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Book I of Dostoevsky's *Demons*: A Slow Start?

Synopsis

One seldom noted critical issue regarding the plot of Dostoevsky's *Demons* (*Besy*) is the slow pace and minimal action in Book I of this otherwise action-packed novel. The two main characters are not introduced until the very end of Book I. This contrasts sharply with Dostoevsky's earlier novels. Dostoevsky himself gives little explanation for this slow start in the notebooks for the novel, and there is nothing about the mode of narration that requires it. The present study seeks an explanation in Dostoevsky probable desire to present, in the history of a provincial town, a microcosm of the impact of the radicals of the Sixties on Russia, itself a stagnant and slow-moving society. The "culture shock" of the advent of the radicals could not be appreciated without first portraying the static society upon which they burst. Dostoevsky also wanted to set the stage for the eventual death or arrest of nearly all the characters introduced in Book I by portraying a society that superficially seemed stable, but that was, at the same time, nurturing ideas that would give birth to its own destruction.

Book I of Dostoevsky's *Demons*: A Slow Start?

The critical issue posed here regarding the plot structure and thematic unity of Dostoevsky's *Demons* (*Besy*) is the discontinuity in the pace of the action and narrative between Book I and the remainder of the novel. There is little action in Book I, which mainly deals with Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovenski, Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina and their circle of liberal *intelligenti* in a provincial town. It is largely satirical in tone,

and only at the very end of Book I do we actually meet the two most important characters of the novel, Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin and Petr Stepanovich Verkhovenskiĭ. The two major plots of the novel, the so-called pamphlet plot relating to Petr, his cell of revolutionaries and their various crimes, including the murder of Shatov, and the plot revolving around Stavrogin, his dark past, moral transgressions, marriage, loves, and his contacts with Petr, are almost entirely delayed until Books II and III. Only in the final scene of Book I is the marriage of Stavrogin to Maria introduced. Thereafter the pace of events accelerates. Books II and III are very “action-packed”, and build directly up to a series of violent events, including multiple murders and arson. There is no violence in Book I.

While the narrator is intimately involved in nearly all of the events in Book I or at least could have learned of them by hearsay, most of the crucial events and meetings in Books II and III are *sam drug*, that is, the narrator did not witness them and could not have learned of them from any of the surviving witnesses, such as the nocturnal meetings between Stavrogin and Kirillov, Stavrogin and Shatov, Stavrogin and Maria and Stavrogin and Fedka, as well as Petr Verkhovenskiĭ’s meetings with some of the same characters.¹ Thus the discontinuities between Book I and the last two Books are not only as to the characters focused upon and the pace or amount of action but even the style of narration.

Another contrast between Book I, on the one hand, and Books II and III on the other is that Book I is set in “respectable” society, which is quite in keeping with the lack of violence or other fast-paced action. Book I essentially involves polite conversation among the circle of *intelligenti* who have formed around Stepan Trofimovich and Varvara Petrovna, except for the occasional intrusion of Captain Lebiadkin and his sister and the introduction of Kirillov’s ideas about suicide. The more fast-paced scenes of Books II and III are set in “subversive” society (or at least not in respectable society) or involve calamitous events, such as incendiarism, murders, the comic meeting of the cell of “five” (actually many more) at Virginskii’s, and the fete, where an event put on by “respectable society” degenerates into a laughable roasting of the towns leading “intellectuals.” Similarly, while most of the events in Book I are polite daytime encounters, many of the key dramatic scenes in Books II and III transpire in the middle of the night, such as Stavrogin’s nighttime visits to Kirillov, Shatov and Maria in Book II, and the murder of Shatov and suicide of Kirillov in Book III.

¹ Vladiv, Slobodanka B., *Narrative Principles in Dostoevskij’s “Besy”*, *A Structural Analysis*, Bern, Frankfurt, Las Vegas, Peter Lang, 1979, 170-172.

