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chapter nine

Metaliterary Identity

I am a slave, I am a worm, but I am not God—that is the only way I differ from Derzhavin. (10:213;269)

— CAPTAIN LEBIADKIN, Demons

I am not of the same society as that Aesop, that buffoon, that Pierrot. (14:78;84)

— MIUSOV, The Brothers Karamazov

“What Aesop?” the judge again picked up sternly.
“That Pierrot, my father, Fedor Pavlovich.” (15:99;666)

— DMITRY KARAMAZOV, The Brothers Karamazov

While Dostoevsky foregrounds the identity crises of his bilious underground man or his tormented intellectual Raskolnikov, he conceals his liars’ identity crises with comic covers. He thereby provides readers with the aesthetic pleasure that derives from comic play, but he also affords us the cognitive pleasure of looking beneath the surface for hidden depths. In this chapter, I focus on Captain Lebiadkin and Fedor Karamazov, two shameless liars who are compared both to writers and to literary characters. Captain Lebiadkin identifies himself with the eighteenth-century poet Derzhavin, with the Russian fable-writer Krylov, and with Shakespeare’s Falstaff. Miusov and Dmitry Karamazov identify Fedor Karamazov as both “Aesop” and “Pierrot.” By attributing these dual identifications as actual writers and comic characters to Captain Lebiadkin and Fedor Karamazov, Dostoevsky identifies them as loci for poetic display, metaliterary play, and serious commentary on the writer’s art.

Liars resemble writers in their willingness to fabricate context as well as content. Liars differ from writers, however, in their ability to do so. As I show, Dostoevsky’s liars’ narcissism reduces their narrative efficacy because it makes their stories self-referential; it also blinds them to the nature and needs of their homodiegetic audiences. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, masterfully manipulates his authorial audience and humorously employs his liars to
inscribe his own poetics into his work’s mimetic action and thematics. Lebiadkin’s reference to Derzhavin, for example, comically encapsulates the thematics of Demons, and Fedor Pavlovich’s identification as “Aesop” indicates hidden depths in Dostoevsky’s last novel. The surface humor of these characters’ poems and stories belongs to them; the penetrating humor and thematic depth of those same poems and stories belong to Dostoevsky. By double-voicing their hyperbolic claims and self-referential fabrications, Dostoevsky adds a metaliterary dimension to his realist novels.

Although he drinks, beats his sister, sponges off the Virginskys, and distributes subversive literature as well as counterfeit money, the lower-class Lebiadkin falls in love with the aristocratic beauty Liza Tushina and styles himself a poet. The first time the narrator meets him, Lebiadkin bursts into dedicatory verse (“To a Star-Amazon”) (10:95;117). He declares his love for her in epistolary verse (“To the Perfection of the Young Miss Tushina”) and calls his marriage proposal to her a poem (“The letter from the infusorian is to be understood in verse”) (10:106;131–2). To an irate Stavrogin he justifies his proposal with an occasional poem (“In Case She Should Break Her Leg”) (10:210;266). In Liza’s presence, he answers Varvara Stavrogina’s query about his sister’s identity with a verse fable (“The Cockroach”) (10:141;177). Expecting Liza to be at the fête, he composes another occasional poem (“To the Governess”) (10:362;472–3). And, self-consciously contrasting himself with a famous Russian poet, Lebiadkin declares “I am a slave, I am a worm, but I am not God—that is the only way I differ from Derzhavin” (10:213;269). As Ksana Blank has shown, Dostoevsky highlights the comic and derivative nature, as well as the weakness, of Lebiadkin’s poetry by having him imitate archaic verse forms. Thus, instead of writing like his contemporaries, Lebiadkin uses eighteenth-century genres and seventeenth-century rhymes.¹

By making Lebiadkin a parodic poet, Dostoevsky flags his novel’s metaliterary dimension. While Lebiadkin naively compares himself to the eighteenth-century Russian poet Gavrila Derzhavin, for example, Dostoevsky uses the occasion parodically to encapsulate the novel’s thematics and situate its metaphysics in a tragicomic and satiric political context. Lebiadkin abbreviates Derzhavin’s famous line: “I am a tsar—I am a slave, I am a worm—I am God.” This line belongs to an ode in which Derzhavin invokes his own “wondrous” powers as a human being to express his unity with God’s creation.² Lebiadkin merely cites a well-known line from a Russian literary classic. Dostoevsky, however, chooses his source poem to echo the novel’s metaphysical thematics. Likewise, Dostoevsky recontextualizes the poem, transferring the metaphysical to the political realm. Lebiadkin cites this line while appealing to Stavrogin for protection from Peter Verkhovensky, who threatens to expose his illegal activities. Justifiably fearing for his life, Lebiadkin emphasizes his lowly
status by citing the two humble identities (“I am a slave, I am a worm”). He consciously modifies Derzhavin’s line by denying his identification with God. He also, perhaps unconsciously, skips the first segment of Derzhavin’s paired contrasts: “I am a tsar.”

