Surprised by Shame
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Surprised by Shame: Dostoevsky's Liars and Narrative Explorers.
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In *Demons*, Dostoevsky’s most overtly political novel, a novel where the plot dynamics of secrecy and exposure function mimetically, thematically, and metaliterarily, the secondary character Ignat Lebiadkin figures centrally in exposing authorial poetics. As Richard Kuhns writes in his book on tragedy, the presence of secrets arouses an urgent desire to unknot them. Thus, while Lebiadkin is a minor character, he propels both the political and love plots of Dostoevsky’s novel. An outward sign of aristocratic shame and political conspiracy, Lebiadkin lies at the center of the novel’s dual plot. As a pretender, he reveals the novel’s parodic and political depths. As a poetaster, he figures importantly in its metaliterary play. As an anonymous letter writer, he pushes the plot with threats to expose others’ personal and political secrets. As an aspiring suitor of Liza Tushina, he exposes the character-narrator’s subjectivity. Finally, as a comically shameless character who mimes the threats to upset the status quo in every way imaginable, he provokes in Dostoevsky’s homodiegetic narrator, other characters, and readers alike the desire to control or contain him, thus making us all complicit in his tragic death.

Lebiadkin is famous as the author of the five ridiculous poems mentioned in chapter 9. By inscribing the novel’s social, political, and metaphysical themes into Lebiadkin’s comic verses, Dostoevsky parodies the sociopolitical role of poets in Russia. More significantly for the novel’s plot, however, Lebiadkin composes a spate of anonymous letters—to Praskovia Drozdova, Varvara Stavrogina, and Governor von Lembke—as well as several letters written in his own name—to Liza Tushina. By having Lebiadkin’s letters pose a threat to the social order, Dostoevsky uses Lebiadkin to propel his novel’s plot. Lebiadkin’s anonymous letter to Varvara Stavrogina prompts her to allow him...
into her drawing room (10:135;168); one of his letters to Liza Tushina provokes Stavrogin's scandalous revelation that he is married to Marya Lebiadkina (10:352;456); and Peter Verkhovensky uses Lebiadkin's anonymous letter to Lembke to cement the conspiracy to murder Shatov (10:417;544). Lebiadkin’s first round of letters hints at his sister Marya’s identity, thus preparing the scandal that ends Part One. His second round of letters reveals Marya’s identity as Stavrogin’s wife, thus provoking the scandal that ends Part Two. While they figure largely in the love plot, these letters merge with the novel’s pretender thematics, raising critical questions about identity. The first letters reveal the presence of an unsettling secret that threatens the social order: Stavrogin’s marriage to a lame, lower-class, holy fool. The second letters expose the secret, thereby disrupting the social norm that would have Stavrogin marry a social equal like Liza and produce offspring to inherit his estate. The third, Lebiadkin’s anonymous letter to Governor von Lembke (10:279–80;360), figures in the political plot. The only anonymous letter that readers see, it reveals the presence of subversive political forces in Russia. It thus explains the political unrest at the end of Part Two and Shatov’s murder in Part Three. By circulating it among the group of five after the Lebiadkins are murdered, Peter Verkhovensky intimidates them with fear of exposure. This letter thus compels characters and readers alike to associate exposed secrets with death.

Like Dostoevsky’s liars in The Idiot, Lebiadkin tries to expose others and thus reveal his own identity. Furthermore, as in The Idiot, the project of exposing others complicates plots. Lebiadkin’s threats to expose Stavrogin’s secret marriage and Peter Verkhovensky’s political activities reveal social and political problems. Lebiadkin uncovers the age-old issue of aristocrats abusing their social inferiors. Stavrogin’s momentary whim has serious consequences: Marya is a social embarrassment as well as an impediment to a real marriage. In true Russian fashion, Stavrogin sends her away to a monastery. Her brother then abducts her to blackmail Stavrogin into supporting him. Eventually, Stavrogin turns a blind eye while Peter Verkhovensky has Marya, her brother, and their old servant murdered. One aristocrat plays around, and three people die. The comic turns tragic.

Lebiadkin’s threats to expose Peter Verkhovensky reveal Peter’s political role, particularly as disseminator of seditious political pamphlets, to readers. Exposing Peter to the authorities, however, involves exposing himself. Peter may have produced subversive literature, but Lebiadkin has distributed it. Lebiadkin’s dilemma thus dramatizes the mercenary mechanics of political subversion. It also reveals his narcissistic ethical indifference: like his social superiors, Lebiadkin acts out of self-interest. Blackmailed by Peter, he blackmails Stavrogin. Unconcerned about sacrificing others, he is sacrificed.
Dostoevsky exposes Lebiadkin as a social critic who exposes injustice only when he is its target. Lebiadkin's plans to expose his social superiors involve shame dynamics. He threatens their sense of self and relation to the world. Stavrogin and Peter Verkhovensky both have leverage over Lebiadkin, but neither can be sure of him. He threatens to disrupt their lives in embarrassing and potentially incriminating ways. He is a wild card, an ever-present reminder of that which must remain hidden. Lebiadkin also exercises that power over readers: we too feel threatened by his presence; we too want him to be contained. By having Lebiadkin press his readers' shame buttons, Dostoevsky coopts his authorial audience into the novel's ethical action. Watching Lebiadkin expose himself as he threatens to expose others rouses an anxiety that we want to eliminate. In this novel, however, elimination entails murder. Readers must then confront our response to his death.

Lebiadkin's project of exposing others also highlights the narrator's project of exposing Lebiadkin. While the heterodiegetic narrator of *The Idiot* exposes Ivolgin exposing others in order to establish his own reliability, the homodiegetic narrator of *Demons*, Mr. G-v, exposes Lebiadkin as a pretender for similar, but more personal, reasons. Lebiadkin openly courts Liza Tushina, making him a rival for the narrator, who has a crush on her. From the novel's outset, the narrator describes Lebiadkin negatively. Dostoevsky thereby challenges his authorial audience to form its own judgments about his exhibitionistic liar and his subjectively involved narrator. Willy-nilly we are drawn into the novel's ethical action. How we respond to Lebiadkin and his death thus determines the author's success in providing what Bakhtin calls “surplus vision.” We must see beyond the narrator's negativity and Lebiadkin's own unreliability. In the end, the very excess of Lebiadkin's outrageousness redeems him. For while we side with the narrator against him ethically, we delight in his verbal excesses. Like Dostoevsky, we can condemn the sins but enjoy the sinner.

**Anonymity and Identity**

Unlike Ivolgin and Lebedev, who violate the Russian social contract by exposing one another as liars, Lebiadkin violates his economic and political contracts with Stavrogin and Peter Verkhovensky by threatening to expose their personal and political secrets. Yet he hesitates. While exposing Stavrogin's secret would allow Lebiadkin to reveal his own identity as Stavrogin's brother-in-law and thus raise his social status, it would also cut off his revenues: Stavrogin pays him for his silence. Lebiadkin faces social obstacles as well: his appearance, life-style, and class status make it “impossible” (in
Mavriky Drozdov's words) for Lebiadkin to be received in an aristocratic
drawing room. Exposure is also a risky business. Exposing Peter's secret would
free Lebiadkin from blackmail. On the other hand, revealing Peter's illegal
activities entails revealing his own. Thus, like Peter, he could be imprisoned.
Lebiadkin attempts to liberate himself from enforced anonymity by writing
letters. He writes to people who would not normally receive him. Once
received, he speaks. On paper and in person, Lebiadkin threatens to expose
others' secrets.

