Surprised by Shame

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In using shame as a narrative strategy, Dostoevsky floods readers with affect. He eliminates the reading experience’s armchair safety by making us witnesses to exposed shame. We experience shame’s contagious, paradoxical force. We want to flee or forget these painful scenes, yet we identify uncomfortably with those who experience them. Like Dostoevsky’s shamed characters, we experience the disruption of shame—the effect of surprise. Like them, we experience the disorientation of shame—the effect of defamiliarization. Just as his characters find themselves in uncharted territory, we find ourselves in a state of aporia, a liminal state in which we are particularly open to shame’s third effect: self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, like shame itself, works paradoxically: it is a state of pain but also a state of awareness. Herein lies the power of Dostoevsky’s art—he not only floods readers with affect, he also captivates our intellect. He portrays shame and scandal while he poses metaphysical questions and delights us with metaliterary play. In short, he engages our minds as much as our hearts.

As we have seen in the case studies of the shamed characters General Ivolgin and Stepan Verkhovensky, Dostoevsky outlines a pattern. The shamed person starts from a position of narcissistic self-enclosure from which he regards other persons as judges. He orients himself toward them self-referentially, trusting them to collaborate in creating and maintaining his idealized self-image. Their failure to comply causes crises of self-consciousness. When self-consciousness leads to the perception of others as equally worthy self-presenting agents, shame can be overcome. The shamed person escapes from the prison-house of self and steps toward community.

The dynamics of shamelessness are more complex and varied. Shamelessness betokens an indifference to norms of social interaction, an indifference
that arises from a sense of exclusion. As Dostoevsky illustrates in *The Brothers Karamazov*, shamelessness is an aggressive defense against shame or the anticipation of shame. In the Dostoevskian case studies of the shameless characters Fedor Karamazov, Lukian Lebedev, and Captain Lebiadkin, inertia prevails, that is, while their rhetoric betrays awareness of ways to overcome their isolation, their shameless behavior not only perpetuates but also exacerbates their exclusion.

The final characters in this study, Ivan Karamazov and his devil, offer yet another look at the dynamics of shame and scandal with which this study began. Before turning to them, however, I return to shame and scandal. While shame can be private or semiprivate, scandals are public. Scandal thus proves rich material for Dostoevsky’s fiction, which thrusts the private into the public realm, broadens the arena of exposure, and reveals the secrets of characters’ souls. Dostoevsky’s work uses scandal in its biblical sense as a stumbling block, a testing ground for the human mind and heart. In portraying scenes of exposed shame, he arouses our desire to isolate ourselves, but he also whets our longing to belong. Exposed shame mobilizes our cognitive as well as our affective faculties. In portraying scandal, Dostoevsky thus plunges us experientially into the text’s action, jolts our ethical sensibilities, and implicates us in the workings of conscience.

Dostoevsky’s choice of shame as subject and narrative strategy reflects his ethical commitment to universal brotherhood. At shame’s heart lies a paradox: separation entails union. Dostoevsky uses this dialectical opposition to demonstrate that awareness of separation implies awareness of community. An individual is isolated from...
suffering, which is counterbalanced by the heavenly delight of fulfilling the law, that is, through sacrifice. (20:175)

In this meditation, Dostoevsky contrasts human nature (“the law of self”) with divine nature (self-sacrifice). In his view, suffering results from self-assertion, happiness from self-sacrifice. This formula works for Dostoevsky’s liars as well as his other characters. Lying is a form of rhetorical self-assertion that is a response to shame at one’s identity. Fearful of social exclusion, liars try to present their ideal rather than their actual self-image. Their rhetoric thus exacerbates their sense of social exclusion: if their ideal self-image is accepted, they do not achieve their goal of being accepted as qualified social agents on their own terms. If, as happens in Dostoevsky’s novels, their ideal self-image is exposed as false, their sense of exclusion is exacerbated.

Throughout his work, Dostoevsky models a path out of the enclosed self. In the barest terms, Dostoevsky advocates freeing oneself from the prison-house of ego, where shame works as chief jailer, and joining community. The first step requires an empathic bridge, which overcomes the “I” as obstacle through the refocusing of self from self to other. General Ivolgin’s final story leads him to reflect not on the wrongs he has suffered, but on the suffering he has caused his wife. On his deathbed, Stepan Verkhovensky repudiates his narcissism and assumes responsibility for others’ welfare. He declares his love for others, because he sees them and himself as members of a larger, metaphysical community (10:505;663). Significantly, he recognizes his narcissism when he comprehends Christ’s humility, the “turned cheek” of the Gospel (10:505–6;664). Dostoevsky thus models a conversion by the book: Stepan’s deep attention to the gospel message leads to an imitatio Christi. Dostoevsky shows that what one reads, and how one reads it, matter deeply. Stepan Verkhovensky’s epiphanies about love and humility prefigure the insights of Dostoevsky’s positive characters, Alesha Karamazov and the Elder Zosima. His deathbed revelations anticipate Zosima’s doctrine that “each is responsible for all.”