It has often been observed that Stepan, who is portrayed in a satirical light in Book I, develops into one of the major characters in the novel, particularly with his speech at the fete and his final journey.² It was certainly important for Dostoevsky to introduce him thoroughly in Book I. Thus the story of Stepan spans and joins the three books. But by contrast to Dostoevsky's other major novels, the major action in *Demons* and the introduction and development of the two most important characters are delayed. For example, in *Crime and Punishment*, we are immediately introduced into the mind of a murderer and the murder of the pawnbroker woman occurs relatively early. Likewise, the major characters, with the exception of Svidragailov, are all in play early on. In *Idiot*, we meet the Prince and Rogozhin in the very first scene and Natasia Filippovna early in the first book. Book I rapidly progresses through a number of scandalous scenes to one of the most dramatic scenes in the novel, the burning of the money. Book II then builds quickly up to the Prince's visit to Rogozhin's house and Rogozhin's failed attempt on the Prince's life. If *Demons* had been written like *Idiot*, Dostoevsky would have introduced Stavrogin and Petr Verkhovenski in the initial chapter, perhaps discussing subversive or sordid events in their past or planning future misdeeds. If *Idiot* had been written like *Demons*, it might have begun with a long description of the history of the Epanchin family and their contacts with the other respectable characters in the plot, and we would not have actually met the Prince and Rogozhin until the very end of the first book. In other words, *Demons* is different enough from Dostoevsky's earlier works that one naturally inquires why Dostoevsky constructed *Demons* in the way he did, with so little action and dramatic development in Book I.

In order to answer this inquiry, the present study will first summarize Book I, examine the evolution of the plot in Dostoevsky's notebooks, and then consider the method and order of narration, before proceeding to resolve the issue posed.

Book I primarily focuses on introducing the primary characters and a large number of secondary characters, but as indicated above, the two most important characters do not appear until the end of the book. Virtually all of the characters are introduced through meetings with the narrator or attended by the narrator. The first chapter traces the life of Stepan over the last twenty years. In the Forties he was thought to be on a

² Davison, R.M., "Dostoevsky's *The Devils*: The Role of Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky," *Dostoevsky's Devils, a Critical Companion*, ed. by W.J. Leatherbarrow, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern U.P., 1999, 119-34.

par with Belinsky, Herzen and Granovsky, but his academic career and early works were undistinguished. Twenty years before the action of the novel commences, he was hired as a tutor by Varvara Petrovna and he served as a tutor not only for her son but also for Shatov and Liza Nikolaevna Tushina, the daughter of Varvara's friend Praskovaia. He, however, devoted little attention to his own son, Petr, whom he has seen only twice since his birth. Stepan not only sponges off of Varvara, but also has mismanaged and filched from the estate that Petr is to inherit.

Varvara values having on her estate someone who in her eyes is a prominent *intelligent*, and Stepan becomes the center of an intellectual circle in the town consisting of Liputin, Virginskii and Shatov. Liputin also introduces Kirillov into the circle, who expounds to the narrator his idea that suicide is a means by which man can become God. There is no prevailing ideology in this circle. Liputin is a Fourierist, but personally he is a gossip, miser and backbiter. Virginskii regards his relationship with his wife as an open marriage of the type portrayed in *What is to be Done?* But her lover is not a freethinking Man of the Sixties, but actually Captain Lebiadkin, whom Virginskii attacks in a fit of jealousy. Shatov, who is Slavophile, is the odd man out and the only member of this circle for whom Dostoevsky shows any sympathy. Kirillov is the only truly radical thinker in the group.

When Karmazinov arrives in town, Varvara begins to fawn on him as well. Karmazinov is another freethinking liberal who knows little of Russia. He knows more about the Karlsruhe sewer system than he does of Russia, and his article about a shipwreck reveals him to be a cowardly person.

The circle that Varvara and Stepan have gathered around themselves is presented as what is considered in the town to be "society." They gather at the local club or at Varvara's estate. Despite the subversive nature of some of their views, they are initially portrayed as quite harmless.

