The Enigmatic G—v: A Defense of the Narrator-Chronicler in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*

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One of the controversial aspects of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Demons* is the problem of its narrative irregularity. At the novel’s outset, a first-person intradiegetic narrator sets out to relate a brief history of his friend Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, which is meant to serve as an introduction to the main “chronicle.” This first-person narrator has a unique voice—profusely talkative, gossipy, ironic, and repeatedly justifying the information he reports. But beginning with the second part of the novel, and in many chapters describing the actions and behavior of and around Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin, the narrative voice abruptly changes, and all references to a first-person narrator disappear. In a form usually called “omniscient,” the narrator reports scenes that he did not himself observe, including what characters said and even thought, without the kinds of justifications he formerly offered for the fictional sources of his information. In response to these narrative irregularities, three critical tendencies have emerged which I believe are worth articulating, briefly summarizing the history of the book’s reception. Yet I will argue that, while they each attempt to resolve the novel’s narrative inconsistencies in their own way—accordingly extrapolating differing implications—on the whole these tendencies have either missed or misidentified the intrinsic moral dimension of the enigmatic narrative stance.

The least provocative critical consensus simply assumes the novel to have two separate narrators—one omniscient and another intradiegetic—each of which is consistent in and of himself. Joseph Frank, who admits “a certain technical inconsistency” in the novel, argues for “two narrators” which enable Dostoevsky to “narrow and widen his focus” between “the intensity of his dramatic scenes and the sweeping and summarizing commentary.” He continues that while “an objective third-person narrator might have given [Dostoevsky] the same freedom, he could have been forced to sacrifice ... the narrator’s personal ‘voice.’”¹ Often in such critical approaches, structural narrative questions are underemphasized.

¹Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years (1865–1871)* (Princeton, 1995), 473–74. This suggestion proves inconsistent: first because G—v emerges from the novel as a character no less observable than, say, Liputin, Lyamshin, or a myriad of other tertiary characters (von Lembke, Ms. Ulitin, the butler, and so on);
in favor of discussions which include the novel’s historical, philosophical, or ideological dimensions. Such discussions include, for example, the “liberalism of the 1840s which Dostoevsky embodies in Stepan Verkhovensky” and the “true historical crash ... between the generations, between Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky the liberal father and Pyotr Stepanovich the nihilist son.” Since the intradiegentic narrator is positioned at Verkhovensky’s side for much of the novel, he is usually assumed to share the same views held by Verkhovensky’s liberal circle. But by defusing the problematized narrator—associating him strictly with his failed mentor-of-sorts and not taking adequate stock of his own experience in the overall tragedy—one can miss the way in which exorcizing the Russian liberalism of the 1840s is not only thematized in the novel but actualized in the narrator, who by the end of the novel becomes “a man whose ‘eyes have been unsealed’ and who has denied his past errors, or his adherence to Western liberalism.”

A more severe critical tendency considers the novel to be technically flawed. David Magarshack, whose translation of The Devils offered a much-needed alternative to Constance Garnett’s The Possessed, wrote in his introduction that the developments in the trial of Sergei Nechaev on which the novel was partly based “forced Dostoevsky to introduce a great number of changes in his novel,” and that his “slipshod method of writing ... made it into one of the most structurally untidy of Dostoevsky’s great novels.” Demons, Magarshack concludes, is a novel with “structural and artistic blemishes.” An earlier critic put it more harshly: “The glaring defects of The Devils are a serious bar to the enjoyment of it.” Leonid Grossman, writing from a somewhat tellingly Soviet position, brings the criticism to its logical end: “The novel misfires,” he writes, mentioning “the gulf between the aim and its realization” and concluding that “the very approach” condemned the novelist to defeat “in advance.” From Dostoevsky’s later letters and notes we learn, however, that it was less the real-life Nechaev trial than the character of Stavrogin that complicated and

and, second, because of several scenes—the big day at Mrs. Stavrogin’s, when Maria Lebyadkin is publicly revealed and Shatov slaps Stavrogin, being most important among them—where the fusion of “dramatic scenes” and “summarizing commentary” shows that G—v is quite able to integrate the two types of narration simultaneously within a single chapter.

2Bruce K. Ward, Dostoevsky’s Critique of the West: The Quest for the Earthly Paradise (Waterloo, ON, 1986), 42; Ray Davison, “The Devils: The Role of Stavrogin,” in New Essays on Dostoevsky, ed. Malcolm V. Jones and Garth M. Terry (Cambridge, England, 1983), 100. Other general tendencies include studies of Nikolai Stavrogin, who “cannot be part of this public, political conflict because ... he is so closely identified with his ‘intellectual father’ Stepan Trofimovich, even though he is the same age as his ‘intellectual brother’ Pyotr, and who by the end of the novel “has retreated deeper and deeper into the personal, where he remains central only to himself until, in terminal disillusionment, he is bereft of even that centrality” (Davison, “The Devils,” 100, 113); or on the symbolic meaning of the main secondary characters, with Shatov as “the image of the idealized teacher Stavrogin,” Kirillov as “a man of one idea [who] contracts beneath the stone that has crushed him,” Pyotr Vekhovensky as the one who “translated the notion of self-will into the language of political action” and “the atheistic premise ... [into] a theory of political amorality,” as well as “the theoretician of destruction” Shigalyov (Konstantin Mochulsky, Dostoevsky: His Life and Work, trans. Michael A. Minihan [Princeton, 1967], 444, 447, 451, and 453).


forced changes in *Demons*. In a kind of a rebellion of a character against the plans of the author, Stavrogin overtook the Nechaev-based Pyotr Verkhovensky as a central character. And while Dostoevsky’s notebooks document a process of integration and unification of these various novelistic developments—including the emergence of a narrative stance which is consciously problematized by intentional traces of previous starts and changes of mind—this critical stance argues that Dostoevsky’s formal decisions marred the novel’s narrative cohesion.

The third and most recent critical position allows for the possibility of a single narrator and incorporates conclusions which grant analytic attention to the novel’s “technical inconsistencies.” In these cases, the problem with the novel’s structure is identified as that of the narrative agency that in fact binds together this “vast” and even “convoluted” masterpiece—that strange source of most of the misgivings about *Demons*, the narrator-chronicler, Anton Lavrentievich G—v.” According to John Jones, “a double stance develops” in *Demons* so that Dostoevsky emerges both “as author and as ‘a character’ in the provincial chronicle”—the narrator, then, is simply a fictionalized Dostoevsky. Slobodanka Vladiv, in a highly valuable close analysis of the novel’s narrative structure, develops the notion of an “ambivalent meaning” which “consists of implications, insinuations, allusions and cross-cancellations of stated values rather than of categorical assertions.” And Adam Weiner, finding an essential evil in the narrator’s singular duality, turns G—v into a kind of fictional author who invents a fictional fiction. “In reconciling the disparate voices in G—v,” he writes, we “need to favor the villainous voice over the innocent.” Expounding on G—v’s character, Weiner claims that “he, after all, emerges as one of the devils of [the] novel’s title.” From the outset of his argument Weiner proclaims: “I believe that the narrator of *The Devils*, Anton Lavrentievich G—v ... is infected by Peter Verkhovenskii’s devils.” He builds his argument on demonstrable narrative similarities between G—v and Pyotr in order to prove that “the heroes’ and narrator’s sins reflect upon the narrative’s highest point of view: that of the implied author.” By implying that the narrator is a fabricator who may even be one of the novel’s devils, Weiner seems to attempt to implicate Dostoevsky himself in the crimes of *Demons*.

