

DOSTOEVSKY'S LIARS AS HUMILIATED POETS¹

In my larger work on Dostoevsky's *vruny* (liars) and the narrative dynamics of shame, I have found Pushkin connections everywhere. Though Dostoevsky did not enshrine Pushkin as a Russian cultural icon until his famous 1880 speech, he consciously inscribed Pushkin's life and work into his own creative *oeuvre*. In this paper, I will focus on the image of Pushkin (in the sense of Pushkin as ur-poet who stands for the creative artist) as humiliated poet and argue that by having his *vruny* parody the life and works of Pushkin, Dostoevsky does what he, and his favorite poet, do best: combine covert sociopolitical thematics with overt metapoetic play.

First I will begin with the poetics of humiliation. Dostoevsky's *vruny* — whether pure hyperbolists, bullshit artists, or story stealers — are shame-filled figures, who compensate for their social humiliations with verbal display. They thus confirm the «Diary writer's» 1873 diagnosis that shame is one source of *vran'ë*: «Второе, на что наше всеобщее русское лганье намекает, это то, что мы все стыдимся самих себя. Действительно, всякий из нас носит в себе чуть ли не прирождённый стыд за себя и за свое собственное лицо, и, чуть в обществе, все русские люди тотчас же стараются поскорее и во что бы не стало каждый показаться непременно чем-то другим, но только не тем, чем он есть в самом деле, каждый спешит принять совсем другое лицо» (21; 119).

The rhetorical displays of *vruny* represent the reverse side of their shame. Dostoevsky's most conspicuous *vruny* — General Ivolgin and Lukian Lebedev in «Idiot», Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky and Ignat Lebiadkin in «Besy», and Fedor Pavlovich Karamazov — are all fallen men or social climbers. General Ivolgin is a fallen general; Lebedev is a low-ranking civil clerk; Lebiadkin is a retired military clerk; Stepan Verkhovensky is a dependent nobleman; and Fedor Karamazov is a member of the lower gentry. By making them would-be poets, prophets, public speakers and story tellers, Dostoevsky parodically evokes Pushkin's life and works.

The results are often extremely funny and profound. Pushkin handles the dilemma of his African heritage by turning a source of shame, his blackness,

¹ В докладе Деборы А. Мартинсен «Вруны Достоевского как униженные поэты», прочитанном 31 июля 1998 г. в Нью-Йорке на X Симпозиуме Международного общества Достоевского, вычленяются и анализируются реализованные в произведениях Достоевского пушкинские мотивы и образы, связанные как с некоторыми персонажами Пушкина, так и с самим поэтом. Внимание акцентируется и на прямых сопоставлениях, и на выявлении общих для Пушкина и Достоевского художественных и исторических архетипов. Проблема рассматривается в русле размышлений об униженности поэта в России и русском культурном и религиозном сознании.

into a source of pride. He not only claims his great-grandfather Gannibal, a general under Peter the Great, but writes seriously about him². While Fedor Karamazov will later claim his humiliations as triumphs, General Ivolgin handles his shame in a more Khlestakovian, thus Gogolian, manner. He both claims his Russianness by representing himself as a quintessential Russian patriot and repudiates it, by identifying himself with a high-profile European other. He rewrites history, representing himself as the page boy, confidant, and would-be son to Napoleon, the century's most celebrated general. He thus refashions himself from an insignificant child into a central actor in the century's greatest drama.

Though my claim for Ivolgin's Pushkin connection is rather generic, I believe that Lebedev's connection is more particular. Dostoevsky makes the association himself by having Lebedev own the complete works of Pushkin (the same collection he himself owned, in fact). And Lebedev twice, very comically, claims prophet status for himself. In the first instance, Lebedev represents himself as a prophet who had predicted his boss's death while he was interpreting Revelation, perhaps a parody of Pushkin's claim to have predicted tsar Alexander I's death with his poem «Andre Chenier». In this case, Lebedev also stresses the poet's triumph over humiliation: «Верую и толкую. Ибо нищ и наг, и атом в коловращении людей. И кто почитит Лебедева? Всяк изощряется над ним и всяк вmale не пинком сопровождает его. Тут же, в толковании сем, я равен вельможе. Ибо ум!» (8; 168).

In the second instance, Lebedev displays his prophetic pretensions publicly in his hilarious cannibal speech, where he defends his own authoritative word, as for example, when he declares: «Покажите же вы мне что-нибудь подобное такой силе в наш век пороков и железных дорог... то есть надо бы сказать: в наш век паровозов и железных дорог, но я говорю: в наш век пороков и железных дорог, потому что я пьян, но справедлив!» (8; 315).