Stavrogin had spent many years away from the town at school but had returned to the town three years before the action of the novel begins. He was rumored to have had a wild life. While in the town, he pulls one gentleman in the club by nose, bites the governor's ear and kisses Liputin's wife. Stavrogin is, however, not on stage for these events, which are recounted three years hence by the narrator. He then goes abroad. In Switzerland he meets and becomes romantically involved with Liza. Varvara is interested in furthering this match, but Stavrogin's feelings for her apparently cool and he leaves her. Varvara suspects that he may have become interested in Shatov's sister, Dasha. In order to remove that

threat, Varvara plans to marry Dasha to Stepan. Dasha reluctantly assents to the marriage, but Stepan suspects, erroneously, that he is being used to cover up Stavrogin's sins.

Dasha has acted as an intermediary for Stavrogin to transmit money to Captain Lebiadkin. The Captain has written poems of his love for Liza, but Liza appears to be interested in Mavrikii. Liza asks the narrator to introduce her to Lebiadkin's sister, and the narrator visits the Filippov house, where the Captain and his sister reside, as well as Shatov and Kirillov.

In the culminating scene in Book I, Varvara meets Maria at a service at the cathedral and brings her home with Liza. Shatov, Praskovaia and Mavrikii join them, and eventually Lebiadkin, Petr and Stavrogin. The evidence has been building that Stavrogin had married Maria, but when confronted by his mother, Stavrogin denies this, but takes Maria away with him. Petr then gives his (subsequently proven to be untruthful) account of how Stavrogin protected Maria and how she began to imagine that he was her fiancé. He also discloses Stepan's suspicion that he is being used to cover up Stavrogin's sins. At the close of Book I, Shatov approaches Stavrogin and strikes him, but Stavrogin calmly accepts the blow without demanding a duel.

In sum, the only major action or events which take place in present time are Varvara's plan to promote her son's potential match with Liza by marrying Stepan to Dasha and the final gathering at Varvara's estate. The latter scene is certainly dramatic, bringing almost all the main characters together and posing the issue of whether (and why) Stavrogin has married Maria and the reason for Shatov's unexplained blow. But it is a fairly "tame" and calm scene compared to the dramatic scenes that appear early on in *Crime and Punishment* (the murder) and *Idiot* (the burning of the money and Rogozhin's assault on the Prince). We also learn little about Stavrogin other than the scandal he had caused three years previously and the rumors about his wild life and marriage to Maria. We learn almost nothing about Petr.

The prevailing style and point of view of Book I is one of satire and even derision. Book I is centered on Stepan and the circle of at best mediocre *intelligenti* that has formed around him. Although the narrator is a confidant and professed admirer of Stepan, the portrait painted of him and Varvara, reveals a life filled with pettiness, pretense and self-delusion. Although Stepan purports to have been exiled from the capital for his subversive views, the narrator is surprised to learn that he has never been under police surveillance at all. Although his writings and

academic career are entirely undistinguished, he is regarded by Varvara as exceptionally gifted, a delusion that magnifies her own importance as his sponsor and benefactress. Although he fancies himself a freethinker in tune with the radicals in the capital, Stepan is at best an able phrasemonger and seems incapable of an original thought. He is a liberal aesthete who worships the idea of beauty, but he is also an idler who exploits Varvara's generosity. Stepan holds things Russian in contempt, constantly peppering his conversation with French phrases. His pettiness and capacity to delude himself come through strongly in his groundless suspicion that Dasha has been romantically involved with Stavrogin. As the tutor for Stavrogin, Liza and Shatov, he has poisoned their minds. Although the circle that has formed around Stepan is rumored to be a hotbed of freethinking, the level of conversation is quite petty.

Dostoevsky carefully suggests the weaknesses of the polite society that is the setting of Book I. While it is indeed a sleepy world where nothing exciting seems capable of happening, it is also a world of false appearance and false ideologies. Its leading citizens, like Stepan and Varvara, coddle freethinkers and socialists. Perhaps even worse, Stepan, those of his circle and Karmazinov are out of contact with Russia and, in fact, with reality. The intelligentsia of the town espouse any number of what are portrayed as foolish ideas.