Lebiadkin's project thus lies on the border between private and public
spheres. Since Lebiadkin threatens to reveal both Stavrogin's embarrassing
marriage and his radical politics, he links the novel's romantic and political
plots. The threat of exposure raises the specter of shame. By revealing Stavro-
gin's marriage, Lebiadkin would expose him to social shame and thus poten-
tial exclusion. By revealing Stavrogin's political connections, he would expose
him to potential arrest and exile. Revealing secrets thus threatens Stavrogin.
But revealing Stavrogin's and Peter's secrets also jeopardizes Lebiadkin's own
privacy. While he wants to enhance his social status, any revelation about
Stavrogin's or Peter's political activities threatens his political future.
Anonymity thus works like a double-edged sword. Though it offers Lebiad-
kin protective covering in the political sphere, anonymity frustrates him in
the private sphere. All of Lebiadkin's letters betray a tension between public
and private, a desire to reveal and a desire to conceal.

The first mention of anonymous letters occurs in Varvara Stavrogina's
drawing room. Both Praskovia Drozdova and Varvara Stavrogina reveal that
they have received anonymous letters about "some lame woman"
(10:135;168). Unlike her mystified friend, Varvara has ascertained the
anonymous writer's identity. She thus violates social norms by announcing
that she will receive the recently arrived Lebiadkin, but she has two powerful
reasons to do so: Lebiadkin has anonymously hinted that her son is married
and publicly accused her ward of being his mistress.

Pretender Politics

At this point in the novel, the narrator has mentioned Lebiadkin once and
encountered him twice. Readers know that Lebiadkin and his sister live
in the house of Filippov on Epiphany Street, a location associating them with
the novel's thematics of pretendership and revelation. Liars and pretenders
thrive during transitional periods, periods when social norms and structures
are laid bare and individuals and groups struggle to maintain or to change the
status quo. Liars and pretenders perceive and employ their historical moments
as opportunities for self-fashioning, that is, they fabricate stories to establish
their place in history. Like historical pretenders, Dostoevsky's liars are not members of the ruling elites. Like Gogol's Khlestakov, they are wannabes. They resemble Boris Uspensky's second category of pretenders: unlike those who truly believe themselves tsars, Dostoevsky's liars are adventurers or rogues. They lie, as Dostoevsky claims, because they are ashamed of their identity and want to be other. Like pretenders, they want the honor and wealth associated with power. And like pretenders, they model themselves after dominant social or political figures. However, they must then live with the paradox of self-fashioning. Liars and pretenders want recognition for a false identity. To balance on the edge of this paradox, they must conceal their true identity. Captain Lebiadkin shares the fate of pretenders whose self-fashioning has a political dimension. While they fashion themselves with an eye to the present, the past catches up with them. Pretenders and liars live theatrically and die tragically.

In writing *Demons*, Dostoevsky clearly drew on the nineteenth-century commonplace comparing the era of the Great Reforms with the Time of Troubles. An enthusiastic reader of Karamzin and Pushkin, Dostoevsky may well have learned from them what Uspensky has noted for us: the presence of one pretender inspires the appearance of others. Dostoevsky accordingly provides pretender pedigrees for both Stavrogin and Lebiadkin.

Peter Verkhovensky proposes that Stavrogin become Ivan-Tsarevich, and Marya Lebiadkina unmasks him as the First False Dmitry when she anathematizes him as “Grishka Otrepev.” Like the First False Dmitry, Stavrogin holds heterodox views: both the atheistic Westerner Kirillov and the religious Slavophilic Shatov claim discipleship; the narrator associates him with masking (10:37;43); and he figuratively abuses icons as he literally abuses three Marias. He rapes the adolescent Matroshka, commits adultery with Marie Shatov, and marries Marya Lebiadkina (who was a commoner, like Marina Mniszech, the First False Dmitry's wife). Stavrogin also engages in a pretender phenomenon that Uspensky labels “anti-behavior”—he bites the governor's ear and pulls Gaganov by the nose.

A Stavrogin wannabe, Lebiadkin likewise engages in anti-behavior. He drinks heavily, a standard form of anti-behavior, but Lebiadkin also writes unruly poetry and anonymous letters, a literary form of anti-behavior. In keeping with his parodic status, Dostoevsky gives Lebiadkin more attributes of the Second False Dmitry, whose origins, like Lebiadkin's, are obscure. The Swedes described the Second False Dmitry as a laborer, a former servant of Grishka Otrepev, and a drummer. Lebiadkin claims to be Stavrogin's steward (10:208;263) and his Falstaff (10:208;263). But he also wants to imitate an American and leave his skin to be drummed on (10:209;264). In Mogilev, the Second False Dmitry was helped by an archpriest whose wife he then seduces.
The archpriest responded by beating him up and throwing him out. Similarly, Lebiadkin has an affair with Virginsky’s wife (10:213;269) and moves in with the Virginskys, but Virginsky eventually beats him up and throws him out (10:29;33). While this ménage à trois clearly parodies the one in Chernyshevsky’s What Is to Be Done? Dostoevsky frequently used multiple sources. He associates this event with pretendership by having the narrator note that after Verginsky beat him, “The captain quickly concealed himself [skrylsia] and revealed himself [iavilsia] again in our town only lately, with his sister and with new goals” (10:29;33), the same words Peter Verkhovensky uses to disclose his Ivan-Tsarevich plan to Stavrogin (10:325;422). Lebiadkin’s plans for himself also recall the Second False Dmitry. While the latter made former bondsmen into landowners and offered landowners’ daughters to those who denounced their masters, Lebiadkin offers to replace Stavrogin’s place in Liza Tushina’s affections; he also makes a veiled promise to denounce Stavrogin and take possession of his land (10:106;132).

Liza Tushina’s surname likewise signals pretender politics. The Second False Dmitry, whose headquarters were in Tushino, was known as the Tushinskii rogue (Tushinskii vor). Moreover, the Tushino period of Russian history was associated with the cynical switching of allegiance. Fittingly, Lebiadkin once distributed subversive literature (as did Marina Mniszech, wife of the First False Dmitry, during the time of the Second False Dmitry), but swears that he has repented (10:212–13;264). Like a Tushinskii rogue, Lebiadkin has changed his allegiance and calls himself a “repentant freethinker.”

In proper Gogolian spirit, Dostoevsky has his narrator expose Lebiadkin not only as a pretender, but as a self-promoting one. Though the narrator refers to Lebiadkin as “Captain” throughout Demons, he reveals early in the novel that Lebiadkin has assumed, not earned, his title. The narrator first claims that Lebiadkin “wasn’t even a retired junior captain as he titled himself. He only knew how to twirl his mustache, drink, and blather the most uncouth nonsense imaginable” (10:29;32). Fifty pages later, Liputin tells the narrator that Lebiadkin is now calling himself “a retired captain; earlier he only called himself a junior captain . . . ” (10:78;96). Lebiadkin thus follows the tradition of pretenders who assume a royal name in order to assume royal functions.