Dostoevsky takes the parody even further with Lebiadkin, who self-consciously fashions himself a poet. For instance, Lebiadkin proclaims: «Николай Всеволодович, я раб, я червь, но не Бог, тем только и отличаюсь от Державина» (10; 213).

While Lebiadkin speaks naively here, Dostoevsky uses this parodic declaration to flag his novel's metapoetic dimension. In the parodied ode, Derzhavin invokes his own «wondrous» powers as a human being to identify himself as God's creation. Lebiadkin's source thus echoes the novel's metaphysical thematics — the question of God's existence and man's relationship to God as a source of morality. Furthermore, the entire line encapsulates the sociopolitical thematics of Dostoevsky's novel. For instance, because Lebiadkin hopes to gain Stavrogin's political patronage, he emphasizes his lowly status. Lebiadkin's self-identification as «slave» links him with

² Pushkin studied and wrote about eighteenth century Russian history. Stepan Verkhovensky studied and wrote about fifteenth century European history.

nine-tenths of the population that Shigalev's theory identifies as «slaves», and his self-identification as «worm» (*cherv'*) anticipates Peter Verkhovensky's declaration to Stavrogin: «я ваш червяк» — 10; 324). Yet Lebiadkin also modifies Derzhavin's line — consciously, by claiming that he's «not a god», a disavowal that recalls Kirillov, who declares himself the «God-man». Finally, Lebiadkin unconsciously modifies Derzhavin's famous line, by omitting its first segment — «я царь» — an omission that proleptically avoids competition with Stavrogin, whom Peter Verkhovensky later proclaims the political pretender «Ivan-Tsarevich» (10; 325).

Lebiadkin's declaration equally emphasizes the novel's metapoetics. Derzhavin's ode is a classic in the Russian literary tradition. Lebiadkin's conscious identification with the Russian poetic tradition thus reveals Dostoevsky's authorial hand. First, Derzhavin's ornamental style and his willingness to mix high and low language and imagery make him a worthy literary model for Lebiadkin. Second, Derzhavin's low social origins, his elevation through military service, and his poems in praise of Catherine the Great highlight the uneasy relationship between poet and political patronage, one of Lebiadkin's, and Pushkin's, sore spots. Third, Pushkin, as Dostoevsky would know, cites the whole famous line that Lebiadkin bowdlerizes as the epigraph to Part Two of his «Egyptian Night» — Dostoevsky thus makes his *vrun* an imitator of Pushkin. Finally, Lebiadkin's next line — «Но ведь средство-то, средство-то мои каковы!» (10; 213) — comically emphasizes the economic humiliation experienced by Russia's poets.

Lebiadkin earlier gives comic voice to the humiliations suffered by Russian poets. In Varvara Stavrogina's drawing room, he blames the gap between his actual and ideal identities on his country of birth: «Сударыня <...> я, может быть, желал бы называться Эрнестом, а между тем принужден носить грубое имя Игната, — почему это, как вы думаете? Я желал бы называться князем де Монбаром, а между тем я только Лебядкин, от лебедя, — почему это? Я поэт, сударыня, поэт в душе, и мог бы получать тысячу рублей от издателя, а между тем принужден жить в лохани, почему, почему? Сударыня! По-моему, Россия есть игра природы, не более!» (10; 141).

The components of Lebiadkin's stated self-image in this speech — that he is a poet, who desires monetary recompense for his talent, and has the misfortune of being born in Russia — evoke Pushkin. Though Lebiadkin is a poetaster, who fabricates according to sound rather than sense³, 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 a man of talent in Russia. In a May 1836 letter to his wife, for example, Pushkin wrote: «черт догадал меня родиться в России с душою и с талантом! Весело, нечего ска-

³ See Lebiadkin's poem for Liza Tushina, where he confesses, «I was never at Sevastopol, nor am I armless — but what rhymes!» (*mukoi/bezrukii*) (10; 95, 117).

затъ!»⁴ Lebiadkin's laments about talented men's lack of outlets and recognition in Russia echo actual concerns in Russian life which are mimetically reproduced in «Besy» in Stepan Verkhovensky's semi-comic struggles with censorship and internal exile.