Not only did Dostoevsky start off at a slow pace dramatically. He also provides minimal foreshadowing of the catastrophic events to come, which will destroy most of the characters introduced in Book I. While we learn that Stavrogin is capable of strange behavior and that he has a mysterious attachment to Maria, we learn and suspect nothing of the crimes that Petr will engineer. Indeed, although the town is populated by various seemingly harmless radicals, Dostoevsky paints a world of inertia seemingly incapable of becoming the setting for the violent events of Book III. The only center of abnormality in this seemingly stable town is the Filippov house, but neither its strange inhabitants nor the "freethinkers" that have gathered around Stepan seem capable of violence.

The stability and peacefulness of the town in fact proves to be only apparent, and its most educated citizens, including Virginskii, Liputin and Kirillov, with their false ideologies, ultimately prove that they can be easily manipulated by Petr. Petr's mendacious account of the relationship between Stavrogin and Maria, which is apparently accepted by those who hear it, signals how the whole town, including eventually the governor and his wife, can be easily manipulated. The instability of the town is not

limited to its intelligentsia. The area around the town is also threatened by an outbreak of cholera. There has also been an increase in violent crime, and recently Jews have appeared in the town. The Shpigulin workers, although they are not revolutionary, are ready to demonstrate to seek redress for their grievances, completely without the encouragement or assistance of the intelligentsia. Numerous radical leaflets and proclamations are circulated in the town, many from sources other than Petr and his circle,³ including one supposedly written by Herzen⁴ and one by Virginskaia's younger sister.⁵ The townspeople prove capable of turning the speeches by Stepan and Karmazinov at the fete into a chaotic spectacle. The local government is incompetent.

What do the *Notebooks* for *Demons* tell us about the relative lack of action in Book I and its discontinuities with the rest of the novel? The *Notebooks* indicate that Dostoevsky did not decide upon the device of delaying the arrival of Stavrogin and Petr until very late in his planning of the novel, and that his declared aim in doing so was to create suspense. The first notes from late 1869 include a Prince (Stavrogin), Student (Petr), Beauty (Liza), Ward (Dasha), Teacher (Shatov), Lame Girl (Maria) and Kartuzov (Lediadkin).⁶ The murder of the Teacher was always part of the story, but in early plans for the novel in 1870, romantic involvements between the Prince, Student or Teacher on the one hand, and Dasha or Liza on the other are prominent features of the projected plot. By early 1870 Granovsky (Stepan) has appeared as the father of the Student, and much engaged in discussion or argument with his son. Notes from February, 1870, indicate that Dostoevsky had decided to make the friendship between the Princess and Granovsky a major theme.⁷ The first overall chronology, from February, 1870 begins abroad. The Prince loves the Ward, who loves Shaposhnikov (Shatov). The Princess (Varvara), Shaposhnikov and the Ward return home, but the Prince stays behind, vexed. The Beauty and her mother return from abroad at the same time. The Prince and Granovsky's son arrive in the town at the same time, and the Prince finds that the Ward no longer loves Shaposhnikov, but has become engaged to Granovsky. The Beauty is spurned by the Student and

³ Dostoevskii, F. M., *Polnoe sobranie sochinenie v tridtsati tomakh*, Tom X, *Besy*, Leningrad, Izd. "Nauka," 1972-90, 245, 248, 269, 273.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁶ Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Notebooks for The Possessed*, ed by Edward Wasiolek, tr. by Victor Terras, Chicago, Ill, U Chicago P., 1968.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

then runs off with the Captain. It is not clear when the murder and fires will occur.⁸

A somewhat later program places the fires and the fete by the governor's wife in the first book or part, but the murder of Shaposhnikov not until the end.⁹ A "course of events" from March 1870 indicates that the novel will be a chronicle, that it will start with Granovsky, but that the Prince will arrive early on.¹⁰

By August 1870, the Ward has become the sister of Shatov, and the Princess is attempting to marry her to Granovsky.¹¹ Liza's relationship to the Prince takes on prime importance. Later in August Dostoevsky mentions beginning the novel with a change of governors, "gossip and moral decay" in the town, and the relationship between Varvara and Granovsky.¹² At about the same time Dostoevsky had a rough draft of the Chronicler's introduction, which indicates that a good deal of time will be spent initially on the friendship between Stepan and Varvara and "our circle" of Virginskii, Liputin and Shatov. By November the character of the Engineer (Kirillov) has been introduced.