While Lebiadkin seeks Stavrogin’s protection, Dostoevsky links every word of his declaration to the novel’s thematics. Lebiadkin’s self-identification as a “slave” links him with the nine-tenths of the population that Shigalev’s theory identifies as “slaves.” His self-identification as a “worm” (cherv’) anticipates Peter Verkhovensky’s declaration to Stavrogin—“I am your wormlet” (cherviak) (10:324;419). His omission (“I am a tsar”) proleptically avoids competition with Stavrogin, whom Peter Verkhovensky later proclaims the political pretender “Ivan-Tsarevich” (10:325;421). Finally, Lebiadkin’s disavowal (“but not God”) recalls Kirillov, a man likewise obsessed with identity, who finally declares himself the “God-man.” As Lebiadkin comically defines himself, Dostoevsky reminds his readers of revolutionary ideologies and politics.

Lebiadkin’s identification with Derzhavin also highlights the novel’s thematics of pretendership. Not a captain but a retired provisions clerk, not a poet but a poetaster, Lebiadkin is a self-fashioner. However comic his self-identifications as “slave” and “worm,” they nonetheless reflect actual humiliations the Russian sociopolitical system inflicts even on those it most honors, such as poets.

While Lebiadkin identifies with a famous poet, Dostoevsky establishes him as a site of metaliterary play. First, Derzhavin’s ornamental style and his unorthodox mixing of high and low diction and imagery make him a worthy literary model for Lebiadkin. Second, Derzhavin’s low social origins, his elevation through civil service, and his poems in praise of Catherine the Great highlight the uneasy relationship between poet and political patronage in the Russian literary tradition. Third, as mentioned in chapter 8, Derzhavin compares the poet to a swan in his poem “The Swan” (Lebed’), a likely source for Lebiadkin’s name. Moreover, Derzhavin’s swan-poet claims that the muses will confer immortality on him, raise him socially, and bring him earthly fame—all claims that reflect Lebiadkin’s longings. Finally, as Dostoevsky would know, Pushkin cites Derzhavin’s famous line as the epigraph to Part Two of his “Egyptian Nights.” Dostoevsky thus forges an added link to the Russian literary tradition. Lebiadkin’s next line—“But my means, what are my means!” (10:213;269)—comically emphasizes the economic humiliation experienced by Russia’s poets. By having Lebiadkin identify with Derzhavin, Dostoevsky thus inscribes his own thematic and metaliterary play into Lebiadkin’s mimetic obsession.

Lebiadkin also identifies with the Russian fable writer Krylov, hyperbolically claiming that his doggerel masterpiece, “The Cockroach,” is a
“fable of Krylov” (*odnu basniu Krylova*). In calling his poem a fable, Lebiadkin indicates that it is an allegory containing a hidden message, which he nonetheless spells out for his audience. By calling it a “fable of Krylov,” Lebiadkin imitates an eighteenth-century fable tradition: La Fontaine appropriated fables of Aesop; Krylov appropriated fables of La Fontaine. Dostoevsky thereby emphasizes Lebiadkin’s connection to the fable tradition and thus to the cunning slave Aesop, to whom Fedor Karamazov is later compared.

Lebiadkin recites “The Cockroach” in Varvara Stavrogina’s drawing room, almost immediately after his Prince de Monbars speech (discussed in the next chapter). Identifying himself as a poet, he recites it to explain why he cannot reveal his sister Marya’s identity:

’Tis of a cockroach I will tell
and a fine cockroach was he,
But then into a glass he fell
Full of fly-phagy . . .

“Lord, what is this?” Varvara Petrovna exclaimed.