Most importantly, the comic fabulations of all Dostoevsky's *vruny*, like all of Pushkin's work, contain hidden socio-political messages. In «The Brothers Karamazov» Dostoevsky hints openly at this by having Miusov and the elder Karamazov sons call Fedor Pavlovich «Aesop». The name of Aesop, a man associated with slavery and liberty, physicality and sacrilege, humiliation revenged by wit, aptly suits Fedor Karamazov and links him in turn with Alexander Pushkin, who, like Aesop, was black, ugly, witty, and sensual; wrote subversively and provocatively; and experienced a whole range of socio-political humiliations.

Before discussing the Aesopic content of Fedor Pavlovich's stories, I want to spell out the path of my argument. First, the Aesopic depth of Fedor Pavlovich's stories is Fedor Mikhailovich's. The epithet „Aesop“ signals Dostoevsky's metapoetics: he warns his readers to pay attention to the content hidden behind the old buffoon's words — something we can do for all of his liars' stories. Following Robin Miller's lead I show elsewhere that Dostoevsky provides his readers with clues for reading his liars' stories by modelling listener response. Readers are given a choice: we can identify with the characters who respond to his liars' stories superficially, or to those who respond deeply. Dostoevsky wisely hedges his authorial bets by making the perspicacious characters the most sympathetic.

Second, the metapoetic Aesopic association between Fedor Karamazov and Pushkin leads to Dostoevsky's Christian thematics through images of humiliation and resurrection. Fedor Karamazov, that most unlikely Christian, exclaims to the monks in Zosima's cell: «У нас ведь как? У нас что падает, то уж и лежит. У нас что раз упало, то уж и вовеки лежи. Как бы не так-с! Я встать желаю» (14; 82).

Fedor Pavlovich's comic concern about resurrection links him to Aesop, and to Pushkin, humiliated poets, who rise above their personal humiliations (their blackness and ugliness) and their sociopolitical humiliations (their servitude to master and tsar) by dint of the word.

Like Fedor Pavlovich, Aesop and Pushkin are further immortalized for their violent deaths. Their sociopolitical humiliations and violent deaths in turn associate Aesop, Pushkin and Fedor Pavlovich with the kenotic tradition in Russian Orthodoxy⁵.

⁴ Пушкин А. С. Полн. собр. соч.: В 10 томах. Л.: Наука, 1970. Т. 10. С. 454.

⁵ Fedor Karamazov's patronymic 'Pavel' links him to this tradition. Though himself violent and abusive in his lifetime, Paul I became the subject of veneration after he was violently murdered by his courtiers in 1801, as the violence of his death associated him in popular memory with Russia's kenotic saints. George P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind (1): Kievan Christianity The 10th to the 13th Centuries. // The Collected Works of George P. Fedotov* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1975). Vol. 3. P. 110.

In fact, Russian Orthodoxy's particular emphasis on Christ's kenoticism may be responsible for the thematic power of shame in the Russian literary tradition. Russians homage a humiliated god. Their first saints are the kenotic princes, Boris and Gleb. Their greatest poet is Alexander Pushkin, a humiliated poet. Though I may seem to make a leap here, Dostoevsky's famous Pushkin speech testifies to the fact that Dostoevsky regarded Pushkinian poetics as quintessentially Christian. One need only cite Dostoevsky's reading of «*Tsygany*» to see how these two converge for him: «Нет, эта гениальная поэма не подражание! Тут уже подсказывается русское решение вопроса, „проклятого вопроса“, по народной вере и правде: „Смирись, гордый человек, и прежде всего сломи свою гордость. Смирись, праздный человек, и прежде всего потрудись на родной ниве“, вот это решение по народной правде и народному разуму. „Не вне тебя правда, а в тебе самом, найди себя в себе, подчини себя себе овладей собой — и узришь правду. Не в вещах эта правда, не вне тебя и не за морем где-нибудь, а прежде всего в твоём собственном труде над собою. Победишь себя, усмиришь себя — и станешь свободен как никогда и не воображал себе, и начнешь великое дело, и других свободными сделаешь, и узришь счастье, ибо наполнится жизнь твоя, и поймешь наконец народ свой и святую правду его <...>“» (26; 139).

By repeating the message «*Smiris', gordyi chelovek*», Dostoevsky stresses the importance of humility for self-mastery, self-knowledge, and union with others, here the Russian people, who, for Dostoevsky are the bearers of Christ's truth. Dostoevsky thus links Pushkin's message with Christ's message. Dostoevsky's claim for Pushkin's universality consequently lies in his view that Pushkin's ethics are Christian, which is to say, universal.