It is tempting to say that Dostoevsky has his shamed characters move from shame scripts to guilt scripts, that is, from obsessing about self and social standing to assuming responsibility for others, thereby identifying shame with the narcissistic self and guilt with the ethical self. But, as I have shown, shame frequently has an ethical component in Dostoevsky’s work. His portrait of Zosima clearly demonstrates this. Zosima’s life changes radically after he slaps his servant Afanasy so hard that he draws blood. The future monk, still an aristocratic career officer, not only feels guilt at his wrong action; he also feels a deep shame that he has become the kind of person who could do such a thing. As his story shows, Zosima accepts his guilt long before he can manage
his shame. While the next morning he bows down to Afanasy and begs forgiveness, years pass before he can face his servant again. Zosima remains in town but sends Afanasy away: “[O]n the same day that I returned from the duel I had sent Afanasy back to his company, being ashamed to look him in the face after the way I had behaved with him that morning—so far is an unprepared man of the world inclined to be ashamed even of the most righteous act” (14:274;301). Only after eight years of wandering as a monk and praying for Afanasy daily can Zosima finally meet his former servant with equanimity and joy.

Zosima overcomes his shame through humility and love, the two paths for overcoming “the law of self” that Dostoevsky lays out in his meditation on his first wife’s death. These paths are also the paths of Christ, Dostoevsky’s moral ideal. Christ is himself a paradox, a God-man, a kenotic god who voluntarily assumes bodily form to redeem humanity. Dostoevsky chooses Christ because he is not an abstract, but an embodied god, a living moral exemplar. And yet, Christ’s incarnation and voluntary humility have proved a scandal, a stumbling block, for conventional wisdom. As Dostoevsky shows in his last novel, Christ’s freely accepted humiliation proves to be a stumbling block for many, but particularly for Ivan and Alesha—the two Karamazov brothers who share a mother.

Ivan and Alesha emblemize shamed and unshamed individuals. Following their mother’s death, both are placed with relatives. Ivan responds to his dependent status with deep shame—the underside of his pride, manifest in his aloofness and self-sufficiency. Like Dostoevsky’s dreamers and underground men, Ivan becomes narcissistically self-enclosed and hypersensitive to others’ opinions. Alesha, by contrast, freely accepts others’ care and reciprocates with gratitude and love. In like manner, they respond differently to metaphysical issues. Ivan and Alesha, shamed and unshamed, both wrestle, directly or indirectly, with Christ’s kenoticism. As part of their early trials, the two brothers wrestle with metaphysical doubts occasioned by a stinker: Ivan with doubts raised by their half-brother Smerdiakov, literally “the stinker,” Alesha with doubts raised by their half-brother Zosima, literally “the stinker,” Alesha with doubts raised by Zosima’s stinking corpse.

Alesha’s struggle with incarnation thus takes an indirect form. When Father Ferapont declares the elder’s odor an outward sign of inward corruption, Alesha stumbles. Having expected miracles of Zosima’s body, Alesha is stunned by the rapid decomposition that links it to the cycle of the natural world emphasized by the novel’s epigraph. The many parallels between Zosima and Christ in the novel, however, tie Zosima’s stink directly to Christ’s incarnation. The elder’s smell manifests his mortality, which he shares with the incarnate Christ. Slattery calls Zosima’s stink “iconic, for it instills in the people of the town a remembrance that brings always to con-
sciousness the words and deeds of the holy man, which certainly call to mind
the prototype of Christ's life embodied and thus remembered in the old
monk.”3 In having Zosima's stink recall Christ's death, Dostoevsky has Alesha
struggle with a variant of the doubt Ippolit experiences in The Idiot after he
reviews Holbein's Christ—after witnessing such an ignominious death, how
could the disciples believe in Christ's divinity? In doubting his elder's holiness,
Alesha, like his brother Ivan, wrestles with God.

While the story of Zosima allows Dostoevsky to present humility and
love as two models for overcoming shame, the story of Ivan offers Dostoevsky
the opportunity to provide another solution, one less discussed (if at all) by
shame researchers and therapists: creativity.4 In shaping Ivan, Dostoevsky
drew on the thematics discussed in this book: fathers and children, divided
selves, pretenders. He tackles his polemic on confession and intensifies his
engagement in metaliterary play. But he also portrays a man grappling with
the modern crisis of faith. Dostoevsky portrays Ivan's soul as the figurative
battleground of God and the devil by revealing the workings of Ivan's uncon-
scious—his nightmares and his writings. Mimetically, he portrays Ivan's
struggle as his attraction to Alesha and his revulsion toward Smerdiakov.
Thematically, he portrays Ivan's struggle as the conflict between the Christ
of Ivan's Grand Inquisitor and the devil of Ivan's nightmare. Smerdiakov and
the devil are on one side; Alesha and Ivan's Christ are on the other. Pairing
Smerdiakov with Ivan's devil shows Dostoevsky's readers that the question of
guilt raised by Smerdiakov troubles Ivan less than the question of shame
raised by his devil.

