequitur). Yet in the very next clause he claims that his father is “sitting hungry” (a contradiction). This claim exemplifies Lebedev’s tendency to disregard truth altogether. It also fits the novel’s imagery of resurrected dead. Kolpakov rises from the dead and returns to his regiment; Lebedev’s bodiless head continues to speak; Lebedev’s father dies in one sentence then starves in the next. These nontranscendent images recall the novel’s preoccupation with Holbein’s Christ and the seeming impossibility of resurrection. Lebedev’s rhetoric, even as reflected in Keller’s article, thus constantly circles back to the novel’s thematics.

While Lebedev and Keller willingly compromise others for the sake of their own verbal display, they differ significantly in their sincerity. During his long interview with Myshkin, Keller suddenly jumps to the conclusion “that he had practically lost ‘every trace of morality’ (‘solely from lack of belief in the Most High’), that he had almost stooped to theft” (8:256). By attributing loss of morality to loss of faith, Keller reinforces Lebedev’s assertion that belief in God spawns ethical action and anticipates Ivan Karamazov’s famous dictum that without belief in God, “all is permitted.” Keller also associates theft with loss of belief in a transcendent idea, thus providing an ethical standard for judging Ferdyshchenko’s and General Ivolgin’s thefts. Ferdyshchenko’s
lack of shame and guilt condemn him. By contrast, General Ivolgin’s shame and guilt, as well as his attempt to undo his crime, redeem him.

Though tempted, Keller does not steal. Instead, he complains comically to the Prince: “Keller with unusual readiness confessed to such things that it was not possible to imagine how it was possible to talk about such things. Approaching each story, he positively averred that he was repentant and inwardly ‘full of tears,’ and yet he talked as though he were proud of his act, and at the same time sometimes so comically that he and the Prince chuckled in the end like madmen” (8:257). This interaction reveals Keller’s narrative talent: like Dostoevsky, Keller can transform the unspeakable into something comic. Keller’s confession recalls yet again Ferdyshchenko’s truth-telling game. The contest, which hinges on self-presentation, establishes each speaker’s rhetorical skill. Both Generals Epanchin and Tolstoy recount shameful incidents skillfully. Though readers may agree that the Generals have cheated Ferdyshchenko, we have no sympathy for him because he is a bad narrator. Like his social superiors, Keller skillfully tells on himself. Unlike his social superiors, he creates listener sympathy. As Keller confesses, the Prince is at the height of his psychological insight in the novel. His genuine affection for the boxer and his remarks about Keller’s stories model a response for the authorial audience: “The main thing is that you have a kind of childlike trustfulness and a rare truthfulness, . . . do you know that even with that alone you compensate for a lot?” (8:257). The Prince thus identifies Keller’s capacity for moral intuition as a redeeming grace.

By confessing to doubleness, Keller links himself to Myshkin and Lebedev, who also articulate their ideas about the doubleness of human thoughts. Keller tells the Prince that he came to visit initially because he wanted to improve himself but then he decided to borrow money as well (8:258). Keller concludes, “Isn’t that base?” (nizko), a question that links him rhetorically to Lebedev, who calls himself “base” (nizok). Arriving as Keller leaves, Lebedev fumes when he sees money in Keller’s hand. The Prince objects that Keller was sincerely repentant. Lebedev responds, “Why indeed what kind of repentance is that! Exactly the same as me yesterday: ‘Base, base am I,’ and in fact it’s only words, sir!” (8:259). Lebedev then confesses his own doubleness, causing the Prince to observe: “‘Well, there you are, he also said the exact same thing to me just now,’ exclaimed the Prince, ‘and both of you praise yourselves! You even surprise me, only he’s more sincere than you, for you’ve turned it into a real profession’” (8:259). In identifying Lebedev as an actor, the Prince exposes his calculations. At the novel’s outset, Lebedev gladly plays the buffoon in order to accompany Rogozhin. He confesses his baseness to Mme. Epanchina so that she will continue speaking with him. He identifies with Talleyrand. He admits his own hypocrisy to the Prince to expose Keller. The
Prince, a model audience for moral response, immediately perceives the difference in their motives. Unlike Keller, with his “childlike trustfulness,” Lebedev acts from *resentment*. Keller wants money and respect, but he does not plot against those who have them, nor is he quick to feel slighted. Furthermore, Keller has a sense of honor, albeit a comically flawed one. He slanders the Prince to defend Burdovsky’s honor, for example, yet he willingly defends Nastasia Filippovna’s honor. In this way, Keller proves himself a champion of the humiliated and injured. Nonetheless, Keller violates the social contract because he perceives Lebedev as a rhetorical rival.