Such a position makes use of an analytical method which looks beyond proverbial “narrative unreliability” to investigate the potential significance of structured (built-in)
textual irregularities—an approach which in my opinion is both rare and fruitful. But I believe that the unequivocal claim against G—v as one of Pyotr’s devils deprives the novel of its subtle but undeniable redemptive undercurrents. While following an analytical approach similar to the third tendency, I will alternatively attempt in this article to defend G—v by looking closely at how he functions both as a character and a narrator, isolating his actions and words in order to see what kind of G—v emerges against the background of his own diegetic world—and how his narrative idiosyncrasy may be related to his character’s moral position. My critical position will further suggest that G—v is a kind of fictional forebear to the modern figure of the “witness” of historical trauma, for whom the act of creating a “narrative is testimony to an apprenticeship of history and to an apprenticeship of witnessing.”

FICTIVE ELABORATION VS. CREATIVE RECONSTRUCTION

Jones suggests that the narrating “I” in Demons is the “character’ Dostoevsky has turned himself into for the purpose of narrating the provincial chronicle.” Mochulsky, too, attributes G—v’s elusiveness to Dostoevsky, who, he believes, “reverted to the device of enigma” in order to “interest” the reader. Jones’s position more or less corresponds with Weiner’s, who calls G—v “a novelist, not a chronicler”—though for Weiner this means not that Dostoevsky projects himself into the novel, but that the fictional G—v usurps the prerogatives of authorial invention. This way Weiner claims the fiction to be not Dostoevsky’s but G—v’s, implying that there is no fictional “truth” in the narrative’s diegetic realm.

Jones, again, writes of “the hint of ... a conspiracy to uphold the truth of the fiction” and quotes a passage from Dostoevsky’s notebooks: “Altogether, when I describe conversations, even tête-à-tête conversations between two people—don’t worry: either I have hard facts, or perhaps I am inventing (sochiniaiu) them myself—but in any case rest assured that everything is true (verno).” The verb sochiniat’, which Jones translated as “invent,” is translated by Weiner as “compose”: “G—v makes a fascinating comment about his mixing of truth and lie to ‘compose’ ... [what] no one could have witnessed.” But here Weiner misrepresents the chronicler: what the full text finally conveys—especially by using

12Jones, Dostoevsky, 270. Referring to Dostoevsky’s notes, Jones argues that by declaring “I am a character” (kharakter, not literary personazh), Dostoevsky “put himself inside the frame” of the chronicle (ibid., 268). But G—v’s kharakter as a diegetic person is not that of Dostoevsky’s as a historical person. As Robert Jackson points out, “The characters who most resemble Dostoevsky ... are the hero of Notes from Underground, Svidrigailov in Crime and Punishment, and Stavrogin in The Devils” (see Robert Louis Jackson, The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes [Princeton, 1981], 64). Even if Dostoevsky lent G—v some of his own narrative techniques in order to give G—v the necessary storytelling faculties, it does not make their characters (kharaktery) similar.
13Mochulsky, Dostoevsky, 422.
14Weiner, By Authors Possessed, 119.
15Jones, Dostoevsky, 269.
16Weiner, By Authors Possessed, 120.
the word *verno* (truth as faithful or loyal) rather than *pravda* (truth as absolute facticity)—is that regardless of whether G—v has hard facts or is “composing” a scene, he appeals to the reader’s faith by avowing, without providing proof, “that everything is true.”

This *sochiniaiu* is key to understanding the difference between the “composing” attributed to G—v and Dostoevsky’s novelistic “elaboration.” Rather than asking whether G—v is “inventing”—the textual irregularities make no other choice possible—the question should rather be: to what end? There is a difference between purposefully deceptive fabrication and an attempt, even if potentially misguided, to reconstruct scenes that one knows happened but at which one was not present to witness. Vladiv clarifies this distinction: “The *sochiniaiu* can be interpreted only” as “reconstruction” and “not in the sense of ‘inventing’ arbitrarily.” Indeed, in his note, Dostoevsky seems to be developing his approach to the novel’s narration, and it appears that in these entries, some of which are studies for the novel, the “I” is already the imagined G—v and not Dostoevsky speaking in his own voice. If we accept the note as written in G—v’s fictional voice, the next question is how the reader relates to the fictional G—v’s claim that his sometimes-reconstruction, or stopgap invention, is still “true.”

This reassurance—or challenge—is explicit in Dostoevsky’s notes but implicit in the novel. It is what problematizes G—v’s reporting events he had not witnessed in such detail, especially in view of his sudden disappearances and flamboyant reappearances in the text both as character and narrator. That he “composes” or “reconstructs” some elements of the story does not make him an outright inventor, and in the text he affirms himself as a resident of this provincial town, as well as a friend, confidant, and acquaintance of many of the characters in the novel. In G—v’s diegetic world, this story happens to “real” people, not to imagined characters, and he describes them according to some aspect of their (for him) actual existence. There is no evidence that he “creates” these characters himself. He is, at worst, an imperfect chronicler. He remains a character and narrator, at times slippery and flawed, and one narrative phenomenon we may want to explore—before we can venture to ask what setting upon such an impossible task might signify—is how he positions himself within the context of such a task.

### CHRONICLER VS. AUTHOR

Throughout *Demons*, G—v goes to great lengths to justify, describe, or assert his position as chronicler. That he may not always satisfy verisimilitude requirements does not mean that he is not aware of them: “As a chronicler I limit myself simply to presenting events in an exact way, exactly as they occurred, and it is not my fault if they appear incredible.”

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17 Laurence M. Porter defines artistic elaboration as “that process of deliberate obfuscation which seeks to induce us to forget that the fictional work remains always and everywhere subject to the dominion of its author.” See his “From Chronicle to Novel: Artistic Elaboration in Camus’s *La Peste*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 28:4 (1982): 591. In G—v’s case, this would be the narrative liberties he takes in order to present his chronicle in an ordered—even if irregular—manner.

18 Vladiv, *Narrative Principles*, 44.

19 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (1994; reprint ed. New York, 1995), 67. All in-text parenthetical references are to this edition. When I quote other authors I retain their usage regarding the translation of *Besy* (that is, *Demons, The Possessed*, or *The Devils*).
He knows that we accept from him certain information to which he technically lacks access, because he also knows that as interested readers we covet that information.

G—v begins his chronicle by recounting details about Stepan Verkhovensky that we understand he has acquired through their friendship, but also oscillating between Verkhovensky’s own identity—who he believes he is—and his personhood—the personality traits which are perceived from the outside or attributed to him. As early as on the second page, after sharing with us Verkhovensky’s penchant for considering himself “persecuted” (by the police? by the authorities?) or in “exile,” the narrator divulges to us information he claims to have learned “just the other day ... with perfect certainty”: that in fact Verkhovensky had never been either exiled or under surveillance. G—v interprets Verkhovensky’s belief that he is politically under a cloud as an example of his “imagination”; “He himself sincerely believed all his life that he was a cause of constant apprehension in certain spheres” (p. 8).

And in order to give us a more nuanced portrait of Verkhovensky as a delusional man, G—v enlists information that was not available to him at the time when he knew Verkhovensky. While he does not divulge to us the source of his data, he admits that some unnamed source exists.

In further explaining Verkhovensky’s antecedents, G—v also illustrates the kind of hazy premise from which both he and his chronicle are going to proceed: Verkhovensky “stopped his lectures on the Arabians because someone (evidently from among his retrograde enemies) somehow intercepted a letter to someone giving an account of some ‘circumstances,’ as a result of which someone demanded some explanations from him” (p. 9). Thus begins a trend that will haunt us throughout the novel: an overabundance of information that lacks specificity or verification landmarks but without which some aspect of the story would be incomplete. A more difficult position for the reader is to accept such lack of specificity later in the novel when it is not couched in the narrator’s rhetorical chattiness but in its conspicuous absence.