Lebiadkin further resembles pretenders in his similarity to a mummer—a person who dons a mask and dresses in costumes. While his master Stavrogin has a face that resembles a mask, Lebiadkin dresses up to play roles. “Do you understand, you ass,” he says to Shatov, “that I am in love. I bought a dresscoat, look, a dresscoat of love, fifteen silver rubles; a captain’s love demands social decorum” (10:119;149). Like historical pretenders, Lebiadkin thus attempts to procure the attributes of nobility by imitating his superiors.
While Lebedev's pretendership is secular, Dostoevsky gives him an address that associates him with the religious side of pretender politics. As Uspensky points out, the word “tsar” in Russian was regarded as a divinely given title. Russians thus distinguished between tsars appointed by God and those appointed by men. In claiming royal birth, all pretenders professed divine election. By having Lebiadkin live in the house of Filippov, Dostoevsky links him to the revelatory politics of pretendership. Danila Filippov was the semilegendary father figure of the most extreme religious sects—the Flagellants and the Castrates. As Richard Peace observes, the house's location on Epiphany Street (Bogoyavlenskaya ulitsa) bears directly on Filippov himself, as it was in a monastery of that name that Filippov was imprisoned after he declared himself by throwing holy books into the Volga. As Peace notes, “The name ‘Bogoyavlenskaya’ therefore combines the hint of concealment with the hope of manifestation.” Dostoevsky echoes this linking of concealment and revelation in Peter Verkhovensky's plans for Stavrogin: “We will say that he is in hiding [skryvaetsia], . . . But he will appear, he will appear [iavit'sia, iavitsia]” (10:325;421). Similarly, Marya Lebiadkina's identity as Stavrogin's wife is concealed, but Lebiadkin threatens to reveal it.

Finally, Dostoevsky underscores pretender thematics by associating Lebiadkin with falsification and unoriginality. He is caught distributing bogus banknotes (10:79;96), to which he later confesses (10:213;269). His sister Marya calls him a “lackey,” a word Dostoevsky uses to denote derivative thinkers. Moreover, Lebiadkin is not only a pretender but a plagiarist. After hearing Lebiadkin's verse “To the Perfection of the Young Miss Tushina,” for example, the narrator notes: “I knew a general who wrote exactly the same verses” (10:106;132). By linking Lebiadkin with plagiarism, falsification, and pretendership, Dostoevsky shows how self-interest engenders social strife.

Dostoevsky's homodiegetic narrator, Mr. G-v, is smitten with Liza Tushina. He thus resents Lebiadkin's infatuation and constantly exposes him as a pretender. The narrator of Demons thus follows the example of The Idiot's narrator and exposes the exposer. Just as Lebiadkin exposes Stavrogin's marriage to discredit Stavrogin in Liza's eyes, so the narrator exposes Lebiadkin to discredit him as a suitor. Like Lebiadkin's, the narrator's infatuation with Liza makes him a rival of Stavrogin, and thus an unreliable source in the public sphere. By revealing how Lebiadkin's personal feelings affect his narrative reliability, Dostoevsky shows his authorial audience how to understand and interpret the narrator's subjective unreliability. What Dostoevsky starts in The Idiot by having his narrator mimic his character-liar, he develops in Demons. Dostoevsky teaches his authorial audience to be wary of narrators with personal stakes in the novel's action. Finally, the narrator's exposition of Lebiadkin is
motivated by that class rivalry which serves, in *The Idiot*, to disrupt the Russian social contract. Dostoevsky gives the authorial audience lessons in judgment: the more a narrator is a character, the less reliable he is.

### Shame of Origins

Lebiadkin’s self-fashioning demonstrates his shame of origins. In Varvara Stavrogina’s drawing room, and thus out of his normal milieu, he reveals a bitter awareness of the gap between his actual and ideal identities. Frustrated by his enforced anonymity, constrained by his new clothing, and anxious to establish his worth before two otherwise inaccessible women, Lebiadkin quickly forgets his place (both his literal place—a chair by the door—and his figurative place as social inferior) and launches into a speech that blames Russia for his social shame:

> Madam, . . . I, perhaps, might wish to be called Ernest, but instead am forced to bear the coarse name of Ignat,—why’s that, what do you think? I might wish to be called Prince de Monbars, yet I’m only Lebiadkin from *lebed*, the swan—why’s that? I am a poet, Madam, a poet in my soul, and I could be getting a thousand rubles from a publisher, yet I am forced to live in a wash-tub, why, why? Madam! In my opinion, Russia is a freak of nature, nothing more! (10:141;175)

With this speech, Lebiadkin intends to show Varvara Petrovna that he is a worthy (albeit anonymous) in-law and to show Liza Tushina, whose very presence “seemed to make him terribly giddy,” that he is a worthy suitor. His peroration of comparisons reveals that even his name, this most basic fact of his identity, shames him, reminding him of his lower-class origins and life’s arbitrariness. After all, why should he be Ignat Lebiadkin, instead of Ernest, Prince de Monbars? Why should he be a poor, unrecognized poet instead of a published, well-paid one? The comic dissonance of this second complaint demonstrates the peculiarly literary cast of Lebiadkin’s mind as cramped living space and creative genius often conjoined in the romantic imagination. Lebiadkin blames Russia for his lack of poetic recognition by hinting that his homeland deprives its citizens of outlets to express their talents.

By having Lebiadkin declare himself a poet, Dostoevsky parodically evokes the image of two poets—Derzhavin and Pushkin. As noted in chapter 9, Lebiadkin consciously compares himself to Derzhavin. While he does so to enhance his self-image, Dostoevsky uses Lebiadkin’s choice of an archaic poet to mock his swan’s literary pretensions and tastes. In his poem “The Swan” (*Lebed’*), Derzhavin engages in a project similar to Lebiadkin’s: publicizing
that which has been suppressed. The poem’s eighth and ninth stanzas refer to the rules Derzhavin had composed for the Arbitration Tribunal, rules that Alexander I received favorably but which Derzhavin’s enemies kept from publication. By stating the intentions behind them in a published poem, Derzhavin hints at something suppressed. Dostoevsky’s Lebiadkin thus imitates Derzhavin.

Lebiadkin’s mentions of the marketplace and the misfortune of Russian birth in his Monbars speech also flag an authorial association with Pushkin, Dostoevsky’s favorite poet. While Lebiadkin is a poetaster who produces pekoral, his comic woes have serious counterparts in Pushkin’s life and writing. Pushkin struggled with the advantages and limitations of political patronage, the exigencies of the marketplace, and the difficulties facing talented individuals in Russia (see his May 1836 letter to his wife: “[T]he devil got it into his head to have me be born in Russia with a soul and with talent! What a joke indeed!”). Lebiadkin’s comic laments thus echo actual concerns in Russian life (as in the case of Pushkin) that Dostoevsky mimetically reproduces in his novel (in the figure of Stepan Verkhovensky).