Smerdiakov and the devil both dwell in Ivan's soul. Like Ivan's devil,
Smerdiakov is a figure of embodied shame. Yet there are several critical dif-
f erences between them. Most obviously, Smerdiakov is a real person over
whom Ivan has no control, and the devil is the product of Ivan's creative
unconscious. Less obviously, Smerdiakov has none of the devil's, or Fedor
Karamazov's, redeeming features; in particular, he lacks their aesthetic sensi-
bility. While both Fedor Karamazov and Ivan's devil revel in metaliterary
hijinks, Smerdiakov cannot appreciate Golgol's work because he reads it liter-
ally. The most important difference, however, is that while Smerdiakov
reminds Ivan of his shame, he stresses Ivan's guilt, something Ivan's devil does
not even mention.

Ivan's devil is, as Ivan admits, “the embodiment of myself,” but only of
his shameful parts. Yet he acts as Ivan's conscience: he reflects Ivan back to
himself; he reveals his secrets and his pride. Ivan's pride, his “I,” is his stum-
bbling block. Ivan's unconscious conjures up his devil in answer to his meta-
physical questions, but he also attributes to his devil the most tormenting ques-
tion: Will he go and inform on himself at the trial in order to act ethically? Or
will he go in order to be praised for his self-sacrifice? The shame-ridden Ivan fears the latter. Not believing in God, he cannot believe in himself. Dostoevsky thus carefully fuses Ivan’s self-doubt with his metaphysical doubt. Dostoevsky answers Ivan’s question about the relationship of belief in God to ethical action by revealing Ivan’s internal struggle.

In case readers have any doubt about the devil’s actual existence, Dostoevsky provides evidence that he is, indeed, a figment of Ivan’s imagination, the product of his troubled soul. First, once Ivan decides to testify against himself in court the next day, he feels joyful and acts ethically, that is, he rescues the peasant he had earlier knocked unconscious. Once he returns home rather than going to the police station, however, “something icy suddenly touched his heart, like a memory, or, rather, a reminder, of something tormenting and repulsive that was precisely in that room, now, and had been before” (15:69;634). Like the room of Dostoevsky’s earlier self-tormenting intellectual, Raskolnikov, Ivan’s room functions both mimetically and thematically: it is an actual place, the scene of his self-lacerating torments, and it is a symbolic place, his refuge and prison, a place that represents his self-enclosure. Like Raskolnikov, Ivan is full of shame. And like Raskolnikov, Ivan uses reason as a defense against that shame. While their consciences prompt them to right action, their minds rebel. Their rooms are scenes of self-inflicted torments. In returning to his room, Ivan returns to isolation, the prison-house of self, the devil’s playground.

Dostoevsky further reinforces the idea that the devil is the product of Ivan’s troubled soul with a gap in the text. Before Ivan’s devil appears, the narrator notes that Ivan is on the verge of brain fever. When the devil informs Ivan that Alesha is tapping on his window, Ivan peevishly retorts that he already knew it. Then, when Alesha informs Ivan that Smerdiakov has killed himself, Ivan replies that he already knew that, his devil had told him. The devil did not, however. Ivan knew it the same way he knew that the tapping on his window was Alesha. In his fevered state, Ivan’s unconscious speaks to him. As he tells Alesha, “He [the devil], by the way, told me a lot of truth about myself. I would never have said those things. You know, Alesha, you know . . . —I very much wish that he was actually him, and not I” (15:87;653). Although he is ill, Ivan recognizes that his devil is part of him. Ivan may dream that he throws a glass of tea at the devil, but the glass is still sitting on his table when Alesha arrives.

Finally, Dostoevsky shows readers that Alesha knows that Ivan is tormenting himself: “The torments of a proud decision, a deep conscience!” The narrator reinforces this observation, “God, in whom he did not believe, and his truth were overcoming his heart, which still did not want to submit” (15:89;655). Alesha sees how Ivan’s illness manifests his internal battle. The
words he uses indicate his diagnosis: Ivan’s “decision” represents a conscious, mental act. That it is a “proud” decision indicates a state of mind, a mind self-consciously concerned with how others will perceive its decision. The other protagonist in Ivan’s conflict is a “deep conscience,” Ivan’s unconscious, ethical self. The narrator thus provides readers with a clue: Ivan’s pride suffers in advance for the shame he expects at the next day’s trial. Ivan, “the grave,” “the mystery,” the self-enclosed intellectual, fears exposure, particularly public exposure. Yet he knows that to do the right thing he must expose himself. Ivan’s mind resists submitting to God’s will, even though his heart tells him that he must.