Throughout the novel, G—v refers to his position as chronicler and to the various avenues through which he has access to information: “The whole town ... [had] already been informed, of course, of the whole of Mr. Stavrogin’s biography, and even in such detail that it was impossible imagine where it could have come from, and, what is most surprising, half of which turned out to be true” (p. 43). Some of G—v’s information obviously comes from Verkhovensky: “Varvara Petrovna had long known that he [Stepan Verkhovensky] concealed nothing from me”; “I also happened to read Petrusha’s letters to his father”; “I myself read this note; he showed it to me” (pp. 63, 77, 81). But there are references to other, not always identified, sources as well: “everything became clear afterwards”; “it was even affirmed later, when everything was recalled”; “Liza told me later”; “I have been studying Nikolai Vsevolodovich all this recent time, and, owing to special circumstances, I know a great many facts about him as I now write”; “I know almost positively” and it “is known to me from rumors of a most intimate sort” (pp. 109, 152, 158, 204, 438). The impression is that if there is information to be had, G—v can get it.

We see that G—v undeniably mixes up a variety of sources of information in order to weave together, sentence by sentence, the most detailed narrative—including dramatizing scenes at which he has not been present. Weiner argues that “G—v intentionally deceives and beguiles readers, using the scenes between himself and Stepan Trofimovich to enhance
his credibility as a chronicler of events he has witnessed with the goal of taking us into his confidence so that we accept him as a reliable chronicler of scenes he has not witnessed.”

The second half of this observation describes perfectly the relationship of faith between the two narrative modes—but it is unclear why Weiner assumes that G—v’s intention is to deceive and beguile the readers. The possibility that this narrative may or may not be completely accurate can be considered to lend G—v further plausibility, making him a more realistic chronicler for admitting his imperfections. Weiner’s interpretive decision not to accept G—v as “a reliable chronicler of scenes he has not witnessed” leads him to castigate the narrator as a fabricator—without considering the possible implications of accepting both of G—v’s storytelling methods. If we do grant G—v our confidence, we may relate to the events he has narrated as something other than deception.

At one point, G—v actually addresses his fictional reader’s expectations: “Of course, no one has a right to expect from me, as the narrator, too exact an account concerning one point” (p. 467). We see that he refers to himself not as an “author,” as he sarcastically calls both Verkhovensky and Karmazinov, but as a rasskazchik—“narrator” or “storyteller” (pp. 23, 97) This important to keep in mind when considering claims that the “narrator with his limited viewpoint and sympathetic ever-open ear preserves the suspiciousness, the reticence, the approximation and also the hypocritical freedom of the novelist who intervenes without admitting his intervention as an author,” or that the “internal tension [in the narrative] suggests what we already know to be true but what G—v refuses to admit: that he is a novelist, not a chronicler.”

G—v is well aware of the difference between chronicler, narrator, novelist, and author, and he stubbornly reserves only the first two terms for himself. This way he plays with but also circumscribes the borders around him, and, in line with his occasionally defiant tone, admits to being implicitly aware of what it means to overstep those borders in his chronicling task. Weiner’s observation that G—v does overstep those borders uses the narrator-chronicler’s own evidence against him—an interpretive position which rests on a question of faith.

Another detail to take into account is the fictional environment which G—v describes and in which he is assumed to be writing his chronicle. The background of constantly multiplying rumors is as much a setting as the provincial town: “What we are given here is not one but many possible stories... What is important is the field of possibilities, not the one actualized.” And these schizophrenic oscillations in the narration—knowledge/ignorance, presence/absence, fact/conjecture—are as significant in the novel as features of Stavrogin’s, Pyotr’s, or Kirillov’s characters. Indeed, “G—v insinuates [legends] into the narrative through endless connivance and equivocation over sources, often operating by narratological sleight of hand... [He] constructs vast canvases upon hearsay and guesswork.”

As the collector and recounter of rumors, G—v certainly casts suspicion on himself as a storytelling medium, which is precisely why his narrative integrity must be evaluated on other grounds. One possible way of doing this is to examine his own narrative stance against this backdrop of rumors on which his chronicle depends.

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20Weiner, By Authors Possessed, 121.
21Ibid., 119.
23Weiner, By Authors Possessed, 11.
G—V’S NARRATIVE STANCE

In the absence of any clear statement on G—v’s behalf about his character’s purpose in “setting out to describe the recent and very strange events that took place in our town”—an inquiry that is no less important than the character-study of any of the main heroes—I shall attempt to extrapolate a personal portrait, however partial, by culling the scattered information that he includes about himself (p. 7). This way, we may get a sense not only of the narrator’s character before the described events, but also of how the protagonist G—v gradually turns, through the novel’s events, into the fictional chronicler. This may give us a basis on which to consider his possible narrative stance.

One of G—v’s paradoxical traits as a character is his reserve in regard to himself—which begins with his very name. Despite the chatty tone with which he sets upon his chronicle, and the justifications with which he peppers it, he never fully introduces himself to the reader. His choice not to reveal the entirety of his last name is inconsequential—any fictional reader assumed to be familiar with the town, the involved personages, or the described events could either know who he was or find access to that information. The more interesting aspect of his reserve is that he does not divulge even this partial piece of information until the middle of “Someone Else’s Sins,” when Verkhovensky addresses him—“Perhaps you’re bored with me, G—v.” And even then the narrator-chronicler adds parenthetically: “(that’s my last name)” (p. 90). His first name and patronymic—Anton Lavrentievich—are given a little later, in the episode of his first visit to the Drozdov residence.24 It is in the same scene that we get a general idea of G—v’s ostensible occupation—“I’m in the Civil Service,” he tells Mrs. Drozdov, Liza’s mother, who has already been told as much on the previous page by Liza. And though, as Gene Moore points out, “we never actually see him serve,” we can already note by this point that, outside of any bureaucratic office and quite unlike most civil servants, he tends to actually put himself at the service of others.25

While G—v is open with personal information he has gathered about other characters, he is careful not to overstep the bounds of propriety in terms of his own diegetic details. We sense this propriety in moments where he seamlessly ties together scenes that clearly involve more “stage direction” than is offered. This happens, for instance, in the chapter “Prince Harry. Matchmaking.” After Mrs. Stavrogin has announced to Verkhovensky that she intends to marry him off to Dasha Shatov, Verkhovensky “sent for me,” G—v recounts, “and locked the door to everyone else for the whole day.” G—v reports Verkhovensky’s ongoing lamentations, and then recounts that “we had a bit to drink in our grief.” In the next sentence, G—v writes that soon Verkhovensky “fell fast asleep” and mentions nothing about what he, G—v, did with himself while his friend slept. Then: “Next morning he expertly knotted his tie,” and, again without mentioning himself, reports on Mrs. Stavrogin’s reappearance and gives an account of her and Verkhovensky’s conversation. She leaves, and Mr. Verkhovensky begins to swagger. “‘I like that!’ he exclaimed, standing before me

24Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 127. It is mentioned twice more in that scene and never again. His last name is also mentioned only in this scene at the Drozdov’s, the above two instances with Verkhovensky and Liputin, and never again.
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and spreading his arms” (pp. 78–79). Between the bottle in which “we” indulged and the moment when Verkhovensky stops before “me”—two pages, an entire night, and a scene which does not include him—G—v makes no mention of where he was. A few pages later he writes, “One morning ... when I was rushing as usual to my sorrowful friend,” suggesting that he usually spent his nights at home, or at least not at Verkhovensky’s (p. 84). The fact is that we do not know—nor do we know where his home is, what it looks like, or who else has ever been there. This textual element, which can be considered secretive and even conniving, can alternately be taken as a sign of self-effacing discretion. One of G—v’s characteristics as chronicler is that he divulges personal details only as they become relevant in the diegesis—and while another critic may read an ulterior motive in such concealment, it seems to me to be a part of his character’s inclination to suppress himself in favor of the events and personages he holds most relevant to his chronicle. And if, despite his sporadic tendency to employ a flamboyant narrative tone, we extend his capacity for selective reserve to his narration, then the sections in which his personal voice disappears no longer seem out of place.