Lebiadkin’s identification with the Prince de Monbars highlights other aspects of the novel’s metaliterary play. By expressing the desire to bear the name of a Frenchman who was an actual historical figure as well as the hero of several literary works, Lebiadkin reveals his desire to be a recognized and admired other—to be a member of the upper class, a European, a hero. He also demonstrates his blurring of the boundaries between life and literature, proving himself, like General Ivolgin, a consumer of romantic fictions. Lebiadkin, who prides himself on his literary education and accomplishments, would have been familiar with the Monbars name, which was a commonplace in early-nineteenth-century French literature. Featured in some historical novels as a minor character, Monbars was the protagonist of Jean-Baptiste Picquenard’s historical novel, Monbars L’Exterminateur: Anecdote du Nouveau Monde (1807), a major source for later reworkings of his story, such as Poirié Saint-Aurèle’s Romantic poem, “Le Flibustier” (1827). The historical Prince de Monbars shared command of the flibustiers, a group of French and English men who were a cross between pirates (free agents) and corsairs (government-commissioned operatives). In the late 1700s, the flibustiers enriched themselves while enabling their respective governments free the West Indies from Spanish hegemony. They appealed to the early-nineteenth-century romantic imagination as a “society of exception,” living a life free of conventional social restraints. While most of these maritime adventurers were opportunists who had left their own countries in search of adventure and wealth, they were seen as liberators who had emancipated indigenous West Indians from their Spanish conquerors. The Prince de Monbars was an important commander of
Tortue Island—a location that symbolized French defiance of Spain's territorial domination in the New World. Assuming the name “Exterminator” to demonstrate his resolve to wipe out the Spaniards, he earned great renown for such exploits as the sacking of Maracaibo and the capture of Vera Cruz.23

In popularizing the filibustiers’ exploits, historical writers, such as Picquenard, still clung to historical events. Yet they also granted legendary status to the group’s leaders, who all followed a heroic code. Historical writers also incongruously appealed to the legend of an ocean paradise. Following in their footsteps, many romantic nineteenth-century writers, including Balzac, Sue, Dumas père, Flaubert, and Sand (all of whom Dostoevsky read), further liberated these legendary figures from their historical moorings and romanticized them. Thus, whether or not Dostoevsky read Picquenard’s account of Monbars and his adventures, he would surely have been familiar with a romanticized version. Significantly, the semifictionalized Monbars resembles Stavrogin24 more than Lebiadkin. He is an enigmatic loner with a mysterious past. Noble by birth, he is equally at home in drawing room and tavern; he is handsome and well dressed, the ladies love him, and his enemies fear him. Monbars’ move to the Antilles and Stavrogin’s early travels25 represent flights from their historical situations, attempts to do something with their talents.26 While still young, they both attain notoriety: military notoriety for Monbars and social notoriety for Stavrogin. Monbars thus emblemizes a romantic hero and Stavrogin a reduced romantic hero. Lebiadkin, who achieves his own notoriety as a versifier, aspires to be Monbars and emulates Stavrogin. He thus comically imitates both art and life.

**Literary Parody**

Lebiadkin’s choice of Monbars as model illuminates his own self-image as hero and suitor. Like Khlestakov, Russia’s ur-liar, Lebiadkin is a consumer of literature. He chooses a romantic hero who was a member of the titled nobility—which he would like to be, who has the reputation of a brave liberator and patriot—which he would like to have, and who has a reputed weakness for women—which is how he fashions himself.

While Lebiadkin would clearly like to be seen as a hero, Dostoevsky’s narrator exposes him as a coward and a parasite. Unlike the Exterminator of history and legend, the cowardly Lebiadkin does not utter a word of protest when Virginsky drags him by the hair. Afterward, however, he “became offended with all the fervor of a noble man” (10:29;33). Lebiadkin’s cowardly response reveals his actual self, while his delayed bravado reveals his ideal self. By invoking rather than following the honor code, Lebiadkin proves that he is noble in word only. Similarly, while Lebiadkin would like to be seen as an
independent agent, he betrays keen awareness of his financial dependence on Stavrogin: “[Y]ou are the master here, not me, and I'm only by way of being your steward, so to speak, for all the same, all the same, Nikolai Vsevolodovich, all the same I am independent in spirit! Don't take away this last property of mine!” (10:208;263). Dostoevsky underlines Lebiadkin’s dependence on Stavrogin by invoking another literary model—Falstaff. Both Peter Verkhovensky and Lebiadkin himself mention the cowardly braggart warrior and liar Falstaff to explain Lebiadkin’s relationship to Stavrogin. Peter emphasizes Lebiadkin’s role as buffoon (10:149;185) and Lebiadkin his role as versifier (10:208;263), but both represent the role as one of paid servitor. Lebiadkin’s evocation of Falstaff also underlines his political function as someone who knows too much about Stavrogin’s past. Like Falstaff, Lebiadkin fears that his older and more mature master may dismiss him: “Can it be that you’ll cast me off like an old, worn-out boot?” (10:213;270).27 Finally, just as Falstaff relies on Prince Hal, Lebiadkin depends on Stavrogin’s political protection.

Given his cowardice and dependence, it is little wonder that Lebiadkin would prefer to be Prince de Monbars, the swashbuckling hero whose very name spelled freedom for the oppressed. Lebiadkin also adopts Monbars’s sole weakness—love. Though Lebiadkin admits to drinking as well, he fashions himself a captive of love. In fact, when the narrator first meets him, Lebiadkin bursts into rhyme:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A cannonball with hot love loaded} \\
\text{In Ignat’s noble breast exploded.} \\
\text{Again with bitter torment groaned} \\
\text{Sevastopol’s armless one. (10:95;117)}
\end{align*}
\]

The plot twist of Lebiadkin’s love for Liza comes directly from Dostoevsky’s own Captain Kartuzov sketch (11:31–57). Dostoevsky’s notes depict Captain Kartuzov as a quixotic landowner in love with a beautiful horsewoman, who is engaged to a handsome young count. The elderly captain reconciles himself to writing poetry dedicated to her until she falls from her horse and breaks her leg. Her fiancé withdraws and Kartuzov hazards a marriage proposal. She declines. Kartuzov then literally goes crazy thinking that his proposal insulted her. He withdraws to a mental institution, composes his poem “The Cockroach” (see discussion in chapter 9), and dies shortly thereafter. In attributing Kartuzov’s verses to Lebiadkin, Dostoevsky adds a covert metaliterary dimension: Lebiadkin plagiarizes from his creator!