In notes from the spring of 1871 Dostoevsky has resolved that in the beginning "the reader sees nothing at all about [Petr]":

Don't do as other novelists do, i.e., blow your horn at the very beginning, announcing that 'here is an extraordinary personage.' On the contrary, conceal it, and reveal his true character only gradually, by means of stroke artistic strokes of the brush¹³

Dostoevsky obviously decided to portray Stavrogin in the same way. Stavrogin's romantic involvement with both Liza and potentially Dasha, which, in the early notebooks, had been a major theme to be introduced early in the plot, was moved offstage in the final version to Switzerland. These events are recounted by narrator from secondhand sources. We thus do not really learn how serious Stavrogin is about either woman.

Dostoevsky's notes thus indicate that various early plans for the novel start with Stavrogin's (and other characters') romantic entanglements and even put the fires at the beginning of the novel. Over the course of 1870 he decided to reorder the plot substantially, starting with Stepan and Varvara, and "the moral decay of the town," delaying the introduction of

⁸ Ibid., 125-134.

⁹ Ibid., 162.

¹⁰ Ibid., 172.

¹¹ Ibid., 262.

¹² Ibid., 284.

¹³ Ibid., 343.

his two main characters. He does not otherwise explain that or why he wants to deprive Book I of action. Nor does he explain why he abandoned the plan to place the fire and fete at the beginning of the novel. That would have portrayed the decay of the town in the most dramatic terms, and he could have done this without revealing who had set the fire. He also abandoned his initial plans to construct perhaps elaborate romantic entanglements or love triangles involving Liza, Dasha, Shatov, Stavrogin, Stepan and even Petr. In such initial plans the characters might have been developed and portrayed as they were in the *Idiot* through the device of two love triangles. He kept some of this projected plot, although the romantic entanglement of Stavrogin with Liza and Dasha eventually became much less prominent than he initially intended. The only reason Dostoevsky gives for reordering the plot as he did, was to create suspense by revealing the two main characters only gradually. The decision to begin with the moral decay of the town was also a key turning point in Dostoevsky's plan for his novel, because it meant, essentially, that the novel would initially focus on Stepan, Varvara and their circle of friends. This was closely related to the decision to introduce Stavrogin and Petr gradually, providing only a few details about them over the course of Book I. But why move the fires, the fete and the Shpigulin workers' demonstration to Books II and III? These events could have been presented without introducing Petr and Stavrogin. Thus, while a study of the *Notebooks* provides a partial answer the questions posed by the present study, it does not explain why Book I was so drained of action.

Is it possible that the lack of action in Book I was dictated by the manner of narration that Dostoevsky chose? Perhaps the structure and order of presentation of the plot was a byproduct of the device of using a narrator who lived through the events in question, knew nearly all of the characters involved and purports to be setting forth an orderly account in more or less chronological order. The narrator states that he is writing his account about three to four months after the events in question, which themselves occur over approximately three to four weeks. The presentation indeed initially appears to be chronological. Thus, the narrator begins with things that happened in the past, principally certain events in the lives of Stepan and Varvara that occurred many years ago, including Stepan's education, his undistinguished academic career, Varvara decision to become his patroness and his journey to Petersburg with Varvara for her to start a journal and reintroduce him to the

intelligentsia of the capital. Starting chronologically, with this prehistory means, inevitably, that things will get off to a slow start.