Readers can thus see how Christ’s incarnation proves a true stumbling block for Ivan. He is proud. He fears public exposure. But he is a writer. Alesha and Dmitry have salvific dreams, whereas Ivan has hallucinations. Alesha dreams he is at the wedding feast of Cana of Galilee; Dmitry dreams that he is in a burnt-out village where the peasant women are homeless and a suckling infant cries from hunger. Ivan’s unconscious bodies forth his shame. His devil embodies the connection between father and son (see last chapter), but he also reminds Ivan of the ways to escape his shame: confession to an empathic listener who has the power to forgive (Ivan’s Christ; Alesha), creativity (Ivan’s earlier writings), and humility (the incarnate Christ).

These three merge in Ivan’s “Grand Inquisitor,” a work that demonstrates how Christ proves a stumbling block for Ivan. If one clings to self and desires control, as Ivan’s Inquisitor does, one cannot accept the kenotic Christ. Like his Inquisitor, Ivan is an intellectual seeker after truth. While Ivan’s Inquisitor wants a god of miracle, mystery, and authority, Ivan wants a Miltonic Satan. Yet the Grand Inquisitor gets a kenotic Christ, and Ivan gets a shabby devil. Unlike the isolated Inquisitor, however, Ivan has an empathic brother, a guardian angel who rescues him from the predatory doubts and self-doubts raised by both Smerdiakov and his devil.

Ivan’s writings and his hallucinations are forms of self-healing: they can help him escape shame’s isolation. They function as forms of distancing self from self, of looking at self from the outside, of joining others to view self not as an object of derision but as a fellow sufferer. Like Ivan’s Christ, Alesha offers healing through unconditional love and acceptance. Like Zosima’s humility, Alesha’s models right relations. Alesha’s influence stems directly from his altruism: he can interact with proud, shame-sensitive others like his father, his brother Ivan, his beloved Lise, his reluctant pupil Kolya, because his “I” does not interfere. He finds the appropriate tone or approach because he has developed a keen sense of discretion-shame.

Significantly, Alesha repudiates Ivan’s guilt as well as his shame. He denies Smerdiakov’s claim that Ivan is guilty. Likewise, his arrival signals the
devil’s departure: Alesha thus drives away the embodiment of Ivan’s shame. As Alesha watches and prays for his brother, he sees that Ivan has experienced a painful self-confrontation which leaves him with two choices: “Either he will rise into the light of truth, or . . . perish in hatred, taking revenge on himself and everyone for having served something he does not believe in” (15:89;655). Readers who have followed the careers of Dostoevsky’s shame-ridden liars and intellectuals, characters such as General Ivolgin, Stepan Verkhovensky, and Rodion Raskolnikov, have hope for Alesha’s brother.

In portraying shame, Dostoevsky hopes to change readers’ vision. One of the Russian words for shame is posazh or spectacle. Dostoevsky relies on our voyeurism but also on our conscience. He puts shame on display, thereby scandalizing readers, flooding us with affect and the desire to flee. Dostoevsky’s narrative strategy is thus risky. Readers who cannot bear the affective flooding flee, some never to return. Readers who remain, however, reap the rewards of full engagement. Dostoevsky plunges us into the ethical action of his texts. He arouses anxiety by breaking down the barriers between readers and characters, but he also offers relief from shame’s pain. And he offers us emotional and intellectual pleasure. Relief comes in forms of intimacy or distance. Love and empathy break down barriers between individuals; laughter, confession, and forgetting create cognitive distance between the painful emotions and the self. Both intimacy and distance thus alleviate, or even heal, shame’s pain. Dostoevsky helps us feel fully human by arousing the heartfelt joy of belonging to a community. But he also shares his intellectual interest in the world and the world of texts. He creates a mimetic world that displays its metaleterary construction, a world that makes us feel intensely, but one that makes us think equally intensely, a world of tears and laughter, despair and hope, a world that saddens yet beckons.

Dostoevsky creates scenes of shame that surprise yet rivet readers. He sharpens our self-consciousness—simultaneously grabbing us by the gut and galvanizing our intellect. By forcing us to directly experience our post-lapsarian state, Dostoevsky creates a sense of community for his readers. He thus exposes the private realm to foster public good. Exposed shame arouses visceral and cerebral responses that challenge us to know ourselves. It is not easy to love one’s neighbor, as Ivan Karamazov says. But he also shows us that it is not easy to love one’s self. Dostoevsky compellingly demonstrates that one must love self to love others. Whether we stay or flee, Dostoevsky’s scenes of exposed shame remain with us, stir our ethical imaginations, inspire us. Dostoevsky surprises us by shame but leaves us a message of love.