Dostoevsky adds a plot twist to the love triangle in Demons, however: in pursuing a hypothetical lame woman, Lebiadkin compounds his rivalry with Stavrogin by comically imitating him.29 Lebiadkin’s first lines introduce the
imagery of broken limbs that runs throughout the novel. Initially Lebiadkin regards armlessness as a technical nicety, a terrific rhyme (mukoil/bezrukii) (in Russian this is both a poor and archaic rhyme) (10:95;117). He opens his letter proposing marriage to Liza by citing armlessness as a sign of courage: “Mademoiselle! Most of all I regret that I did not lose an arm in Sevastopol for glory, having not been there at all” (10:106;131). While the pretender captain invokes a military context where limblessness signifies courage and honor, Dostoevsky here engages in metaliterary play by invoking Gogol’s limbless Captain Kopeikin, Tolstoy’s Captain Tushin, who loses an arm fighting Napoleon in War and Peace, and Tolstoy’s “Sevastopol Sketches.” Dostoevsky also exposes Lebiadkin’s psychology: elsewhere in the novel and in Lebiadkin’s thought, limblessness signifies insufficiency or defect. By making deficiency a trophy here, Lebiadkin comically reverses the normal shame associated with defect—an example of the grandiosity that serves as a defense mechanism for his narcissistically injured self.

Independently, Lebiadkin and Liza both speculate on her future if she were to break a leg. In Varvara Petrovna’s drawing room, Liza reflects that as a horsewoman she could very well break one or both of her legs. She teases Mavriky Nikolaevich: “’[Y]ou’ll be assuring me from morning till night that I’ve become even more interesting minus a leg! But one thing is irremediable—you are immensely tall, and minus a leg I’ll become so very tiny, how then will you be able to take my arm, we won’t be a matching pair!’” (10:157;196). Liza aspires to lameness to be like Stavrogin’s wife—and thus more interesting. Yet she also regards a broken leg as a sign of physical and moral defect—and thus a manifestation of her self-image.

Lebiadkin’s attraction to a lame Liza not only signals his imitation of Stavrogin, who has a lame wife, but also his unrealistic ambition to supplant his master in Liza’s affection. Lebiadkin declares to Stavrogin that he, like Gogol in his “Last Story,” has written an occasional poem—“In Case She Should Break Her Leg.” He explains it to Stavrogin, hoping to reestablish himself as Stavrogin’s Falstaff but also to justify himself as Stavrogin’s rival:

“In Case She Should Break Her Leg,” that is, in case of horseback riding. A fantasy, Nikolai Vsevolodovich, raving, but a poet’s raving; I was struck once, in passing, when I encountered a girl on horseback, and asked a material question: “What would happen then?”—that is, in such a case. The case is clear: all wooers back out, all suitors vanish, so it goes and wipe your nose, the poet alone will be left with his heart squashed in his breast. Nikolai Vsevolodovich, even a louse, even he can be in love, even he is not forbidden by any law. (10:210;265)
In Lebiadkin’s reading, a woman’s lameness devalues her. Consequently, the man who chooses a defective wife must be truly noble or defective. Lebiadkin thus justifies his proposal to Liza with two arguments. The first argument asserts his ideal, chivalric self-image: if Liza were to break a leg, her choices of marrying would decrease. Like Liza, Lebiadkin thus conflates literal and figurative, equating a physical fall with a social one. Lebiadkin’s fantasy also betrays his ignominy: he willingly debases his beloved to elevate himself. The second argument—“even a louse, even he can be in love”—reveals the Captain’s actual self-image: the louse represents both his low social status and his parasitism.

While the Lebiadkin love plot follows that of Captain Kartuzov, the differences are revealing. Most importantly, the horsewoman in the Kartuzov sketch actually breaks a leg and her fiancé deserts her. Lebiadkin, however, does not wait for a hypothetical accident to announce his passion. As the narrator notes, Lebiadkin is totally incapable of containing or controlling his emotions: “A trait of such people—this total incapacity to keep their desires to themselves; this uncontrollable urge, on the contrary, to reveal them at once, even in all their untidiness, the moment they arise. When he steps into society not his own, such a gentleman usually begins timidly, but yield him just a hair, and he will at once leap to impertinence” (10:140;174). In describing Lebiadkin’s shamelessness, the narrator emphasizes his unconventionality and unpredictability, thereby creating the expectation of scandal.

Lebiadkin’s unpredictability springs from a class rage rooted in shame of origins. Hypersensitive to his class status, he does not approach Liza when he is sober. When drunk, however, he proposes to her. What discretion-shame he possesses restrains him, for he proposes in writing. He does not send his letter until Liputin tempts him with the argument that “every man deserves the right of correspondence.” Lebiadkin’s letter reflects his actual self-image as a nonentity as well his desired self-image as Stavrogin’s rival. Expecting to receive property from Stavrogin, Lebiadkin practically offers to replace him as fiancé:

To the Perfection of Young Miss Tushin.
Dear lady, Elizaveta Nikolaevna!
Oh, what a lovely vision
Is Elizaveta Tushin.
When she flies sidesaddle with her relation
And her locks share the wind’s elation,
Or when with her mother in church she bows
And the blush of reverent faces shows,
Then matrimonial and lawful pleasures I do desire,
And after her, and her mother, send my tear.
Composed by a man in an argument.

Dear lady!
I pity myself most of all for not having lost an arm at Sevastopol in the cause of glory, not having been there at all, but served the whole campaign managing vile provisions, considering it baseness. You are a goddess in antiquity, and I am nothing but have guessed at the infinite. Consider it as verse and no more, for verse is nonsense after all and justifies what is considered boldness in prose. Can the sun be angry at an infusorian if it composes to the sun from its drop of water, where there is a multitude of them, as seen in a microscope? Even the very club of philanthropy towards large cattle in Petersburg under the auspices of high society, while rightly commiserating with the dog and the horse, scorns the terse infusorian, not mentioning it at all, because it has not grown big enough. I have not grown big enough either. The thought of marriage might seem hilarious, but soon I will possess two hundred former serfs through a mankind-hater whom you should scorn. I could impart much and volunteer it according to documents—enough for Siberia. Do not scorn the proposal. The letter from the infusorian is to be understood in verse.

Captain Lebiadkin, a humble friend,
with much free time to spend. (10:106;131–2)

Lebiadkin’s lowly status runs as a leitmotif through the letter. He calls Liza “a goddess in antiquity” and “the sun”—a poetic cliché as well as an image that ties her to Stavrogin, whom Peter Verkhovensky calls “a sun.” Liza is the center of the universe, the giver of life, a celestial body, while Lebiadkin, a lowly provisions clerk, is a “nothing,” “an infusorian,” one of a multitude of microscopic organisms in a drop of water on earth (another image taken from Derzhavin’s famous ode “God”). How then to breach the gap between them? Lebiadkin’s letter proposes two solutions: his elevation to the status of property landowner and his denunciation of Stavrogin. The latter would eliminate his rival entirely, since being sent to Siberia would end Stavrogin’s physical proximity to Liza. It would also curtail his marital prospects, as all civil marriages were dissolved upon criminal conviction.

By the time he enters Varvara Stavrogina’s drawing room, Lebiadkin urgently desires to legitimate himself before both his hostess and Liza. To counteract the shame of his actual self-image as an “infusorian,” and “a louse,” Lebiadkin invokes a swashbuckling hero, the attractive, rich, independent
Prince de Monbars. He attempts to bridge the great gap between his actual and ideal self-images with verbal bravado. His shameless exhibitionism expresses the other side of his narcissism. The narrator emphasizes the connection between his insecurity and his vanity: “The expression of his physiognomy betrayed extreme insecurity and, at the same time, insolence and some ceaseless irritation. He was terribly scared, one could see that, but his vanity also suffered, and one could guess that out of irritated vanity, despite his fear, he might venture any sort of insolence if the occasion arose” (10:137; 171). The narrator thus describes Lebiadkin as a narcissistic time bomb.