In line with the gradual, sometimes unnoticeable, and always limited revelation of G—v’s own character, our initial glimpses into his inner self appear before we even know his name. In fact, G—v does not quote himself speaking until “Someone Else’s Sins.” Suddenly, after an expositional discussion of Mrs. Stavrogin’s “matchmaking” on behalf of Mr. Verkhovensky, G—v reports himself speaking for the first time: “‘What is there for her to be angry about, since you’ve done what she demanded?’ I objected to him” (p. 82). Previously, he has reported his participation in conversations with Mr. Verkhovensky only indirectly, reserving direct discourse for the latter. This change comes at a place in the novel where G—v begins to emerge as a participant in the narrative, reporting not only the events of the scene, but also how they affect him and his conduct as a character. Until this point, the only sense we get of G—v’s personality is through his ironic admiration for Mr. Verkhovensky. Now, G—v functions not as a focalizer of someone else’s story but reveals his own inner responses and comments on them: “I endured much anguish during this unfortunate week”; “Such behavior wounded my pride somewhat”; “being still a young man, I was somewhat indignant”; “In the heat of passion ... I perhaps blamed him too much”; “In my cruelty”; “I was even angry with him”; “Perhaps my irritation was petty and stupid” (pp. 80–81). His is a regretful, confessional tone, betraying a sense of maturation since the events—despite the fact that he himself calls them “recent” in the chronicle’s first sentence. Though upon first reading we do not yet know of Verkhovensky’s death, there comes across a remorse at what is unchangeable, alongside a sense that G—v’s personal stance as a narrator is not the same as his stance as a diegetic protagonist at the story’s outset.

G—v begins to acquire an image as a character and a hint at a name just as he emerges from his nearly uninvolved extradiegetic role, in which he presents himself as an observer rather than an actor, to an intradiegetic though circumscribed involvement in the unfolding events. This process begins, as we saw above, at Verkhovensky’s apartment, where the reader is most familiar with G—v’s presence and can easily accept this additional character solidification. By the end of “Someone Else’s Sins,” G—v as protagonist is already being addressed by Liputin on the town’s streets: “It’s Mr. G—v, a young man of classical
upbringing and in connection with the highest society” (p. 117). Liputin’s description also appears in the midst of G—v’s first self-initiated diegetic act—volunteering to visit Filippov’s house on Liza’s behalf in search of Shatov. There he converses with Kirillov about the latter’s theories, an involved ideological dialogue unlike any in which we have seen him participate since the beginning of the book, since most of the discussions with Verkhovensky consisted of personal or cultural matters within the confines of their circle of friends (pp. 112–17). And it is upon leaving Fillipov’s, addressed by Liputin, that he also faces his first moment of dramatized conflict: after “Captain” Lebyadkin drunkenly recites his love poem to Liza and takes hold of G—v’s overcoat, G—v brushes him away and rushes off, with Liputin following closely behind. As G—v reports to us, he criticizes Liputin “in a rage” for keeping company with “such trash.” When Liputin suggests that G—v is merely afraid of a ‘rival’ for Liza, G—v flares up in a way that is quite unlike the even-tempered individual with which we have been presented up to now: “‘Wha-a-at?’ I cried, stopping.” But the confrontation ends as quickly as it began, with Liputin “punishing” G—v’s petulance by refusing to reveal any more secrets about the unfolding affairs: ‘go groping around for the rest yourself’” (p. 118). This statement practically defines G—v’s role as a character for the rest of the novel: as suddenly as G—v becomes an actor in the story he is relegated back into the post of a painstaking collector of the town’s news and gossip. Which, as far as we can tell, is the role that suits his character.

There are at least two more dramatized moments in which G—v is characterized not only by sudden gallantry but also by an equally sudden retreat. One again involves Liputin, this time on the sidelines of the “Fête.” In the scene, Liputin has just finished reading a satirical poem about the governesses. G—v narrates: “I had already gone backstage; I was after Liputin” (p. 474). We are in unfamiliar territory: more than two thirds of the way into the novel our narrator has never expressed such urgency to confront any other character. G—v then recounts his “indignantly seizing [Liputin] by the arm” and Liputin’s “cowering, immediately starting to lie and pretending to be miserable.” Our usually mild-mannered G—v then accuses Liputin of colluding with Pyotr Verkhovensky in “a conspiracy” against Mrs. Lembke. Liputin makes no effort to contradict or deny the accusation, asking G—v instead, “What is it to you?” and walking away (p. 475, my translation).

For the reader, Liputin’s question is surprising because we take it for granted G—v cares about what is happening—for what other reason has he been narrating this story for nearly five hundred pages? Liputin’s shocking question brings to the fore the inconspicuous quality of G—v’s that is only cursorily mentioned by himself: his inconspicuousness. This quality emerges from the behavior of other characters towards him. For example, after a debacle at the Drozdov residence Liza seems “to have forgotten I was there” (p. 143). At the ball, when G—v approaches Mrs. Lembke, she does not reply to his bow: “She really did not notice me” (p. 502). Within the realm of the events G—v proves to be unimposing, and judging my Liputin’s question—“What is it to you?”—he tends to remain disregarded even by the plotters who are his acquaintances. Though he has been noting all the developments along the way, they do not feel threatened by him.

A chasm develops between the perception of G—v’s behavior up until this point in the diegetic realm, and his projected pose up until this point as a narrator-chronicler. The character G—v at the outset of the events does not share the moral position of the narrator
G—v at the outset of the telling. There is a contrast between G—v as he is perceived by others in the story during the time of the events and G—v as we relate to him based on his telling. This scene is the diegetic moment that he fathoms the scale of the conspiracy and follows this realization with a verbal eruption—and it is possible that it represents an internal shift in the protagonist G—v. We see externalized G—v’s investment in uncovering the conspiracy he now realizes is unfolding, a dedication which until now has been only implicit. The character G—v who existed before these events would not necessarily have become the chronicler G—v who narrates them had it not been for this kind of defining moment in which the events bring out a conscious sense of responsibility. Moreover, judging by G—v’s behavior, his new moral investment leads him not to taking an active role against the intrigue itself, but to rededicating himself to the post of observer. For even after realizing that Liputin and Pyotr are plotting against Mrs. Lembke, G—v reflects only briefly on what he should do with his discovery—Ask Mr. Verkhovensky for advice? Talk to Mrs. Lembke?—and soon he, indeed, gives up any further action on his part by claiming that he “had to go and listen to Karmazinov.” His highest duty, again, is to observe every possible facet of the events unfolding around him.

The other of G—v’s dramatic flare-ups takes place when he appears at Mrs. Lembke’s and finds her “being deceived right to her face” by Pyotr Verkhovensky (p. 493). After Pyotr tells the story about Liza absconding with Stavrogin, G—v writes that “here I suddenly got beside all patience, and shouted furiously at Pyotr Stepanovich: ‘You set it up, you scoundrel! ... Yulia Mikhailovna, he is your enemy, he will ruin you, too! Beware!’” (p. 500) And without a moment’s reflection on their reactions or consideration of the impact of his accusation and warning, he runs “headlong” out of the house:

But I could no longer be bothered with him; the main fact I did believe, and I ran out of Yulia Mikhailovna’s beside myself. The catastrophe struck me to the very heart. It pained me almost to tears; perhaps I was actually weeping. I did not know at all what to undertake. (p. 498)

Weiner attributes G—v’s confrontation with Pyotr to G—v’s jealousy of Liza. For Weiner, the whole chronicle is the execution of G—v’s “personal revenge” over his own thwarted ambitions concerning Liza. But this fails to take into account her engagement to Mavriky Drozdov, for while we know that Mavriky offered Liza to Stavrogin, there are no textual grounds for believing that such an offer would ever have been made to G—v. The only hint G—v gives to this end, revealing a rare personal detail regarding his feelings, is to say that “I myself wanted terribly to be introduced and recommended to” Liza Tushin. But he defuses this testimony in the same paragraph, adding that “my blindness lasted only a moment, and soon afterwards I understood all the impossibility of my dreams” (p. 82). Weiner, however, insists that “G—v vilifies Stavrogin for his role in despoiling his (G—v’s) ideas and perhaps plans concerning Lisa.”26 But there is no evidence of such megalomania on G—v’s part: though he admits to a short-lived infatuation, which he immediately disregards as “dreams,” he never even intimates any “plans.” His “dreams” regarding Liza do much more to explain his devotion when she asks for his help with

26Weiner, By Authors Possessed, 117.
recruiting Shatov; and the prompt awakening from the infatuation explains why, despite his
devotion, he does not consider actually pursuing Liza, which would indeed make him an
active rival of other men within the plot. It is feasible that G—v’s partiality to Liza could
make him more sensitive to the news about her and Stavrogin, hence striking his “very
heart,” but it must also be taken within the context of his growing comprehension of the
interconnectedness of events—and especially of Pyotr’s role in orchestrating them. His
reaction to the news, I believe, is inextricable from his character’s growing grasp of the
dept's of the conspiracy, and its repercussions for the whole town.