Seasoned readers of Dostoevsky, we've heard this message before. When Fedor Karamazov asks Zosima what he must do to gain eternal life, Zosima sagely responds: «Сами давно знаете, что надо делать, ума в вас довольно: не предавайтесь пьянству и словесному невоздержанию, не предавайтесь сладострастию, а особенно обожанию денег, да закройте ваши питейные дома, если не можете всех, то хоть два или три. А главное, самое главное — не лгите <...> самому себе не лгите. Лгущий самому себе и собственную ложь свою слушающий до того доходит, что уж никакой правды ни в себе, ни кругом не различает, а стало быть, входит в неуважение и к себе и к другим. Не уважая же никого, перестает любить, а чтобы, не имея любви, занять себя и развлечь, предается страстям и грубым сладостям и доходит совсем до скотства в пороках своих, а всё от беспрерывной лжи и людям и себе самому» (14; 41).

As Olga Meerson has shown, Dostoevsky's Christianity cannot be reduced to sermonizing⁶. In making his liars humiliated poets, Dostoevsky

⁶ См.: Меерсон О. Библейские интертексты у Достоевского. Кошунство или богословие любви? // Достоевский и мировая культура. М., 1999. № 12. С. 40–53. — Доклад О. Меерсон (Джорджтаунский ун-т, США) был прочитан 31 июля 1998 г. на той же секции, что и доклад Д. Мартинсен.

parodically inscribes his Christian beliefs into his novels' metapoetics. A brief look at Fedor Karamazov's anecdotes about two French Denis's — Diderot, the political martyr exiled by the secular state, and St. Denis, the Church father executed by temporal authorities — will show how Dostoevsky comically invokes stories of humiliation and resurrection for thematic ends.

Fedor Karamazov tells both stories as challenges to Zosima and the monks. He introduces the first, which he attributes to Miusov's aunt, after confessing to doubts about God's existence: «Я, ваше преподобие, как философ Дидерот. Известно ли вам, святейший отец, как Дидерот-философ явился к митрополиту Платону при императрице Екатерине. Входит и прямо сразу: „Нет Бога“. На что великий святитель подымает перст и отвечает: „Рече безумец в сердце своем несть Бог!“ Тот как был, так и в ноги: „Верую, кричит, и крещение принимаю“. Так его и окрестили тут же. Княгиня Дашкова была восприемницей, а Потемкин крестным отцом...» (14; 39).

Fedor Pavlovich's self-identification with the blasphemous atheist informs his audience that he is self-conscious about his story's blasphemous content. His choice of Dashkova and Potemkin as godparents, his addition to the story, was probably motivated by a desire for historical verisimilitude, as they were two of the most well-known figures of the time after Catherine herself. Fedor Dostoevsky's choice of Dashkova and Potemkin, however, are Aesopic. Both Dashkova and Potemkin were involved in the conspiracy which placed Catherine on the throne. Diderot would thus be blessed by those who had revolted against the God-ordained emperor (Peter III), replacing him with a secularly-oriented Empress (Catherine II) — an appropriate association in a novel about parricide/regicide/deicide and about the conflict between atheism and faith. Princess Dashkova was also Catherine the Great's literary rival, appropriate for a novel full of rivalries. Potemkin was not only the creator of «Potemkin villages», those signs of the cover-up for the reality behind Catherine's ideal for the Russian empire, he was also Catherine's most well-known lover, thus linking lying and sensuality, making him a worthy parallel for Fedor Pavlovich himself. Diderot's baptism unites an unholy trio in a holy rite — a union that reflects the contradiction between Fedor's intuitive desire for faith and his profane life.

The Diderot story also points to Dostoevsky's metapoetics. Dostoevsky has Fedor tell a story (about Diderot) that refers to another story (about the fool who says in his heart that there is no God), both of which have subjects who question God's existence. This triple *mise-en-abyme* in which Fedor Karamazov identifies with Diderot whom Platon identifies with the unbelieving fool (*bezumets*) of the Psalms situates Fedor's crisis of identity in a literary, historical, and metaphysical continuum that moves backwards from the nineteenth century to the eighteenth century to the time of the prophets — a time of direct struggle with God the Father.

Fedor's next story, which he attributes to Miusov, also focuses on the

thematics of belief: «Вот что спрошу: справедливо ли, отец великий, то, что в *Четьи–Минеи* повествуется где–то о каком–то святом чудотворце, которого мучили за веру, и когда отрубили ему под конец голову, то он встал, поднял свою голову и „любезно ее лобызаше“, и долго шел, неся ее в руках, и „любезно ее лобызаше“. Справедливо это или нет, отцы честные?» (14; 42).