In this drawing-room setting, Lebiadkin clearly chafes at his anonymity. Anxious to establish his rightful identity as Stavrogin’s brother-in-law, he hints at his sister’s identity:

I, of course, am a negligible link. . . . Oh, Madam, rich are your halls, but poor are those of Marya the Unknown, my sister, born Lebiadkin, but for now we will call her Marya the Unknown, for now, Madam, only for now, for God himself will not allow it to be forever! Madam, you gave her ten rubles, and she accepted them only because they came from you, Madam! . . . From no one else in the world would this Unknown Marya take, otherwise her grandfather, an officer killed in the Caucasus before the eyes of Ermolov himself, would shudder in this grave, but from you, Madam, from you she will take anything. (10:138–9; 174)

In this speech, Lebiadkin employs rhetorical contrasts, appeals to divine justice, and fabricates a family pedigree to establish his social qualification. He opens by self-denigration, a conciliatory gesture. After contrasting his sister’s humble poverty with Varvara’s patent wealth, he hints at his sister’s current identity, thereby increasing Varvara’s anxiety. He then devises a laudable heritage for his sister (and for himself by association) by fabricating a patriotic and military relative—a grandfather killed in combat in the Caucasus. He elevates his grandfather to heroic status by claiming that he died in front of General Ermolov himself.36 Lebiadkin thus counteracts the shame of his actual social status by creating a socially prestigious pedigree.

**Repentant Freethinker**

Lebiadkin repeatedly reveals his willingness to promote himself at any price. In his letter to Liza, Lebiadkin offers to denounce Stavrogin (whom he does not name) and thus rid himself of a rival. In his anonymous letter to Governor von Lembke, Lebiadkin offers to denounce Peter Verkhovensky (whom he does not name) and thus rid himself of a blackmailer. By
not naming his antagonists, Lebiadkin unconsciously consigns them to the same anonymity to which they have consigned him. In his letter to the governor, Lebiadkin offers, in return for political amnesty and a pension, to provide information on the distribution of subversive literature. Designed to save himself, Lebiadkin’s anonymous letter to Lembke declares his patriotic intention of saving his country:

Your Excellency,

For by rank you are so. I herewith announce an attempt on the life of the persons of generals and the fatherland; for it leads straight to that. I myself have constantly been spreading them for a multitude of years. And godlessness, too. A rebellion is in preparation, there being several thousand tracts, and a hundred men will run after each one with their tongues hanging out, if not taken away by the authorities beforehand, for a multitude is promised as a reward, and the simple people are stupid, and also vodka. The people considering the culprit are destroying one and another, and, fearing both sides, I repented of what I did not participate in, for such are my circumstances. If you want a denunciation to save the fatherland, and also the churches and icons, I alone can. But, with that, a pardon by telegraph from the Third Department, immediately, to me alone out of all of them, and the rest to be held responsible. As a signal, every evening at seven o’clock put a candle in the doorkeeper’s window. Seeing it, I will believe and come to kiss the merciful hand from the capital, but, with that, a pension, otherwise what will I live on? And you will not regret it, because you will get a star. It has to be on the quiet, or else there will be a neck wrung.

Your Excellency’s desperate man.
At your feet falls
the repentant freethinker, Incognito. (10:279–80;360)

Lebiadkin’s illogical and ungrammatical letter opens by inadvertently insulting von Lembke with an insinuation that his excellence derives only from his rank. While announcing the threat to Russia’s generals and Russia herself, Lebiadkin repeatedly uses the epithet “fatherland,” thereby demonstrating his identification of Russia with the men who lead it. By linking atheism and political unrest, the fate of God and country, Lebiadkin’s letter ties together the novel’s political and metaphysical thematics, anticipating the political and metaphysical dimensions of parricide in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Lebiadkin signs his anonymous letter to Governor von Lembke “Incognito,” from the Latin for “unknown.” *Incognito* also means someone in disguise or under an assumed name. It is thus a name that aptly epitomizes the paradox
of pretender identity: pretenders are unknowns who want to be known, illegitimate rulers who seek to rule legitimately. As history shows, and as Dostoevsky affirms, such a state cannot sustain itself for long. The internal contradictions are too great. Though Lebiadkin’s letter claims patriotic motives, his self-interest shines through: he asks for both a pardon and a pension. Ironically, Lebiadkin’s plan to liberate himself from Peter Verkhovensky seals his fate. Lembke shows Peter the letter on the eve of the fête, and Peter has Lebiadkin killed that night. Peter also uses the letter to force Shatov’s murder. Lebiadkin’s willingness to expose others to promote his own safety leads directly to four murders. Thus, while Lebiadkin identifies generals, fatherland, and God (father figures) as those endangered by Russia’s radicals, he and Shatov (former collaborators/brother figures) are equally at risk. Dostoevsky makes a political point: fathers may threaten sons, but radical sons threaten fathers and kill brothers. Brotherhoods based on violence breed more violence.

In signing his anonymous letter to Governor von Lembke “repentant freethinker,” Lebiadkin plagiarizes from himself, one of Dostoevsky’s own favorite practices. Lebiadkin used the same tag while describing his putative will to Stavrogin. When an incredulous Stavrogin inquires about this legacy and its recipients, Lebiadkin responds:

To the fatherland, to mankind, and to students. Nikolai Vsevolodovich, in the newspapers I read a biography about an American. He left his whole huge fortune to factories and for the positive sciences, his skeleton to the students at the academy there, and his skin to make a drum so as to have the American national anthem drummed on it day and night. Alas, we’re pygmies compared to the soaring ideas of the North American States; Russia is a freak of nature but not of mind. If I were to try and bequeath my skin for a drum, to the Akmolinsk infantry regiment, for example, where I had the honor of beginning my service, so as to have the Russian national anthem drummed on it every day in front of the regiment, it would be regarded as liberalism, my skin would be banned . . . and so I limited myself only to students. I want to bequeath my skeleton to the academy, on condition, however, that a label be pasted to its forehead for ever and ever, reading: “Repentant Freethinker.”

There, sir! (10:209;264)

Lebiadkin’s last will and testament clearly parodies Gogol’s “Zaveshchanie,” an actual document that Dostoevsky had parodied before in his “Village of Stepanchikovo.” In Demons, Dostoevsky returns to the language and images of Gogol’s last will and testament to continue his dual parody of life and literature. As a false captain, Lebiadkin reminds readers of Gogol’s literary characters, the pretenders Khlestakov and Major Kovalev. His
title and his surname's suffix also evoke Gogol's lower-class military hero Captain Kopeikin. As a generator of hyperbolic prose, however, Lebiadkin echoes Gogol himself. Even his name, like Gogol's, derives from a bird's name.