Just as with the accusation against Liputin cited above, G—v’s active role in this
specific situation is again subverted by his investigative disposition vis-à-vis the wider
developing circumstances. His external outrage is quickly supplanted by his need to find
out what is happening in town—and to figure out what can be done with his growing
knowledge and understanding. And while nothing can be done to avert tragedy on a massive
scale, his efforts turn into fodder for the chronicle. Jacques Catteau’s breathless summary
of that hectic afternoon puts the episode into perspective:

The chronicler, horrified by the events at the literary party, has run away from the
scene: he first goes to Stepan Trofimovich’s house, where he is refused entrance,
then visits the governor’s wife, where he bumps into Pyotr Stepanovich and learns
too late that Liza has run away, then rushes back to Stepan Trofimovich’s house,
then to Liza’s for confirmation of what he already knows, then to see Dasha, who
does not receive him, then off to see Shatov, who doesn’t listen to him, thinks of
going to see Liputin but changes his mind and goes back to Shatov, who answers
him with a curse, and finally arrives at the ball, where the great dramatic scene
explodes.27

G—v’s running around seems to be fueled by a sense of what he suspects might actually be
happening, and he is dragged into the web of relationships slowly, initially collecting rumors
on Verkhovensky’s behalf, and then being gradually caught up in the ordeal itself. A diegetic
protagonist takes form who exhibits not concrete personal ambitions but rather unexplored
and unexamined sentiments through which he is funneled into the role of a partial, inadvertent
witness. He is pulled by the force of events from one place to another, a position which
gradually increases his authority to write the “chronicle”—not only because he has collected
so much information but also because he was one of the first, by his account, to fathom the
significance of the events: “The intention was clear, to me at least: they were as if hastening
the disorder” (p. 473).

G—v’s growing suspicion here turns into a realization that, though the details are not
yet clear, a larger conspiracy is developing out of what he and other characters first thought
were unconnected events. Once the protagonist G—v begins to put these pieces together,
he seems to become increasingly eager to discover the truth of what is happening—a diegetic
effort which will eventually become the backbone of his “chronicle.” Unlike most other
characters, he is not satisfied with a single version of the events that rumor may bring his
way. He wants to find out all the possible versions and rumors, and something of what

27Catteau, Dostoevsky and the Process of Literary Creation, 357–58.
eludes them all as well—a tendency which in the writing of the chronicle leads him to fill in the gaps.

SLIPPAGE OF NARRATIVE AGENCY

G—v’s reconstruction assembles many diegetic circumstances about which he lacks specific detail—something he can fully realize only during the writing. Yet his “basic desire ... is to tell his reader everything that happened in the order in which it happened ... despite the fact that he is sometimes carried away by the emotions that accompanied the events or by his innate chattiness”—or even, in extreme cases, despite his lack of firsthand knowledge.28 And while in some instances this gap-filling is obvious—as in section III of the chapter “Night,” before which he clearly announces that “I will set out to describe the subsequent events of my chronicle, this time knowingly”—in others G—v introduces information he did not have as the events unfolded using less blatant narrative techniques (p. 217).

One of these is the convention of non-disclosure, in which the narrator may but is not obligated to tell us more than he knew at a given moment in the story. After all, there are many details that he knows at the time of the telling that he did not know at the time of the events—allowing him to narrate “knowingly.” In Demons, however, this convention has a second effect, allowing G—v to stealthily pass on the reins of his narrative agency to other characters and then pick them up again while seeming merely to “report” an event as it happened.29

The day after Mrs. Stavrogin high-handedly informs Verkhovensky of his betrothal to Dasha Shatov, she instructs Verkhovensky not to write to Dasha. About a week follows during which Verkhovensky writes to Mrs. Stavrogin instead, and shows G—v a note from her in which she makes “a direct request that he spare her any relations with him,” adding that she would “in time let him know herself when he could come to her” (pp. 80–81). During that week, G—v, being sent for every day by Verkhovensky, “had endured much anguish ... staying almost constantly at the side of my poor matchmade friend” (p. 80). At one point, Verkhovensky suddenly pulls out of his drawer, to our and G—v’s surprise, daily notes that Mrs. Stavrogin has all this time been writing to Verkhovensky on the subject of the author Karmazinov. G—v satisfies our curiosity by producing word for word the notes from that day, the day before, and two days before, and parenthetically mentions that “there had probably also been one from three days ago, and perhaps one from four days ago” (p. 88). His conjecture implies that he does not know the details of Verkhovensky’s communication with Mrs. Stavrogin at a time when he is assumed to have been spending almost every moment with Verkhovensky. It is also strange in light of the note that Verkhovensky did show to G—v (who “showed” it to us) in which Mrs. Stavrogin said she would not write. And while G—v sets up the mise-en-scène, he stops short of taking the

28Vladiv, Narrative Principles, 58.
29This touches on a question of when direct speech ends and becomes either what Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan calls hypodiegesis—that is, a story within a story which does not advance the main narrative—or what Genette terms pseudodiegesis, which includes a continuation of the main narrative under the guise of a story within a story.
agency for the revelation. In order: G—v arrives to find “an extreme change” in Verkhovensky, G—v mentions Karmazinov, and Verkhovensky flies into a “complete frenzy” (p. 87). This is as far as G—v’s after-the-fact summary carries us. We switch here to a representation of the episode as it proceeded; and now it is Verkhovensky who holds the key to discoveries: “Here, look at this! Read! Read!” he shouts.

In a sense, G—v here leans narratively on Verkhovensky, who is granted an extradiegetic ability to affect the narrative: complicating it by pulling out hitherto unknown notes, the sudden materialization of which is contradictory to the very narrative logic carefully built up so far. At these moments G—v no longer holds the narrative agency despite the fact that he seems to be reporting the events—his function as the retrospective narrative voice clashes with his function as an ex-tempore focalizer. Indeed, “the narrator of Besy may have ‘doubles’ or ‘emanations’ who could be called narrators ‘of the second degree’ or ‘of the third degree’ and so forth. ... [P]otentially every character may be a carrier of privileged information.”

The narrative agency here almost imperceptibly slips into Verkhovensky, who, in the fictional present, shows the notes from Mrs. Stavrogin to us and G—v at the same time. Verkhovensky’s behavior in this episode is felt to be consistent with what we know of his unpredictable hysterical character—to invoke Aristotle, he is consistent in his inconsistency—and this familiarity screens his subtle narrative function.