There are, however, many events in the lives of Shatov, Maria Shatova, Kirillov, Stavrogin and Petr which occurred many years ago as well that we do not find out about until later, such as Stavrogin's violation of Matresha and his marriage to Maria. Thus the narrator's presentation in Book I is not in chronological order. Instead, he starts his account with his state of knowledge before the arrival of Stavrogin and Petr in the town, that is, at the beginning of the four weeks he describes in present time. At that point he did not know about Matresha or the marriage to Maria. He also did not know, as he found out later, that Petr had, upon his arrival in the town, already decided to murder Shatov and perhaps even Maria and Lebiadkin. Thus the narrative in Book I, while seemingly in chronological order, omits many events that the narrator learned of only later. In short, the reader will learn what happened in the provincial town from the perspective of an inhabitant of the town at the time who had no idea, at the point Stavrogin and Petr arrived, of the calamitous events to follow. That means that the narrative must begin with no knowledge of such things as the marriage to Maria, the Matresha story, and the prehistory of the Stavrogin-Petr relationship and Stavrogin's other various romantic attachments. Thus Book I unfolds without revelation of some of the "juiciest" details that the narrator later discovers. This method of narration has the beneficial artistic effect of preserving mystery and suspense about events the narrator already has knowledge of.

Books II and III, on the other hand, are presented largely in chronological order, with the exception of Stavrogin's confession, which concerns an event that occurred many years before. The narrator was presumably aware of all this material when he first sat down to compile his narrative. It is not presented in the order in which he discovered it, since he presumably learned about things like the events leading to the murder of Shatov at least several days or weeks after the events occurred.

But to attribute the slow start of *Demons* to the method of narration really only reposes the same question it attempts to answer. As he sits down to chronicle the events that transpired in his town, the narrator chooses to describe at length the superficially peaceful and stable life of the town before the arrival of Stavrogin and Petr, keeping from the reader what he already knows about these two characters and the tragic events they would bring to the town. While there is nothing unusual about this method of narration, which obviously creates mystery and suspense as to many of the key events, there is nothing about the method of narration

itself that would have forced Dostoevsky to strip Book I of action. Dostoevsky simply has his narrator decide to narrate the events not chronologically but in the order that Dostoevsky believed was most appropriate to the development of his story, and we are again left with question of why Dostoevsky thought this order appropriate. If the narrator was really a mere chronicler (rather than a disguised dramatist), he would have presented everything in truly chronological order.

One must therefore look beyond the *Notebooks* and the method of narration to explain the “slow start” of the novel in a narrative of the petty affairs of the intelligentsia of a provincial town. The thesis here will be that Dostoevsky wanted to start his novel with the unexciting life of a provincial town and the Men of the Forties precisely to be able portray, in a microcosm, the “culture shock” in Russia caused by the arrival of the “demons,” who are men of the Sixties. He wanted to paint at the same time a society which, superficially, seemed incapable of spawning the calamitous events of Books II and III, which result in the death or arrest of virtually all the characters introduced in Book I.

For Dostoevsky Stepan represented the Men of the Forties, like Belinsky, Granovsky and Herzen, and Karmazinov represented Turgenev. Dostoevsky obviously wanted to show how such liberals, socialists and freethinkers not only paved the way for but actually gave birth to the revolutionaries and “monsters” of the Sixties, such as Nechaev, Chernyshevskii and Dmitri Karakozov. At the same time, he wanted to portray the town, initially, as a backwater where nothing like the cataclysmic events of Books II and III could ever happen, so as to magnify the dramatic shock of those events.

Consciously or unconsciously Dostoevsky created a plot that is in many ways an allegory or representation of the history of Russia in the Sixties, and particularly how the Men of the Sixties crash-landed upon a stagnant and decaying society. The Men of the Sixties, with their political radicalism and moral apostasy, naturally spread shockwaves throughout Russia. One could not dramatize their impact without first painting the seemingly tranquil and stable scene upon which they burst. One prominent characteristic of the Men of the Forties was that they were not men of action. Belinsky was primarily a literary critic, Granovsky a historian, and Herzen, although a socialist, was not an active revolutionary and spent most of his adult life abroad. In short, the Forties involved a lot of talk but no action. The Forties were a period of intellectual ferment, but political inertia. The inertia of Book I is thus appropriate for representation of this period or at least its legacy.