The Cannibal’s Defense

Following Lebedev’s cannibal speech, both Keller and Ivolgin expose Lebedev as a phony. Keller points to the gap between Lebedev’s rhetoric and his lifestyle; Ivolgin criticizes his unexpected conclusion. Alive to his audience’s mockery, Lebedev defends himself: “As far as it concerns me, a nineteenth-century man, then I, perhaps, would have judged otherwise, and that’s what I’m informing you about, so there’s no reason, gentlemen, to curl your lips at me, and for you, General, it’s positively indecent” (8:315). Lebedev takes particular offense at the General’s derision because of the Russian social contract. Yet Lebedev’s self-consciousness increases his rhetorical fervor, for he concludes his speech with a series of anaphoric questions and portentous imperatives that wed his forensic and prophetic talents:

Now for the conclusion, the finale, gentlemen, the finale which contains the solution to one of the greatest questions of that time and ours! The criminal finally goes and informs against himself to the clergy and surrenders himself to the authorities’ hands. One asks, what tortures awaited him at that time, what torture wheels, what bonfires and burning? Who, after all, pushed him to inform against himself? Why not just stop at the figure sixty, preserving his secret until his last breath? Why not simply give up monastics and live in repentance as a hermit? Why, finally, not become a monk himself? And here’s the solution! Therefore, there was something more powerful than bonfires and burning and even a twenty-year habit! Therefore, there was an idea more powerful than all misfortunes, bad harvests, tortures, plagues, leprosy, and all that hell which humanity would not even have borne without that binding idea directing the heart and fecundating the sources of life! Show me something similar to such a power in our age of vices [porokov] and railroads . . . that is, one should say: in our age of steamers [parokhodov] and railroads, but I say: in our age of vices and railroads, because I am drunk, but right! Show me a contemporary binding idea of even half the power of that in those cen-
uries. And dare to say, finally, that the sources of life have not weakened, not grown murky under that “star,” under that net entangling people. And don’t scare me with your welfare, with your riches, the infrequency of famine and the speed of your roads of communication! There is greater wealth, but less power; the binding idea is gone; everything has grown soft, everything and everybody has gotten well-stewed! We’ve all, all, all gotten well-stewed! . . . But enough, that’s not the point now, the point is how should we manage, most worthy Prince, about the hors d’oeuvres that have been prepared for our guests? (8:315)

Dostoevsky’s lawyer-prophet concludes his speech about a people-eater by proposing that people eat. By identifying his conclusion as a “subtle, forensic twist to the case” that staves off “genuine indignation” and pacifies his opponents, Lebedev naively associates forensic rhetoric with moral manipulation. Eight years later Dostoevsky’s Diary writer exposes the ethical cost of ending a speech with a witticism: “You know what: it seems to me that it is very difficult to remain, and, as they say, to keep yourself as an honest person when you worry so much to save the most apt remark for last, in order to leave a burst of laughter after yourself. The task is itself so petty that in the end it must drive from a person everything serious. And what’s more, if the apt remark is not stored up for last, then it’s necessary to make it up, and for a pretty turn of phrase ‘one doesn’t spare mother or father’” (22:54). Dostoevsky’s later attitude to lawyers applies to Lebedev: rhetorical talent almost always leads its possessor astray. Lebedev’s forensic rhetoric undercuts his moral message. Likewise his mixture of prophetic and forensic rhetoric signals the duality of his soul.

**Literary Critique as Authorial Message**

Dostoevsky provides his authorial audience with guidelines for judging Lebedev’s bombast by having his rhetorical rivals, Keller and Ivolgin, criticize Lebedev and his speech. By exposing Lebedev’s prophetic pretensions, both thus violate the Russian social contract. Keller objects to the content, the presentation, and the ethics of Lebedev’s speech: “He attacks enlightenment, preaches twelfth-century fanaticism, he’s affected, and even without any innocence of the heart: yet how did he himself get the means for his house, let me ask?” (8:316). Keller’s first objections parodically voice the views of 1860s radicals: he condemns the religious content of Lebedev’s message. Keller’s next two objections spotlight authorial concerns: Lebedev’s posturing and his ethics. Keller appropriates one of the narrator’s verbs to characterize Lebedev: the verb “to be affected, to posture” (krivliats’ia) (8:212), a word
with both physical and moral connotations. In colloquial Russian, the common word *krivda* (falsehood, injustice) is used as the opposite of *pravda* (truth, justice). In addition, the verb *krivliat’sia* (to be affected, to posture) gains a further sense of physical and moral distortion by association with the verb *krivit’sia* (to become crooked, to make a wry face). The narrator employs this verb at the beginning of Book Two when Myshkin finds Lebedev reciting his successful trial speech to his family (8:161). Mme. Epanchina uses it three times to describe Lebedev (8:202; 212; 241). By placing this verb in Keller’s mouth 100 to 150 pages after Mme. Epanchina and the narrator use it, Dostoevsky emphasizes Lebedev’s insincerity and role-playing. Dostoevsky’s narrator also exposes Lebedev by using the verb “wriggles” (*vertet’sia*) (8:241), which his *Diary* writer later uses to describe lawyers’ unscrupulousness (21:22, 23). In Dostoevsky’s novel, Lebedev’s identification with lawyers taints his moral image.