“It’s in the summertime,” the captain hurried, waving his arms terribly, with the irritable impatience of an author whose recitation is being hindered, “in the summertime, when lots of flies get into a glass, then fly-phagy takes place, any fool can understand that, don’t interrupt, don’t interrupt, you’ll see, you’ll see . . .” (he kept waving his arms).

“The cockroach took up so much room
He made grumble* the flies.
‘A crowded glass, is this our doom?’
To Jupiter they cried.
But as the flies did make their moan
Along came Nikifor,
A kind, old, no-o-oble man . . .

I haven’t quite finished here, but anyway, in plain words!” the captain rattled on. “Nikifor takes the glass and, in spite of their crying, dumps the whole comedy into the tub, both flies and cockroach, which should have been done long ago. But notice, Madam, notice, the cockroach does not grumble! This is the answer to your question, ‘Why?’” he cried out triumphantly. “‘The cockroach does not grum-ble!’ As for Nikifor, he represents nature,” he added in a quick patter and began pacing the room self-contentedly. (10:141–2:176)
Lebiadkin’s comic poem, in which Dostoevsky parodies Miatlev’s poem “Fantastic Tale,” sums up his dilemma: Lebiadkin’s apophatic claim that the cockroach “does not grumble” reveals his self-image. While fable writers typically represent humans in animal form, Lebiadkin reveals his sense of insignificance, as well as his sense of physical size and awkwardness, by imitating Miatlev’s choice of poet-cockroach. By representing the rest of humanity as flies, Lebiadkin further reveals his own sense of social immobility (though they have wings, cockroaches usually crawl). Finally, in his fable, he represents himself as an outcast—persecuted for his superficial differences. Like the flies, the cockroach is caught in a trap; unlike the complaining majority, he remains silent, thereby demonstrating his moral superiority. While he repudiates the vociferous majority’s political infighting, Lebiadkin shares their ignoble fate. Lebiadkin gives Nikifor, whose name means “Bearer of Victory,” and who “represents nature,” both a servant’s name and a servant’s job, thereby emphasizing his role as servitor of divine will. He thus comically represents the man-made sociopolitical order as a chaotic mess and divinely creates nature as an arbitrary force. From Miatlev’s poem, Lebiadkin appropriates the image of a cockroach fatally fallen into a cup. The source poem also depicts an image of grieving love, which reflects Lebiadkin’s unrequited love for Liza Tushina. Furthermore, Miatlev’s image of silent loyalty inspires the pretender captain, who aspires to be seen in the same way.

Lebiadkin’s creator, however, would know that Miatlev’s elegiac poem of melancholy love and solitude parodies an eighteenth-century elegy by A. I. Polezhaev. This makes Lebiadkin’s poem a parody of a parody. But Dostoevsky goes even further: he turns Lebiadkin’s verse into a political and metaphysical satire. Dostoevsky’s addition of Jupiter and his choice of the verb “to grumble” (ropat’) add a metaphysical dimension missing from Miatlev’s poem. Dostoevsky’s first version does not mention Jupiter (11:38). His modification thus reflects Lebiadkin’s comic and the novel’s serious metaphysical concerns. Moreover, in contrasting his meek poetic “I” with the flies’ metaphysical rebelliousness, Lebiadkin uses the verb “to grumble” (ropat’/vozroptat’), which flags Dostoevsky’s authorial reference to his beloved book of Job. Though the verb “to grumble” does not figure in the Russian Bible account of Job, it occurs in Dostoevsky’s. Dostoevsky’s source for the verb was probably yet another eighteenth-century poem—Lomonosov’s “Ode, Extracted from Job, Chapters 38, 39, 40 and 41.” Lomonosov’s ode opens, “Oh you, man, who vainly in your grief / grumble [ropsches] against God / Listen, if in jealousy / He spoke awesomely from the clouds to Job!” Lebiadkin narcissistically stresses his own creative powers as well as his own human suffering, while Dostoevsky gleefully parodies Lomonosov’s ode, which ignores Job’s suffering to emphasize God’s might.
By having Lebiadkin invoke Job, Dostoevsky highlights his narcissism. Lebiadkin is not a righteous man who first earns his good fortune by hard work and devotion to God; rather he is a liar and a parasite who daily beats the sister who supports him. Nor does Lebiadkin accept his humble place on this earth; rather he rails against heaven and earth at the perceived injustices against him. He does not quietly accept his anonymous status as Stavrogin’s brother-in-law; rather he does everything he can to publicize the connection. He gladly misrepresents himself to earn others’ praise and recognition. Thus, as Varvara prepares to expel him from her house, Lebiadkin declares, “Madam, your magnificent halls might belong to the noblest of persons, but the cockroach does not grumble! Notice, yes, notice finally that he does not grumble, and cognize the great spirit!” (10:142;177). Lebiadkin’s apophatric grumble exposes him as a shame-ridden, materialistic, vain, and rebellious man who will do anything for personal recognition. He wants praise for remaining anonymous, but he flaunts his anonymity to reveal his identity.