While there is a Russian saint named Merkurii of Smolensk who allegedly picked up his decapitated head and carried it, the kissing detail identifies the saint of this story as St. Denis, and the story's source not as the Russian Lives of the Saints, but probably Voltaire's mock epic «The Maid of Orleans». Note that in the story St. Denis's response to the literal alienation of his head from his body involves a figurative act of union. First he picks up his head — thus holding together that which has been sundered. Next he kisses it, an act that implies self–blessing as well as victory over his executioners, a refusal to accept the alienation of head from body that the state has imposed on him. Finally, the figure of the martyred saint recalls Christ who also rose from the dead and was seen walking on a road outside a major city.

Both Fedor's stories are about the power of story–telling. They thus link Dostoevsky's metapoetics to his Christian beliefs. In both stories, a Denis is humiliated, then rises and experiences communion, with others or self. For Dostoevsky atheism is alienation from God, and thus from human community. The solution to alienation is communion. Shame at oneself is also a form of alienation — alienation from self. The solution to shame, as Zosima tells Fedor Karamazov, is self–acceptance. One can only love others if one can love oneself. Dostoevsky's Pushkin — «Smiris', gordyi chelovek» — is bearer of the same message.

Dostoevsky fabricates his own Pushkin, a Pushkin who articulates Dostoevsky's most cherished thematics. He thus engages in the same kind of projection as his *vruny* — or perhaps they engage in the same kind of projections as their creator, a rhetorical strategem that is a hallmark of Dostoevsky's poetics. Here as elsewhere, Dostoevsky lays bare his narrative strategies by duplication or parody or both⁷. For instance, in the «Diary» writer makes his point about *vran'e*, by engaging in it — thus identifying with his hyperbolizing *vruny*. In his Pushkin speech, Dostoevsky fabricates a Pushkin, just as Ivolgin fabricates a Napoleon and Lebedev fabricates a cannibal client, who somehow or other reflect the thematic interests or psychological make–ups of their creators.

⁷ Elsewhere I show how Dostoevsky continues in «Besy» a pattern he developed in «Idiot». As the disembodied narrator in «Idiot» exposes Ivolgin exposing others in order to establish his own reliability, Dostoevsky exposes his narrator's subjectivity. In Besy, Lebiadkin attempts to expose others, especially Peter Verkhovensky and Stavrogin, in order to undermine their credibility and establish his own. Likewise, the narrator–chronicler exposes Lebiadkin as a pretender in order to undermine his credibility and establish his own. Finally, Dostoevsky exposes his narrator's blatant subjectivity, thus undermining his credibility and establishing his own.

In addition to being metapoetically connected to Pushkin, Dostoevsky's *vruny* are connected through the poetics of humiliation. They identify not only with Russia's humiliated poet, but with other humiliated figures as well. Ivolgin identifies with three figures who first triumph and then are humiliated — Napoleon, the Frenchman with the lapdog, and Prince Myshkin Sr. He also identifies with the humiliated and «restored» (not «resurrected») Corporal Kolpakov. Lebedev identifies with the decapitated Mme du Barry and with St. John the Baptist, figures whose secular and prophetic triumphs end in others' seeking their deaths, humiliating deaths which bring them lasting fame. Lebiadkin identifies with Sir John Falstaff, the jolly jester who dies a poor man's death. Stepan Verkhovensky identifies with Pushkin's «*Bednyi rytsar'*». And Fedor Karamazov is not only identified as «Aesop», he also identifies with the humiliated Denis's.

Dostoevsky's Pushkin and his *vruny* share another quality — they are all uniquely Russian, yet universal. Both their Russianness and their universality lie in their humiliation. Pushkin's strength lay in his ability to take a source of humiliation, such as his blackness, and make it a source of strength through the power of the word. By making him a secular exemplar, Dostoevsky thus extends to Russians a message of hope — humiliation leads to strength, the fallen shall rise. But while Dostoevsky's values are Christian, he often conveys his Christian thematics in outrageous and provocative manners. I will make this point, by concluding with the words of Dostoevsky's namesake, Fedor Pavlovich Karamazov: «У нас ведь как? У нас что падает, то уж и лежит. У нас что раз упало, то уж и вовеки лежи. Как бы не так—с! Я встать желаю» (14; 82).