Another example of this slippage of narrative agency can be found in the scene which shortly follows: Liputin makes a surprise visit with Kirillov to Verkhovensky’s apartment while G—v is there, and their visit is so scandalous that Verkhovensky finally decides to leave his home in order to visit Mrs. Stavrogin and protest against having to marry for “another man’s sins.” But on the way he meets Liza Tushin and immediately returns to his apartment in order to receive her and Mavriky Drozdov. Liza reveals that all his attempts to shut himself up were futile: not only she and her mother, but the whole town already knows of his impending marriage to Dasha Shatov. He asks her how everyone has come to know this, and here we witness, again, a surprising narrative path that neither we nor G—v could expect: “‘Mama, it’s true, was the first to find out, through my old nurse Alyona Frolova; your Nastasya came running to tell her,’” says Liza referring to Verkhovensky’s maid. “‘And you did tell Nastasya, didn’t you?’” (110) Not only did Verkhovensky tell Nastasya, as we suddenly learn, but he also has not told G—v that he told Nastasya. And the person to expose this is not G—v but Liza—in medias res. This is revealed to us and to G—v at the same time in the story, and he withholds expositional comment. As in the earlier scene, the narrator G—v collapses into the protagonist G—v, and the narrative agency is transferred to Liza. Both these examples represent an important juncture for us as readers in relation to the narrator. We learn that if as a narrator-chronicler he pulls and ties together a variety of sources, as a protagonist he is often debarred from sources, and those sources surprise him in the diegesis at the same time that they surprise us in the narrative. No matter how much the narrator G—v may know about the events, and no matter how much he may be holding back, the diegetic world is not completely under his control—as Weiner suggests. For all his narrative liberties, G—v is constantly chasing or describing events that have been spun by others, including and especially Pyotr Verkhovensky.

30Vladiv, Narrative Principles, 76.
SLIPPAGE OF NARRATIONAL DISCOURSE

One of the other major problems in the narrative of *Demons* is the irreconcilability of the narrator’s ironic discourse with the image of a well-intentioned and morally oriented protagonist—the clash of the narrator’s irony with his supposedly good intentions. This is especially the case in the first chapter, where G—v’s narrates “A Few Details from the Biography” of Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky. G—v’s opening line about “the talented and much esteemed Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky” is narrated in the same even tone with which he admits that his “friend had indeed acquired not a few bad habits” (pp. 7, 62). This latter comment is followed by an account of Verkhovensky’s gambling, drinking, and selling off of his son’s land to pay debts, discourse peppered with references to him as a “lofty and disinterested man” who was “noble and had lofty aspirations” (pp. 75–76). Deborah Martisen has argued that much of G—v’s ironic narration in relation to Stepan Verkhovensky “represents his attempt to sort out his conflicting feelings for Stepan” and results from “Dostoevsky creat[ing] a narrator grappling with his own gullibility.”31 This interpretation aligns itself well with a character seeking a kind of personal redemption through his narrative act, and it also suggests that, in spite of his character’s personal attachments, G—v’s account spares not even the characters he considers to have been closest to him. That is, while G—v repeatedly emphasizes his own sympathetic if ironic lenience toward Verkhovensky, he paradoxically does this without ever shying away from baring Verkhovensky’s shortcomings. And if we agree that this is because “Verkhovensky’s weaknesses inadvertently cause others harm,” then it follows that G—v’s moral judgment of those around him tends toward taking intention into account.32 The gap between his evaluative comments and the factual information that he conveys seems at first to subvert his moral reliability—but when the character’s own moral yardstick is expressed this way, the gap between his comments and his reported facts does the opposite. It shows us that, no matter what complicated sentiments can be attributed to the narrator vis-à-vis his subject, they do not censor the fabula details of his chronicle, thereby reinforcing his moral reliability.

There is another kind of slippage between the narrational and diegetic discourse which occurs especially at the beginning of *Demons*: the narrator-chronicler seems to borrow terminology from other characters. This phenomenon is a converse variant of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the word of another. In *Demons*, we not only see the “passing [of] one and the same word through various voices all counterpoised to one another”; rather, we also see words pass from the authorial narrative to the direct speech of characters and/or from the speech of characters to the authorial narrative precisely as *they are*—suggesting a direct channel of transference between the chronicler’s discourse and that of the personages he describes.33

Bakhtin notes that the “transferral of words from one mouth to another, where the contents remain the same although the tone and ultimate meaning are changed, is a

31Deborah A. Martisen, *Surprised By Shame: Dostoevsky’s Liars and Narrative Exposure* (Columbus, 2003), 104.
32Ibid., 105 (emphasis added).
fundamental device of Dostoevsky’s.”34 In *Demons* we see an additional kind of “word of another”—one that exemplifies how easily words and ideas that were recently unused or unknown get disseminated in a society, are taken up and used by others before they have been properly probed, developed, thought through, examined. Terms, categories, judgments—these all crop up, sometimes with minimal thought, and are immediately appropriated by hearers. What we end up with is a scenario where not only the original meaning of the word, but also the very proliferation of tellings, are in fact validated through a word’s several usages.

We see this when G—v mentions the notion of “public opinion,” which was just “born” three years after the 1861 Anton Petrov affair.35 It is Verkhovensky who introduces the term: “And what is all this fuss nowadays about some public opinion (*obshchestvennym mnением*) being ‘born’—did it just drop from the sky, suddenly, for no rhyme or reason?”36 Yet though “public opinion” is here presented as a relatively new notion ridiculed by his “teacher,” G—v later uses the term neutrally when he refers to the “unexpected turnabout in public opinion (*v obshchestvennom mnении*)” in Stavrogin’s favor after he has refused to shoot Gaganov during their duel, but shot in the air instead. He uses this expression again in describing Stavrogin as having “scorn[ed] the opinion of the public” (*preziraet mnение* [sic] *obshchestva*) by not challenging Shatov to a duel after the latter had slapped him.37 And then he uses a variant expression in relation to most of the men in the Spigulin factory who were “vindicated both in general opinion (*obshchim mnении*) and officially” from arson.38 Thus after pointing out to us the newness of this idea through Verkhovensky’s attitude to it, G—v appropriates it, or its variants, in describing the town’s state of affairs.

Conversely, terminology used by the narrator in earlier exposition appears later in the mouths of other characters. G—v explains that he stayed close to Verkhovensky “in the quality of his closest confidant” and, as the situation grated on him, he adds that he was “finding it boring to be a confidant” (pp. 80, 81). Later in the same chapter, Liza, being introduced to G—v for the first time, proclaims: “I’ve already formed a funny idea of you: you’re Stepan Trofimovich’s confidant, aren’t you?” (p. 110) Not only does Liza use the specific term which G—v himself has only recently introduced to the readers, she is even claiming to have “formed” the idea herself. A notion which first was introduced to us in the extradiegetic telling seems to slip into intradiegetic usage by the characters themselves—a transfer that can also be understood as G—v’s appropriating Liza’s word *post-factum* in his retrospective narration, even for the narration of episodes that preceded the first articulation of this word in the *siuzhet*.39

34Ibid., 217.
35Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 36. “A raskolnik named Anton Petrov acquired an immense authority over the peasantry of the [Kazan] region when ... he proclaimed the true liberation which pretended to disclose the genuine intentions of the Holy Tzar. ... Troops were finally sent in during April 1861 to arrest the agitator.” See Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation (1860–1865)* (Princeton, 1998), 135.
37Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 297 (*Besy*, 185). I have modified the translations slightly.
39The closest example in *Demons* to “classical” Bakhtinian “word of another” appears in the kaleidoscopic influence of Stavrogin’s past words and ideas on other characters—only in this novel, the reader never “hears” these words in the “original,” but only when they are recounted back to Stavrogin by Shatov, Kirillov, and
Perhaps the most subtle and portentous of these discourse slippages connects Pyotr Verkhovensky directly to G—v in regard to their relation to Nikolai Stavrogin. After Shatov slaps Stavrogin, G—v prefaces his meditation on the meaning of Stavrogin’s restraint with the words, “I have been studying (izuchal) Nikolai Vsevolodovich all this recent time.”\footnote{Dostoevsky, Demons, 204 (Besy, 129).} We can read this as another justification for the character analysis which G—v is about to launch, a justification that duly prefaces a deeper insight into Stavrogin than we would perhaps have otherwise expected of G—v. The strange part of this turn of phrase, however, is that it reappears almost word for word, spoken by Pyotr Verkhovensky to Stavrogin: “Oh, I’ve studied of you (ia vas izuchil).”\footnote{Dostoevsky, Demons, 419 (Besy, 258).} This occurs in the crucial scene where Pyotr finally exposes the extent of his madness—to Stavrogin and to the reader. Our narrator and our villain use the same vocabulary in respect to the same subject—a commonality which should certainly raise our eyebrows, but which does not automatically imply identity.