Lebiadkin is Dostoevsky’s creation. His identity is self-fabricated. The humiliations he experiences, however, have historical counterparts in Russia. Though Dostoevsky draws attention to the constructed nature of his novel as well as the constructed nature of identity, he nonetheless demonstrates with Lebiadkin’s death that personal, political, and poetic identity are life-and-death matters. Lebiadkin’s exhibitionist displays warn the shame-sensitive Stavrogin of what to expect once he announces his marriage to Lebiadkin’s holy fool sister. Stavrogin eventually turns his purse over to Fedka, the convict who later murders the Lebiadkins. As I will show in the next chapter, the threat of shame provokes extreme responses in people’s hearts. Lebiadkin may live comically, but he dies tragically.

**Aesop**

While General Ivolgin and Stepan Verkhovensky die after shocks to their identity, Captain Lebiadkin and Fedor Karamazov are murdered in part because they expose, or threaten to expose, others’ shame. Like Lebiadkin, Fedor Karamazov responds to social shame by verbal aggression. When humiliated, or potentially humiliated, he humiliates. By doing so publicly, he not only provokes a desire for revenge within his victim but also arouses audience anxiety. By doing so with stories, Fedor Karamazov earns the epithet “Aesop,” which situates him at the center of metaliterary play in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Though commentators usually focus on Ivan’s and Aleshia’s literary activities, their provocative progenitor regales those assembled in Zosima’s cell with four stories that signal the novel’s metaliterary dimension. Like
Aesop’s stories, Fedor Karamazov’s contain hidden messages. And like Aesop’s, they provoke hostile audience response.

Dostoevsky reveals authorial intent to associate Fedor Karamazov with Aesop by having three characters refer to him as “Aesop” four times within a hundred pages of the novel’s beginning and once at its end. Miusov calls him “Aesop” once in Book Two, Chapter 8 (14:78, 84); Dmitry Karamazov once and Ivan Karamazov twice in Book 3, Chapter 9 (14:129, 132, 140, 143); Dmitry once again in Book Twelve, Chapter 2 (15:99, 666). Dostoevsky further underscores the epithet’s metaliterary function by joining Miusov’s first and Dmitry’s last references to Fedor as “Aesop” with references to him as “that Pierrot.” Aesop and Pierrot share humble social origins and ambiguous identities as well as scatological, gastronomical, and clown-like associations. Both are identified with arbitrary violence and comic wit. Both are subverters of hierarchy as well as performers. And both link Fedor Pavlovich to the European literary tradition. Though Fedor Pavlovich is referred to as “Pierrot” only twice, he is repeatedly referred to as, and even professes himself to be, a “buffoon” (shut), keeping his identity as a performer alive to Dostoevsky’s readers.

The references to Fedor Pavlovich as “Aesop” and “Pierrot” are not only five hundred pages apart but also occur in vastly different contexts. Their placement and travel thus bear the stamp of Fedor Karamazov’s eponymous creator. Miusov uses these epithets in the privacy of his own thoughts, while Dmitry declaims them in a courtroom during one of the most publicized murder trials in Russia. The epithet “Aesop” thus moves from Miusov’s mind to the Karamazov house and then to the public fora of both courtroom and press. The epithet’s move from private to public reflects the path of the novel’s action, a family scandal that becomes a national one.