Like Gogol's, Lebiadkin's bequests reveal their author's obsession with identity, fear of being misunderstood, and desire for public recognition. Like Gogol, Lebiadkin wants credit for mere intentions during his lifetime: “So you intend to make your will public in your lifetime and get rewarded for it?” (10:209;264). Like Gogol, Lebiadkin repudiates his earlier politics. Like Gogol, Lebiadkin designates his legacy for his countrymen's “use.” Yet, whereas Gogol bequeaths his literary works, particularly his Selected Passages, to his fellow Russians, Lebiadkin bequeaths his skeleton. By calling comic attention to his body, Lebiadkin parodically echoes Gogol's obsession with his own body and his fear of being buried alive. Like all else in this Gogolian document, Lebiadkin's choice of epithet reveals Dostoevsky's parodic authorial play along with his serious thematic concerns. The epithet “Repentant Freethinker” underscores the reactionary views of Gogol's late work. In Dostoevsky's oeuvre, the epithet “freethinker” (vol'nodumets) signifies Enlightenment beliefs, particularly atheism (14:261). Lebiadkin has worked for the revolutionary atheists. As he confesses to Stavrogin, he has distributed subversive political pamphlets calling for the closing of churches, the annihilation of God and inheritance laws, the disruption of marriage, and armed rebellion. In both his confession to Stavrogin and his letter to von Lembke, Lebiadkin repents his association with atheism and revolution and affirms his fealty to Russia. (Given the radical critics' view of Dostoevsky's post-exile political conversion, Dostoevsky is probably indulging in a little self-parody as well.)

**Anonymity and Identity**

While Lebiadkin writes anonymously, his hyperbolic rhetoric easily betrays his identity. Although the imperceptive Praskovia Drozdova hasn't a clue to the anonymous letter writer's identity, Varvara Petrovna quickly uncovers it. Likewise, while the bumbling von Lembke hasn't a clue, the perspicacious Peter immediately identifies Lebiadkin.

Albeit a minor character, Lebiadkin is linked to many of the novel's characters, major and minor. Like Shatov, Lebiadkin is murdered by Peter Verkhovensky. Like Karmazinov, who writes a farewell piece titled “Merci,” Lebiadkin composes a “last poem.” Like Stepan Verkhovensky, Lebiadkin blames Russia for his lack of public recognition. Dostoevsky makes Varvara Stavrogin link these two dissimilar liars by dismissing Lebiadkin's comic hyperbolizing as “allegories” and “nonsense,” the exact words she uses to dismiss Stepan Verkhovensky's hyperbolic speeches. Lebiadkin’s self-identification
as a “repentant freethinker” also parallels Stepan Verkhovensky’s deathbed change of heart toward Russia. Finally, as mentioned earlier, Dostoevsky links Lebiadkin to Stavrogin both personally and politically. Lebiadkin’s obsession with his identity links him to his chosen master, Stavrogin. Significantly, Lebiadkin is connected with all of Stavrogin’s women: he is brother to Stavrogin’s wife, acts as a rival for Liza Tushina, and slanders Stavrogin’s mistress Dasha. Lebiadkin persistently imitates Stavrogin. Whereas Stavrogin is married to an actually lame woman, Lebiadkin obsesses about marrying a potentially lame woman. Whereas Stavrogin, in the chapter cut by Dostoevsky’s publisher Katkov, plans to publish his confession, Lebiadkin plans to publish his will. Stavrogin’s observation that Lebiadkin hopes to profit from publishing his will is echoed by Tikhon, who makes the same observation to Stavrogin regarding the publication of his confession. Last, Lebiadkin’s continual obsession with identity echoes the novel’s preoccupation with Stavrogin’s enigmatic identity.

Lebiadkin’s own name, part of the identity he deplores, deserves some attention. Why did Dostoevsky change his name from Captain Kartuzov (Peaked Cap or Powder Bag) to Captain Lebiadkin (Swanlet)? While there is good evidence to show that Dostoevsky deliberately refers to Derzhavin’s poem “The Swan,” Lebiadkin is not Dostoevsky’s first swan: The Idiot’s Lebedev holds that honor. The striking parallels between Dostoevsky’s two swans reveal authorial intention. Both Lebedev and Lebiadkin are parasitic retired clerks—one civilian, one military. Both compensate for their social insignificance by verbal exhibitionism. They both love speechifying (slovechki). Both draw attention to their novel’s thematics by employing cannibal imagery, raising the specter of limbs lost in military campaigns (reversing the shame of defectiveness), and pointing to dualities: Lebedev to humans’ internal dualities, Lebiadkin to sociopolitical dualities. Both act out of self-interest and betray their benefactors. Both drink too much. And both send anonymous letters to bridge social barriers.

Writing anonymous letters gives Dostoevsky’s swans a sense of power and control. Their letters bridge the gap between their actual marginality and their desired centrality. While both swans write anonymously, they write to establish an identity, to create roles for themselves. While they write to obtain the gratitude or recognition of their addressees, their letters arouse their addressees’ anxiety. They thus further marginalize themselves.

In public, both swans define themselves rhetorically—Lebedev as prophet, Lebiadkin as poet. They thereby appropriate the roles of Russia’s greatest and Dostoevsky’s favorite poet—Pushkin. Not surprisingly, the spirit and poetry of Pushkin pervade Dostoevsky’s metaliterary novels The Idiot and Demons. In The Idiot, as Aglaia identifies Myshkin with Pushkin’s “Poor
Knight," Dostoevsky points to the works of Pushkin and Cervantes as intertexts. When Aglaiia’s mother wants to read Pushkin, Lebedev volunteers to sell her his set of the poet’s complete works (the same edition Dostoevsky owned). A self-proclaimed prophet, Lebedev willingly alienates himself from the Russian literary and prophetic tradition for money. Fittingly, as an aspiring lawyer, Lebedev is also willing to sell his own meager talents. Dostoevsky identifies at least one Pushkin intertext for *Demons* with his choice of epigraphs—one biblical (discussed in chapter 6), one Pushkinian. The Pushkin epigraph recalls a carriage lost in a snowstorm, led astray by petty demons (*besy*). As becomes increasingly clear in the novel, Lebiadkin is a petty demon and is lost in the confusing politics of 1860s Russia.

Like Pushkin, both Dostoevsky’s swans have uneasy relationships with their patrons because of their ambitious desire to achieve fame and fortune from their verbal talents. They thus remind the reader of the problems facing men of talent in Russia. Yet Dostoevsky’s swans are not truly talented. Like their literary forebear, Khlestakov, they are pretenders. Neither true prophet nor true poet, they remind readers of the gap between their actual and their ideal identities—the very gap that Dostoevsky identifies as a source of their lying and thus of their identity.