Finally, Keller discredits Lebedev’s speech by asking what kind of prophet profits from his trade? Keller thus exposes the discrepancy between Lebedev’s self-presentation as a “poor” and “naked” prophet and his financial opportunism. Moreover, Keller’s exposure of Lebedev reinforces an earlier exposé by Lebedev’s own daughter Vera, who scolds her father for donning his raggedy old jacket instead of his brand-new one (8:160). Lebedev feigns poverty to enrich himself.

Following Keller’s exposé of Lebedev, General Ivolgin argues that Lebedev’s pretensions to the status of a prophet clash with his conciliatory conclusion: “‘I’ve seen a real interpreter of Revelation,’ said the General in another corner to different listeners, among them Ptitsyn whom he seized by the button, ‘the deceased Grigory Semenovich Burmistrov: he, as they say, set hearts aflame. And in the first place, he put on glasses, opened a big, ancient book with black leather binding, well, and besides he had a gray beard, two medals for tithing. He would begin sternly and severely, generals bowed before him, and women fainted, well—and that one concludes with *hors d’oeuvres!* Nothing at all alike!’” (8:316). Though the General comically points to Burmistrov’s props, he also stresses his rhetorical impact. Lebedev, on the other hand, avoids audience criticism by pandering to their physical comfort. He defensively asserts his qualifications to speak: “I say in our age of vice and railroads because I am drunk, but *prav!*” (8:315). By playing on the double meaning of *prav*, which can mean “right” or “just,” Lebedev invokes prophetic privilege. Yet his defensiveness reveals Lebedev’s resentment of the class status that condemns him to role-playing.

Although Lebedev avoids mockery by inviting his guests to eat *hors d’oeuvres*, Dostoevsky uses Lebedev’s invitation to parody one of the mysteries of Christian ritual—communion. The sacrament of communion unites the con-
gregation in an act of symbolic cannibalism: members partake of the freely
given body and blood of Christ and thus unite spiritually with their God
through a physical act. In proposing that his guests join in a secular commu-
nion, Lebedev unwittingly acts as Dostoevsky’s comic spokesperson.

Lebedev’s client engages in nonsymbolic cannibalism, killing and eating
unwilling victims, yet he changes in a way dear to Dostoevsky’s heart—from
self-imposed isolation or dissociation (obosoblenie), he moves to community
(vseobshchnost’). Lebedev uses his client’s belief in God as an indirect argu-
ment against cannibalism—when his client turns to God, he stops eating his
fellow men. While Lebedev proclaims the need for a higher idea, he does not
elaborate. Dostoevsky has Mme. Epanchina, the novel’s social conscience, do
that. Angry at the Burdovsky crowd, she exclaims, “Madmen! Vain ones! You
don’t believe in God, you don’t believe in Christ! And in fact vanity and pride
have so eaten you up, that you will end up eating one another up, this I pre-
dict to you” (8:238). Mme. Epanchina overtly links atheism and cannibalism.
She also identifies vanity and pride as causes of social strife, arguing that
when individuals place themselves first, they destroy community. Like Lebe-
dev’s cannibal, they act narcissistically and thus harm others.

While the Prince defends the verisimilitude of Lebedev’s twelfth-century
cannibal, he nonetheless questions the cannibal’s choice of monks. Lebedev
hints that monks’ homosexual proclivities made them easy prey, and Gania
suggests that monastic corruption ensured monks’ corpulence. But the
Prince’s question implies another explanation. Monks are members of reli-
gious orders who take Christ as their model. Dostoevsky thus suggests,
tongue in cheek, that a religiously oriented man like Lebedev’s cannibal wants
to approximate the sacrament. But he fails, because he follows the letter of the
ritual, not the spirit. The cannibal thus shares another of Lebedev’s weak-
nesses. Like Lebedev, he reduces the figurative to the literal. Lebedev’s canni-
bal partakes not of the God-man, but of God’s men.