Like the legendary Aesop, Fedor Karamazov’s career moves from private to public spheres. As Annabel Patterson points out in her study Fables of Power, most collections of Aesop’s fables from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century begin with the legendary life of Aesop. Though the Life itself consists of a series of anecdotes, many of them scatological, Patterson points out that together they form a complex fable that was often amply illustrated. In the legendary Life, Aesop (or Aethiops) was an ugly, black slave who acquired the gift of eloquence after he hosted two priests of Diana. He was then sold to the philosopher Xanthus, whom he entertained with his wit and one-upmanship. Weary of his role as servile prankster, he achieved manumission by successfully interpreting portents. Aesop then attained international fame as a counselor, which proved his undoing, for the good citizens of Delphi, either jealous of their own reputation as readers of oracles (Patterson) or angry because Aesop reminded them of their slave origins (Daly), had him
framed for sacrilegious theft and threw him over the cliff at Delphi. Patterson points out that though there were fables before and after Aesop, he became associated with animal fables employed as ruses by the underprivileged for survival in a hostile world and was thus seen as a symbolic figure of challenge from below. Furthermore, she associates him with sexual and political violence and locates him at the crossroads of gross body and ironic wit, slavery and liberty, self-destructive ambition and an ideal of emancipation. The account of Aesop in the nineteenth-century Russian encyclopedia published by Brockhaus-Efron also characterizes the father of the animal fable as a person who, though constantly humiliated by his owners as well as his fellow slaves, was able to revenge himself successfully. The name “Aesop” thus evokes the image of a man who rose from servitude to independence by using his god-given wit, a legendary figure associated with physicality, sacrilege, and theft, both generating fiction and generated by it, the site of revenged humiliation and opposites clashing. What better epithet for Fedor Pavlovich Karamazov?

Skotoprigonevsk, the name that Dostoevsky chose for Fedor Karamazov’s residence, also smacks of Aesop. In the notes to their translation, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky supply “Cattle-roundup-ville” as the rough meaning of the town’s name. Given Aesop’s association with both animal fables and political satire, the town becomes a fit location for a Russian Aesop. The first two stories that Fedor Pavlovich tells in Zosima’s cell have Aesopian parallels. In examining the first one, I show how Dostoevsky exploits the tragicomic potential of revealed shame by creating a liar who self-consciously reveals his own shame in order to pass it on. In doing so, Dostoevsky deliberately explores storytelling’s potential as an aggressive challenge to its audience. Furthermore, by creating a character who self-consciously violates social norms, Dostoevsky self-consciously violates reading norms, thereby challenging his audience and actively engaging us in the ethical action of his text.

When readers first meet him, Fedor Karamazov has lived and prospered by his verbal wit, the Aesopian quality he has used to raise himself in the world. He sang for his supper, as it were, during his days as a sponger. He managed to convince his first wife, an intelligent young woman with a romantic imagination, “if only briefly,” that he “was one of the boldest and most sarcastic spirits of that transitional epoch” (14:8;8). From this marriage he gained enough capital to make his future fortune. Like the Aesop in Swift’s “The Battle of the Books,” Fedor Karamazov breaks the silence in Zosima’s cell by apologizing for his son Dmitry’s tardiness. He introduces himself with a well-worn cliché attributed to Louis XVIII, thereby identifying himself as an imitator of social decorum: “I myself am always very punctual, to the minute, remembering that punctuality is the courtesy of kings.” An upholder of social decorum, Miusov responds to his shame at witnessing
Fedor's gaucherie by acrimoniously retorting that Fedor Pavlovich is not a king. Thus, early in the novel, Dostoevsky sets up a scenario of shame and exposure that draws readers into the action. To the intense embarrassment of the homodiegetic audience, including his son Alesha, Fedor Pavlovich parries by proclaiming himself a buffoon:

“That's quite true, I'm not a king. And just imagine, Petr Alexandrovich, I even knew it myself, by God! You see, I'm always saying something out of place! Your reverence,” he exclaimed with a sort of instant pathos, “you see before you a buffoon! Verily, a buffoon! Thus I introduce myself! It's an old habit, alas! And if I lie inappropriately sometimes [nekasti inogda vru], I do it even on purpose, on purpose to be pleasant and make people laugh. One ought to be pleasant, isn't that so?” (14:38:40)

Fedor Pavlovich here pays lip service to the Diary writer's observation that most liars sacrifice themselves to their audiences, thereby hoping to provide pleasure. In Dostoevsky's article, however, audience pleasure encourages social harmony, whereas Fedor Pavlovich voices the cliché about punctuality to criticize his son. He thereby demonstrates that he is not an altruistic, but an aggressive liar. His shameless exhibitionist display also discomfits the homodiegetic audience, whose members serve as models for the narrative audience, including Alesha, a model for Dostoevsky's authorial audience. Guided by the audience in the text, Dostoevsky's readers experience the same anxiety at witnessing a flagrant violation of social norms as the character audience.