**REDEMPTIVE CHRONICLER VS. DESTRUCTIVE PLOTTER**

The striking commonalities between Pyotr and G—v do not end at shared phrasing. When Pyotr Verkhovensky first appears in person in the last chapter of Part I, he almost immediately falls into the role of a raszkazchik. Hence Weiner: “As if further to arouse misgivings about himself, G—v soon characterizes Peter as a ‘narrator’ (raszkazchik), bolstering the disturbing bond between the two.”\footnote{Weiner, By Authors Possessed, 118.} But while the word raszkazchik can certainly be translated as “narrator” or “storyteller,” it can also mean “yarn-spinner” or “fabulist.” That is, while G—v, the chronicle’s raszkazchik, himself calls the main plotter of the tragic events a raszkazchik, it does not strictly follow that they are both the same kind of raszkazchik. And while to Weiner these commonalities suggest a deeper demonic affinity between the two, I believe that they can be seen as a background for important differences between them—one which may be gleaned from G—v’s expressed attitude toward Pyotr.

Pyotr makes his surprise entrance in the presence of Mrs. Stavrogin, Mr. Verkhovensky, G—v, Mrs. Drozdov, Liza Tushin and Mavriky Drozdov, Ivan Shatov and his sister Dasha, as well as Captain Lebyadkin and the cripple Maria Lebyadkin—almost all the main characters in the novel. Stavrogin arrives in the room soon after and without answering his mother’s question—“Is it true that she is ... your lawful wife?”—he takes the “unfortunate lame woman” Maria Lebyadkin away (p. 182). At this point Pyotr takes it upon himself to elucidate their relationship for Mrs. Stavrogin, and by extension for the rest of his audience in the room as well as for us as readers. We get the story for which, like Mrs. Stavrogin, we hunger. But perhaps unlike her, we already know better than to take it at face value—G—v gives us an anticipative (proleptic) warning just as Pyotr begins his tale: “I did not know the man’s character fully then, and still less did I know his intentions.” We see that the main moral issue for G—v is not as much Pyotr’s assumed role of raszkazchik—which
he does call “rather strange, and outside the usual ways”—as the eventual revelation of his being “a falsifier and deliberate deceiver of others” whose character flaws “effect death and destruction.”

Our suspicion of Pyotr’s deception is purposefully complicated by a series of dubious declarations of support for his version of the story—all of which are of course included in the narrative by G—v. First, Pyotr forces Captain Lebyadkin to agree that “everything” in his account is “true,” and though we do not yet know the actual truth, we know from previous scenes (to which Mrs. Stavrogin is not privy) that Lebyadkin is a drunk and a liar, reducing the credibility of his attestation (p. 193). With Stavrogin’s subsequent reappearance, a most suggestive thing happens: Stavrogin says that he can “guess what [Pyotr] dashed off (nastrochil) for you here” and adds that Pyotr “precisely dashes off (strochit) when he talks.” He twice uses a Russian word that denotes writing and scribbling, and that has the additional connotation of invention or fabrication on the fly. He then makes reference to Pyotr’s narrative style as “realist” and proclaims that as such Pyotr “cannot lie”—a blatant self-contradiction considering the use of strochit, and possibly meant to confuse Mrs. Stavrogin together with the rest of his audience. But in the process Stavrogin also casts doubt on Pyotr’s form of storytelling.

When G—v expresses his displeasure at Pyotr’s “importunate desire ... to tell other people’s anecdotes,” we may at first note that G—v has been doing precisely this throughout his whole narrative. One interpretation of such a contradiction might be to charge G—v with hypocrisy, but a more nuanced consideration of the same contradiction, and why exactly G—v protests Pyotr’s “rather strange” behavior to the readers, could reveal the implicit difference G—v considers there to be between Pyotr and himself. In Pyotr’s case, G—v accuses him of “baiting” Mrs. Stavrogin in “her sorest spot”—a starkly different position than the chronicling stance that my analysis has attempted to portray (p. 185).

Connected to this is the kind of “discursive slippage” discussed earlier, again reinforcing the problematic affinity between G—v’s and Pyotr’s methods. This happens when the latter justifies his access to the information in the story he is about to tell Mrs. Stavrogin: “There is much that [Stavrogin] does not conceal from me” (p. 186). G—v’s earlier phrase, narrated to his readers, was that “Varvara Petrovna had long known that [Mr. Verkhovensky] concealed nothing from me” (p. 63). The link is enhanced by both remarks relating to Mrs. Stavrogin. These commonalities are not incidental, and by forcing a comparison between the two characters they can simultaneously challenge the reader to consider what tells them apart. And since those possible differences must be grounded in the text—that is, G—v’s chronicle—one way to extrapolate them, as mentioned above, is to look at G—v’s own criticism of Pyotr’s storytelling.

In one telling instance, G—v, as both protagonist and chronicler, judges Pyotr’s storytelling with great vehemence. When Pyotr recounts how Liza got into the carriage that went off to Stavrogin at Skvoreshniki, G—v is already doubtful of his version of the events. His doubt grows when Pyotr claims to have rushed up to the carriage, “and yet [he]
did not make out who was in the carriage,” exclaims G—v in a parenthetical note to his retelling of Pyotr’s telling, “and with his curiosity!” Soon, as we have already seen, G—v gets “beside all patience” and shouts, “You set it up, you scoundrel!” On the next page the narrator gives an astute analysis of Pyotr’s version of the events and why he believes it is false:

In the first place, the obviously false way in which he reported the news was all to noticeable. He did not tell it as soon as he entered the house, as a first and extraordinary piece of news, but pretended that we already knew without him—which was impossible in so short a time. And if we had known, we could not in any case have kept silent about it until he started to speak. He also could not have heard any of the “bells ringing” in town about the marshal’s wife, because again the time was too short. Besides, as he was telling about it, he smiled a couple of times somehow meanly and flippantly, probably regarding us by then as utterly deceived fools. (pp. 500–501)

G—v also points out that Pyotr’s claim that he had been a “witness” to the event is not consistent with his claim that he cannot give an account “in detail” of who was in the carriage (p. 500). In fact, G—v is the only character to confront Pyotr and challenge his lies, but this explication of Pyotr’s withholding information puts the latter in a narrative position opposite G—v’s, from which the latter gives us accounts “in detail” of events he has not witnessed.

The comparison between Pyotr and G—v is important, but not necessarily because G—v is “infected” by Pyotr, with whom he is rarely reported as having interacted. G—v’s own frenzy of activity, which is not unlike Pyotr’s, results directly from the former following the tracks of the latter, “always arriving too late, like the detectives who track a criminal by a trail of steaming corpses.” Like any “detective,” G—v often gets close to the criminal he is trying to apprehend, perhaps even thinking in his fashion and adopting some of his methods—but as complex as is the position of the detective, it does not make him a criminal.