**Shame and Death**

Through Lebiadkin, Dostoevsky demonstrates the tragic side of the political comedy being enacted. A comic pretender in a novel about serious pretendership, Lebiadkin moves from social embarrassment to political sacrifice. Like historical pretenders, Lebiadkin acts in his own self-interest but is coopted by political forces greater than himself and dies a bloody death. Lebiadkin (and his sister Marya and their servant) become the innocent victims of Peter Verkhovensky’s political machinations. Lebiadkin’s death also demonstrates the potential tragedy of the noncorrespondence between the ideal and the actual. To counter his actual identity as a retired provisions clerk, Lebiadkin adopts the title and role of a captain. To counter his enforced anonymity as Stavrogin’s brother-in-law, he hints in letters, in taverns, and in Varvara Petrovna’s drawing room at his family connection to the Stavrogins. To counter Peter Verkhovensky’s hold over him, he refashions his identity, calling himself a “repentant freethinker.” Lebiadkin’s naive belief in the power of money and words to change reality makes him both comic and tragic. He believes that the acquisition of property and aristocratic relations can obliterate the social differences between himself and the upper class. Like pretenders before him, Lebiadkin represents himself as other in the hope that he will actually become so. In fact, the identity Lebiadkin seeks to realize kills
Lebiadkin, the pretender captain, must die in order for Verkhovensky, the pretender-revolutionary, to realize his plan to enthrone Stavrogin as a pretender Ivan-Tsarevich. The comic Gogolian world of the pretender Khlestakov takes a tragic turn in the political climate of 1860s Russia. Lebiadkin's death gives us pause, however, for Dostoevsky uses the imagery of sacrifice to describe it (10:396;517). Lebiadkin may be a liar, a pretender, and a rogue, but his death resembles that of the real Tsarevich Dmitry—his throat is cut. Like the young innocent, Lebiadkin is sacrificed to the cause of pretender politics.

Shame dynamics move the twin plots of *Demons*. By threatening to expose others' secrets, Lebiadkin threatens the social and political status quo. Thus he must be removed. Varvara Stavrogina throws him out of her drawing room. Stavrogin relocates him—to the town's periphery. Peter has him murdered. Lebiadkin thus becomes emblematic of that which must be repressed to preserve the social and political order. Lebiadkin's power is the disruptive power of shame. From Lebiadkin's first appearance in Varvara's drawing room, the narrator makes his audience complicit in getting rid of him. Like the assembled characters, readers are uneasy around Lebiadkin and want him to be thrown out—because he violates social norms. He exposes himself, thereby exposing us to his shame. While some readers delight in this exhibition, most are uncomfortable witnesses. His ejection relieves our anxiety at having to witness another's shame.

Lebiadkin’s death is a critical moment for the authorial audience. Throughout the novel, we have been exposed to the narrator’s open dislike of Lebiadkin. The narrator’s hearsay description of Lebiadkin’s death further emphasizes the pretender captain’s drunkenness and animality: “On the spot I was told that the captain was found with his throat cut, on a bench, clothed, and that he was murdered, undoubtedly, while dead drunk so that he would not have heard and the blood flowed from him ‘as from a bull’” (10:396;517). The details he includes, however, particularly the reported speech “as from a bull,” suggest the image of sacrifice: like an animal on an altar, Lebiadkin is lying on a bench, fully dressed, his throat cut. While the narrator means to emphasize his bulk and passivity, the author invokes sacrifice. For Lebiadkin’s death, Dostoevsky employs a strategy similar to the one in *Crime and Punishment*. There, as Gary Rosenshield points out, the omniscient narrator largely adopts Raskolnikov’s viewpoint, looking at events through his fevered eyes, giving life to his obsessions and fears. Like Raskolnikov, the narrator focuses on one death—the pawnbroker’s. But as in *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky complicates the murder by tripling it. Just as the pawnbroker’s sister Lizaveta and her unborn child are murdered along with her, so Lebiadkin’s sister and their servant are murdered along with him. In *Demons*, the narrator likewise focuses on one death—Lebiadkin’s. As in *Crime and Punishment*,
the narrator mentions, but marginalizes, the deaths of the meek and the humble. Dostoevsky, however, never forgets those other deaths—and we in the authorial audience come to see how we, like Raskolnikov and the narrator in *Demons*, have been guilty of tunnel vision. Lebiadkin may have been unconscious as he died, but his housemates were not. His sister Marya and their elderly servant woman have multiple wounds, evidencing their struggles. By noting as hearsay that Lebiadkin had probably been murdered while he was stone drunk, thus anesthetized by alcohol, the narrator neutralizes our response to his death. He would have felt little or nothing. He was an embarrassment, even to readers. We may even feel a little relief at his death.

The hearsay evidence of the women’s struggles, however, increases our horror and gives us pause. Though the narrator introduces evidence that Lebiadkin was murdered for the money he’d been flashing the night before, making the two women innocent victims, the authorial audience knows the murder is politically motivated. We know, and the narrator confirms our suspicion, that Marya was equally targeted. Both she and her brother had to be removed. Both were sources of shame. Marya’s very existence bore witness to Stavrogin’s aristocratic sin. His upper-class self-indulgence thus results in the sacrifice of his wife, her brother, and their servant. And who kills them but Fedka, another source of shame, another political secret; Fedka, a peasant turned criminal after being lost at cards by the liberal father Stepan Verkhovensky; Fedka, a taboo-breaker who steals from churches and leaves mice in icon covers, who replaces holy literature with pornography; Fedka, an escaped convict turned murderer after being bought off by the revolutionary son Peter Verkhovensky; Fedka, murdered in turn for Lebiadkin’s blood money. But blood cannot remove shame.

Lebiadkin’s status as sacrifice restores reader pity for him. The narrator stresses his baseness, his comicality, his shamelessness. As the parodic embodiment of his social superiors’ narcissistic grandiosity and self-absorption, Lebiadkin makes us laugh. His ideals derive from clichés, which make him comic. His sacrificial death, however, makes him tragic. Lebiadkin participates in his own death, but he does not deserve to die. Dostoevsky rescues him from the narrator’s characterization of him as drunkard, opportunist, pretender, poetaster, and parasite, and restores to him the status of human being. For Dostoevsky portrays him as a pawn in a political struggle where the unscrupulous (Peter Verkhovensky) escape, while the virtuous (Shatov) and the innocent (Marya, the servant) are murdered. Lebiadkin, who is neither virtuous nor innocent, shares their fate.

Finally, Lebiadkin’s name links the poetic and the political in *Demons*. Another possible source of Lebiadkin’s name is the myth that identifies the swan as Orpheus, the poet murdered by Thracian women while he was under
the influence of Bacchus. The myth links wine, song, and bloody murder, an apt poetic precedent for Dostoevsky’s swan. Poets are disruptive. Lebiadkin’s function as a powerful wild card, a figure who threatens to disrupt the social and political order by threatening to expose personal and political secrets, reveals the threat of the poet’s power. Lebiadkin’s vacillation between uneasy acceptance of a status quo that marginalizes him, denying him wealth, power, and fame, and disquieting threats to expose his superiors’ sins arouses in characters and readers alike a desire to contain him. In other words, Dostoevsky uses the comi-tragic figure of Lebiadkin, Stavrogin’s Falstaff and imitator, a Second False Dmitry, to give us visceral knowledge of how censorship works. Lebiadkin is a pretender poet, but like real poets, he exposes, or rather threatens to expose, truths that we would rather repress than face.