This small scenario dramatizes an instance of inappropriate wit, thus preparing both literally and thematically for the two anecdotes that immediately follow. Fedor Pavlovich’s blasphemous use of the interjection “by God” (ei-bogu) in a monastery underlines his conscious toying with social and religious taboos. He presents himself as a self-conscious buffoon, a playactor and entertainer, a Pierrot. But he goes even further. Fedor Pavlovich recounts two anecdotes about how wit can backfire. These anecdotes wittily explain the aforementioned exchange with Miusov by anticipating their own effect; they also link him to Aesop, whose wit frequently angered his audience.

By wittily exposing himself, Fedor Karamazov aggressively shares his shame with his audience:

I came to a little town seven years ago, I had a little business there, and went around with some of their merchants. So we called on the police commissioneer, the ispravnik, because we wanted to see him about something and invite him to have dinner with us. Out comes the ispravnik, a tall man, fat,
blond, and gloomy—the most dangerous type in such cases—it's the liver, the liver. I spoke directly with him, you know, with the familiarity of a man of the world: “Mr. Ispravnik,” I said to him, “be, so to speak, our Napravnik!” “What do you mean, your Napravnik?” I can see from the first split second that it's not coming off, that he's standing there seriously, but I keep on: “I wanted,” I say, “to make a joke, for our general amusement. Mr. Napravnik is our famous Russian Kappelmeister, as it were . . .” I explained it all and compared it quite reasonably, didn't I? “I beg your pardon,” he says, “I am an ispravnik, and I will not allow my title to be used for the construction of puns.” He turned around and was about to walk away. I started after him, call out: “Yes, yes, you are an ispravnik, not Napravnik.” “No,” he says, “have it your way. I am Napravnik.” And just imagine, our deal fell through! And that's how I am, it's always like that with me. I am forever damaging myself with my own courtesy! (14:38; 40–1)

Fedor Karamazov's pun, as he himself realizes, might have worked with a different audience. The word ispravnik, which designates a police commissioner, literally means "corrector." By contrast, napravnik, which literally means "director," is a fabricated word that is also the last name of the Russian composer who first directed the Mariinsky Theater, the imperial opera and ballet theater in Petersburg. Fedor Pavlovich appeals to the police commissioner not to criticize or correct, the police commissioner's literal job, but to direct Fedor Pavlovich's business enterprise. Fedor Pavlovich thus puns on the police commissioner's identity as well as his title. He asks him to be a "director," rather than a "corrector," to harmonize people rather than to isolate them. While Fedor Karamazov puns with a very concrete commercial goal in mind, Fedor Dostoevsky situates this pun in a novel that thematizes social and spiritual harmony. Fedor Dostoevsky's pun also plays with the shared root prav, which denotes "justice" and "truth," other thematic issues in the novel.

Fedor Karamazov's pun demonstrates his deliberately aggressive wit. He tells this anecdote about misfired wit after Miusov rudely refuted his cliché about punctuality. By telling a story about the police commissioner's humorless response to his pun, Fedor Pavlovich exposes Miusov's. At the same time he looks to his son's spiritual director, the Elder Zosima. Like the police commissioner, the Elder Zosima upholds order, in his case, spiritual order. Unlike the police commissioner, who “corrects” his charges, Zosima “directs” his spiritual flock. Fedor Pavlovich thus tells his anecdote about literal and figurative understanding to a divided audience—which either literally or figuratively understands him. Unlike most Dostoevskian liars, Fedor Karamazov is acutely aware of his audience. Dostoevsky thus uses him to inscribe his Aesopian poetics into the scene's mimetic action. In
reading this scene, Dostoevsky’s readers may follow the different examples of Fedor Pavlovich’s homodiegetic audience. Like the police commissioner and Miusov, we may respond to his pun with shame and punish him. Or, like Zosima, we may listen to the shame behind it and respond with compassion.

Fedor Pavlovich’s diagnosis of the police commissioner as a sufferer from “the liver” displays his street smarts—he understands that the police commissioner is a difficult audience because of his disposition. Fedor Dostoevsky’s diagnosis links Fedor Karamazov’s police commissioner with his own underground man, who uses Galen’s theory of the four humors to explain behavior. As Meerson points out, this apparently physiological explanation gains theological significance in the context of Dostoevsky’s biblical references, where liver illnesses suggest Jeremiah’s lamentation over the desolation of Jerusalem (Lamentations 2:11). Fedor Karamazov’s diagnosis of the police commissioner’s humorlessness thus suggests a physical disorder based on an excess of bile, while Fedor Dostoevsky’s suggests a spiritual depression based on a biblical sense of loss and longing.