These comic critics provide Dostoevsky’s authorial audience with
rhetorical and ethical criteria for judging Lebedev’s speech. Yet, while Keller
reveals Lebedev’s moral defects, Dostoevsky shows how exposure cuts two
ways. Like Lebedev, his critics reveal their own moral flaws. Keller discred-
its himself by spouting the rhetoric and ideas of 1860s radicals. His argu-
ment—that Lebedev’s speech attacks enlightenment and praises religion—
rings hollow because of its unexamined clichés. In staging these critiques that
discredit Lebedev, Dostoevsky turns to the comic tradition in which authors
make serious thematic statements under the mimetic guise of their fools and
liars. Lebedev’s critics discredit him, even as his cannibal speech voices one
of Dostoevsky’s most cherished ideas—that belief in God unites men on
earth.
Lebedev implies a moral contract: if one believes in God, one is obliged to love one’s neighbor. While this is difficult to achieve, it functions like Dostoevsky’s version of the Russian social contract. Lying and allowing others to lie promote tolerance and acceptance of one’s neighbor, a tolerance and acceptance based on an awareness of one’s own humanness. As Versilov reminds Arkady (The Adolescent), who wants to expose his landlord’s story as a lie: “My friend, always allow a person to lie a little—it’s innocent. Even let him lie a lot. First of all, it will show your tact, and second of all, for that you also will be allowed to lie—two enormous advantages—at one time. Que diable! one needs to love one’s neighbor” (13:168). In this view, the Russian social contract operates on the principle of reciprocity and functions to strengthen the bonds of community. Arkady’s impulse—to expose the lie—would disrupt the dialogue and alienate its participants.

This is what happens in The Idiot. Consumed by shame at their social positions, General Ivolgin and Lebedev lie. Ivolgin tells outrageous stories and Lebedev delivers forensic and prophetic speeches to impress their audiences. Their desire to undo their shame inspires them to rhetorical excesses that surpass acceptable limits. In loving their self-images more than their neighbors, they expose and humiliate each other, thus violating the Russian social contract. By doing so, they call attention to the unwritten codes of social interaction. They also expose themselves.

In fashioning these scenes of exposure, Dostoevsky lays bare his own narrative strategy. As his characters expose one another to shame, thereby implicating the character-witnesses, so Dostoevsky exposes his characters to shame, thereby implicating his readers, who are also positioned as witnesses. By making shame public, Dostoevsky plumbs readers into the affective and cognitive experience of the text’s action. On the cognitive level, Dostoevsky’s character audiences ask the questions that Dostoevsky wants his authorial audience to ask: What are a speaker’s intentions? What moves characters to act? What are the consequences, intentional and unintentional, of a given speech act or a given action? On the affective level, Dostoevsky complicates the picture: we may not feel sympathy for a character’s action, but we can feel the pain of his/her exposure.

As Dostoevsky exposes his narrative strategies, he exposes his moral vision. In The Idiot, Dostoevsky makes a character’s shame or shamelessness a moral measure: a character who is capable of shame is capable of change. As Dostoevsky shows, shame can eradicate barriers or erect them. Shame that eradicates barriers implies conscience, a moral agency that reminds us of what we share with our fellow human beings. Yet shame can be used defensively, to erect barriers, to protect exposed individuals from further scrutiny, thereby removing them from others’ compassion. Shamelessness, on the other hand,
only erects barriers. Whether or not it is a defensive role adopted to protect the self from narcissistic injury, shamelessness implies lack of conscience, that is, lack of the moral agency necessary for community. Yet even Dostoevsky’s most shameless characters, like Lukian Lebedev and Fedor Karamazov, worry about the afterlife, indicating that a spark of conscience still lives within them. Lebedev’s cannibal speech, his family loyalty, and his prayers for Mme. du Barry reveal traces of conscience in him. Nonetheless, the inertial force of role-playing overpowers his conscience. Lebedev starts and ends as a role-player. He enacts shame without feeling it. From start to finish, Dostoevsky’s narrator maintains a distance from Lebedev. Dostoevsky thus metes out poetic justice—his narrator treats Lebedev as Lebedev treats others. As long as Lebedev reifies others and views them as sources of profit, he remains separated from them. In The Idiot, the shamed General dies in the bosom of his family; the shameless Lebedev leaves the novel the way he entered it: still plotting to enrich himself at others’ expense. He has a family, but he has left them at home.