For Weiner, the “many private scenes that G—v nonetheless describes (to the consternation and irritation of generations of critics) suggests that the narrator of The Devils employs the same device of novelistic ‘composing’ that is one of Peter’s chief demonic features.” In specifically mentioning “Kirillov’s tragic death, which could only have been witnessed by Peter,” Weiner accuses G—v of “fabricat[ing] an entire scene between Kirillov and Peter, employing a myriad of lurid, voyeuristic details.” But even if G—v “fabricated” some of the details—or even if he got them from someone who spoke to Pyotr or directly from Pyotr himself—the reader does not suppose that G—v “fabricated” Kirillov’s “tragic death,” nor doubt the fact that the scene between Kirillov and Pyotr did take place. There is no clear diegetic reason in the text which we may show as evidence for such an interpretive

45Dostoevsky, Demons, 500. This point is more significant than it seems at the moment in the story—for Stavrogin Liza’s presence at Skvoreshniki is both alibi and motive for the impending Lebyadkin murders.
46Catteau, Dostoevsky and the Process of Literary Creation, 358.
47Weiner, By Authors Possessed, 119, 120.
move. We can feasibly ascribe creative reconstruction to G—v’s chronicle, but in the narrative it is only Pyotr who is presented as spinning tales in order to influence and manipulate the diegetic reality as it unfolds. Though G—v could not observe certain scenes while they were happening, it is diegetically feasible that he was able to gather what he learned, what he knew from observing each of the characters at other times, and what he could conjecture to be their in-character “thoughts and feelings,” and combine them into a composition or reconstruction (sochinenie) of a scene that he knew took place. In fact, elsewhere we have evidence that G—v can imagine events by projecting himself into their setting, as when he later visits the site of Shatov’s murder and thinks: “How dismal it must have seemed on that harsh autumn evening!” (p. 598) As Vladiv notes, even internal processes “may be inferred from external facts.” In fact, as a historian and biographer, Joseph Frank does exactly the same thing when, writing of Herzen’s open letter to Bakunin, he concludes that “Dostoevsky certainly would have hastened to procure” a copy. Frank does not show evidence of this, but his familiarity with Dostoevsky allows us to grant him his certainty of something that might have happened over a hundred years before on a different continent in a different language. In the same way, we grant G—v the ability to provide details he “cannot” know—of rooms, movements, feelings, and thoughts—belonging to people with whom he had direct contact in a town he knew like the back of his hand. The contingency of the past “present” is also taken into account by the fact that these scenes have occurred before the writing of the chronicle. And as we have seen repeatedly throughout, much of what has happened becomes somehow known. Through a transference into narrative form, the events are thus revealed in as orderly a fashion as G—v can manage.

G—v indeed employs a gamut of narrative methods to fill the gaps in his chronicle. And it is certainly the case that “both G—v and Peter are prone to complain that they lack the literary talent needed for certain tasks, but then to go ahead and perform the tasks nonetheless”—both of them making similar use of the modesty topos. But while Pyotr’s deceptive and destructive intentions are clearly treated in the chronicle, little textual evidence exists for what ulterior motive G—v may have for deceiving his readers—unless one makes the extratextual interpretive supposition that the two are in cahoots, or alternately that G—v is out to besmirch Pyotr’s name. Yet unlike Pyotr’s tale-telling, which serves his anarchistic unraveling of society, G—v’s narrative act emerges more as an attempt to dig to the roots of its collapse. We have seen that as the novel progresses G—v becomes increasingly unnerved and eager to account for the events that he slowly realizes are destroying his society—not, like Pyotr, manipulating that very destruction. This way G—v’s narrative position slowly develops into the modern figure of historical “witness” who embarks on his “narrative as testimony not merely to record, but to rethink, and, in the

48 Unless we attribute to the fictional narrator the artistic aims of the author, a possibility which John Jones may support but with which I have already disagreed in my analysis.
49 Vladiv, Narrative Principles, 107. Vladiv presents the following contextual description of G—v’s narrative mode: “The nature of the narrator’s information apparatus is such that both an ‘inner monologue’ and a sam drug [tête-à-tête] scene could be justified by the device of implicit (that is, not explicitly stated or formulated) reconstruction or (implicit) eavesdropping (‘leaks’) or (implicit) secondary narrators, all of which strategies could account for the narrator’s knowledge of the states of mind of other characters.”
50 Frank, Dostoevsky: Stir of Liberation, 459.
51 Weiner, By Authors Possessed, 118.
act of its rethinking, in effect \textit{transform history} by bearing literary witness.” And insofar as his chronicle originates from and is returned back to the fictional collective of his provincial town—where every fictional reader can check his version against the myriad of other rumors the reader can imagine circulating around—it “is from this communal knowledge that the authority of the witness, that is, the truth claim of the narrative, proceeds.” While Pyotr’s fabulation is a tool of manipulation for a destructive end, G—v’s chronicling is a tool of attempted understanding, which may even lead to a collective recuperation. Impure as G—v and his narrative may be—and he is the first to admit this in the text—he is the first to admit this in the text—his aims are inverse to Pyotr’s. Pyotr wants to destroy society; G—v’s duty gradually grows into fathoming and later recording the events in their proper magnitude. His character is that of a “civil servant” who has dedicated an entire period of his life—both the intradiegetic story-time and the extradiegetic telling-time—to making sense of events that had torn his town apart. His commitment, embodied in his chronicle, is as unwavering as it is imperfect.

Hence, when Weiner calls G—v one of “the novel’s chief devils” and suggests that “G—v is the god of his creation,” he implies that G—v’s narration is cynical and essentially likens it to Pyotr’s acts of conspiracy and murder. Jones’s interpretation is slightly more circumscribed, and his attitude toward the narrator wavers between describing him as Dostoevsky appearing as a character when he approves of his telling, and calling G—v the “intrusive chronicling ‘I’” when he disapproves. He eventually claims that the reader is positioned “on the side of the narrative against the narrator,” separating two different kinds of narrative stances that can in fact be seen as unified. Another way to put this would be to say that despite himself the narrator presents a narrative in relation to which the reader can choose an unbiased position. No matter how flawed or partial his narrative may be, G—v as fictional chronicler presents the events independently of, even if alongside, the peculiarities of his own character, and he does so by pursuing many of the story’s possible aspects and events, even when they deal with characters toward which he is sympathetic or which are beyond reach. Yet despite this vagueness, or perhaps even because of it, he goes a long way toward reconstructing something which within his diegetic realm is by nature unknowable.

In this, G—v’s writing is itself an act of, and call for, faith—from himself as much as from his reader. He describes possible and probable circumstances behind what are for his character grave and tragic events, and only this way are these fictional occurrences documented, remembered, unraveled, and, as it were, diegetically revealed. His fictional chronicle is as devoted an inventory as can perhaps be expected of the ways in which the small society he describes has gone temporarily insane—and a revolt against such insanity insofar as it calls it by name. The novel’s ambiguous narrative structure disseminates a kind of intersubjective meaning that is sometimes paralyzing in its attempt to encompass as much as possible of these “very strange” events. And vast as they are, G—v still makes it

\footnote{Felman, “Camus’ The Plague,” 95, 111.}
\footnote{A further and separate case can be made for a rhetorical manipulation of the reader by Dostoevsky, who may be propelling us to a self-liberating denigration of two generations of Westernized radicals whose sway over “public opinion” Dostoevsky had come to regard as pernicious.}
\footnote{Weiner, \textit{By Authors Possessed}, 121.}
\footnote{Jones, \textit{Dostoevsky}, 270, 277.}
clear to his readers—the fictional target audience which in his world are his townspeople and his countrymen—that there is much that he has not managed to narrate even indirectly.

Dostoevsky’s novel, like the fictional chronicle, forces the real-world reader, as a stand-in for G—v’s townsfolk, into a dilemma: whether to accept G—v’s attempt to reach beyond his own direct experience or whether to charge his character with overreaching, perhaps even fabrication. While Weiner does identify this reach, his retained doubt over G—v’s narrative act turns it into an additional attempt, after Pyotr Verkhovensky’s, to deceive his society. But, as I have attempted to show in this article, accepting G—v’s call to faith can turn his chronicle into a rehabilitative act which gives access to the spiritual and moral missteps that led to the traumatic events. Thought of this way, G—v’s chronicle becomes a first step toward an attempted recovery from this mass trauma. But in order for this significance to manifest itself, the reader, like a fictional member of this society, must answer G—v’s implicit call for narrative faith.