Fedor Karamazov’s punny story also reveals the synthetic construction of Dostoevsky’s novel. Fedor Karamazov’s wit backfires. His story fails both because the police commissioner is humorless and because Fedor nonetheless persists in inappropriate wordplay. His story thus replicates and anticipates Miusov’s humorless reactions. His story also anticipates Smerdiakov’s revenge against Fedor Pavlovich for the playful Aesopian names he has given “Smerdiakov” and “Balaam’s ass.” The name Smerdiakov derives both from the noun smerd (which literally means “a stinking peasant” and figuratively “a plebian”) and the verb smerdet’ (“to stink”). As Dostoevsky would know, the legendary Aesop bestows scatological or animalistic names. The first words the heretofore dumb Aesop speaks, for instance, are the names of objects and animals, including an “ass.” Likewise, when his master Xanthus asks Aesop why people examine their own feces, Aesop replies, “Because long ago there was a king’s son, who as a result of the looseness of his bowels and his loose way of living, sat there for a long time relieving himself—for so long that before he knew it, he had passed his own wits. Ever since then when men relieve themselves, they look down for fear they, too, have passed their wits.” Whether or not Fedor Dostoevsky knew this particular anecdote, he too associates witlessness and excrement in the person of Lizaveta Smerdiashchaia (literally, “Stinking Lizaveta”). By attributing his mother’s nickname to his son, Fedor Karamazov deeply humiliates him. As Smerdiakov tells his neighbor Maria Kondratievna, “I’d have killed anyone in a duel with a pistol for calling me a scoundrel, because I came fatherless from the Stinking One” (14:204;224).
Fedor Karamazov’s second anecdote also involves word play. In it, for the sake of a pun, he slanders a woman whose husband then beats him. Though I reserve discussion of this anecdote for chapter 11, it, like Fedor Pavlovich’s first anecdote, has an internal audience and is about audience response. Both anecdotes thus self-consciously anticipate Fedor Pavlovich’s homodiegetic audience’s responses, for they are about business or social interchanges spoiled by Fedor’s love of wordplay. The dynamic of backfired wit, in turn, links Fedor Karamazov to Aesop. First of all, like Aesop, Fedor Pavlovich constantly provokes others into beating him—including his own son Dmitry. Next, like Aesop, Fedor Pavlovich is partly responsible for his own violent death: Aesop reminds the citizens of Delphi of their origins as the progeny of slaves. Likewise, Fedor Pavlovich’s names for Smerdiakov remind his illegitimate son of his shameful origins.25 Again, like Aesop, Fedor Pavlovich is betrayed by the child he takes under his roof.26 In an Aesopian twist, in a novel about divine and human justice, the self-proclaimed “son of lies” is killed by the son of a liar.

Finally, by establishing the Aesop/Fedor Karamazov connection, Fedor Dostoevsky draws readers’ attention to the covert message of Fedor’s stories—for The Brothers Karamazov is a novel about justice and judgment. Fedor Karamazov, who worries about the Last Judgment, tells stories about being judged and punished.

Fedor Pavlovich’s Aesopian identity also links him to another literary legend—Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin. In her work on Russian fables, Laura Wilhelm makes the Aesop/Pushkin connection. She notes that the danseur Konstantin Dembrovsky apparently maligned Pushkin in an unpreserved epigram by referring to him as “Aesop” because of his “homely physiognomy” (nekrasivaiia fiziognomiiia). Pushkin responded by appropriating the epithet in an 1819–20 epigram: “When I look into mirrors/I see, it seems, Aesop” (Kogda smotrius’ ia v zerkala,/To vizhu, kazhetsia, Ezopa). She then outlines the parallels between Aesop and Pushkin: both emerged as champion word wielders in cultures that encouraged rhetorical display; both upstaged their superiors with their verbal wit; both experienced countless run-ins with authority figures; both thirsted for freedom and regarded poetic prophecy as a function of free speech; both valued personal expression over official views, exalting the Muses over Apollo; both experienced extremes of humiliation and lionization; and both died violent deaths at the hands of philistines.27 Dostoevsky, an avid reader of Pushkin as well as an occasional summer neighbor of his sister, probably knew the epigram. He certainly connected Pushkin with blackness; he also linked Fedor’s prototypes Lebedev and Lebiadkin to Pushkin. By inscribing blackness into Fedor Pavlovich’s surname and by attributing his own first name to him, Dostoevsky linked four writers who are further connected by
their provocative style. In traditional Russian fashion, Dostoevsky thus fuses the poetic and the political as his linked figures of Aesop/Pushkin/Fedor Karamazov/Fedor Dostoevsky remind readers of bodily mortality, poetic immortality, and the politics of interpretation.

Fedor Karamazov and his creator pose a further problem for their audiences. Both note that positive audience response causes pleasure. Furthermore, as Fedor Karamazov's anecdotes show, negative audience response causes pain. His second anecdote underlines the fact that a disapproving audience can even beat a storyteller—as happened so frequently in Aesop's case. So why does a storyteller who knows that storytelling can provide pleasure tell stories that deliberately provoke displeasure? While I do not believe I can explain fully, I think that the shame dynamics encoded in the Aesop/Pushkin connection provide a partial explanation.

When Fedor Karamazov responds to Miusov's initial rejection by aiming his anecdotes at him, he acts like Aesop, engaging in wit and one-upmanship with a social superior. In winning the battle of wits, Aesop frequently incurred physical punishment from his master. Thus the cycle of shame and triumph would resume and continue until Aesop wins his freedom. Once free, he not only becomes his master's social equal, but also gains universal recognition as his master's intellectual superior. Fedor Pavlovich starts from an analogous position. Though he is Miusov's class equal and a relative by marriage, he is not Miusov's social equal. Miusov is ashamed of their relation by marriage. Fedor Pavlovich resents and reacts to his shame. Miusov exposes and shames Fedor Pavlovich, reminding him of his social inferiority. Fedor Pavlovich, in turn, exposes and shames Miusov. Their rivalry thus keeps shame alive for both of them. As mentioned earlier, there are three major defenses against shame: denial, flight, and fight. The first two are more conventional and socially acceptable. The decorum-conscious Miusov engages in the first, denial. Fedor Pavlovich, on the other hand, chooses aggression, which is both unconventional and unacceptable. He shares his shame, thus equalizing the relationship. Fedor Dostoevsky uses this Aesopian struggle mimetically to illustrate sociopolitical and economic inequalities in a modernizing country, thematically to raise questions of justice, and synthetically to spotlight issues of audience response.

The epithet “Aesop” functions mimetically as well as metaliterarily in Dostoevsky's novel. Aesop is smart enough to know that he should not provoke the Delphians, yet he does. Fedor Karamazov is smart enough to know that the police commissioner would resent the pun on his name, that the important official would resent the pun on his wife's honor, that the humorless Miusov would expose and shame him. But the pleasure of wordplay, a pleasure that links Fedor Karamazov with Dostoevsky's Lebedev and Lebiadkin, impels
Dostoevsky’s exhibitionist liars to display themselves whatever the cost. In this, Dostoevsky’s liars differ from their creator.

In literary history there are two Aesops: the Aesop of legend and the writer of fables. The name “Aesop” thus evokes the story of a slave who lives and dies by his wit. It also suggests apparently simple stories with hidden depths, thus signaling a time-honored practice favored by writers constricted by censorship. Aesopian subterfuge became a commonplace in the Russian literary tradition, where writers and readers alike conspired to inscribe forbidden materials and messages in and extract them from texts that passed through the scrutiny of government censors. In attributing the epithet “Aesop” to Fedor Karamazov, Dostoevsky deliberately evokes Aesop’s legendary life story as well as his poetics. As I have shown, Fedor Karamazov’s life story resembles that of the legendary Aesop. But Fedor Karamazov as an Aesopian storyteller is a cover for Fedor Dostoevsky, who uses his comic namesake to plumb dangerous thematic depths. On the surface, *The Brothers Karamazov* is the story of parricide. Beneath the surface, it is the story of regicide and deicide, topics forbidden by Russian censors. Though Dostoevsky counted on his Russian audience’s Aesopian reading practices, the epithet “Aesop” clues us to look for depths in Fedor’s stories that we might otherwise overlook.