The Sixties, on the other hand, involved manifestos, assassinations, arson and outright revolutionary rhetoric, and thus Books II and III are appropriate for the representation of this period. By portraying a sleepy, but decaying provincial town at length, and then foisting Stavrogin and Petr on the Forties-like society of the town at the end of Book I, Dostoevsky could represent and portray the bewilderment of Russia at the arrival of the monsters of the Sixties. When men like Chernishevskii, Karakozov and Nechaev burst on to the scene in the Sixties, those who had been used to the inertia and political repression of the Forties and Fifties were likely to be very astonished and perplexed. Dostoevsky probably decided that the most dramatic way to portray the “culture shock” of the Sixties was to have such men descend upon a sleepy provincial town and its apparently harmless intelligentsia. The sudden intrusion of the demons on this sleepy but decaying world was a masterful artistic representation of the sudden and unsettling intrusion of the Monsters of the Sixties on Russia. The greater the sense of inertia Dostoevsky could portray in Book I, the more dramatic would be the entrance of Stavrogin and Petr.

Indeed, the horror caused by shocking events narrated in Books II and III is similar to Dostoevsky’s own reaction to certain events in St. Petersburg in the spring of 1862. In May, a leaflet entitled *Young Russia* was circulated. The leaflet, whose author was one P.G. Zaichnevskii, was printed by Zaichnevskii’s cohorts on their own press in St. Petersburg. The pamphlet demanded a bloody revolution to overthrow all aspects of the current system. While violence would be initially directed at the royal entourage, *Young Russia* proclaimed that anyone “not with us is against us,” and evoked images of mass carnage. The pamphlet also attacked anyone who advocated any type of compromise with the present society and political system, including Herzen.¹⁴ At about this same time, fires of mysterious origin raged for two weeks in the capital. Large swathes of the poorer districts were incinerated, and rumors soon began to circulate that the same radicals who had circulated *Young Russia* were also responsible for the fires.¹⁵

Dostoevsky, by this time a religious conservative, was stupefied by the audacity and what he perceived as the stupidity of the radicals who had circulated *Young Russia*. He was so horrified by the fires that, according to Chernyshevsky, Dostoevsky visited him in the apparent hope that he

¹⁴ Frank, Joseph, *Dostoevsky, The Stir of Liberation*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton U.P., 1986, 145-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 148-51.

could exercise some type of restraining influence on the radicals. Dostoevsky's account of this meeting differs, but he did state that he asked Chernyshevsky to express some kind of reproof to the radicals.¹⁶

The fires and the pamphlets distributed in the provincial town in *Demons* of course bear many similarities to these events in the capital in the spring of 1862, and Dostoevsky magnified the sense of horror and destruction by superimposing on the night of the fires the calamitous fete, as well as the murders of Shatov, Lebiadkin, Maria and Liza and the suicide of Kirillov. The shocking effect of these later events is of course magnified by the sense of inertia created in Book I, from which the reader gains the impression that nothing like this could happen in the town.

There is, however, more to the plot structure of *Demons* than finding an appropriate way to represent the shock waves created by men like Chernyshevsky and Nechaev. Prominent in Book I is Dostoevsky's contempt for the Westernized intelligentsia of Russia, typified in the novel by Stepan, Karamazinov, Liputin, Virginskii, Liza and even the narrator. While they themselves are shocked by the calamitous events of Books II and III, it is their liberal and socialist ideologies, portrayed in Book I, that spawned Petr and Stavrogin. Indeed, Petr is the son of Stepan and Stavrogin of Varvara. Ultimately, however, it is precisely the cozy world of the liberal intelligentsia that is destroyed in Book III. The destruction of this cozy world is made all the more dramatic by the impression created in Book I that it is a world where nothing dramatic ever happens.

In this connection, it is important to trace what happens to all of the characters introduced in Book I. Virginskii and Liputin are drawn into Petr's cell and inveigled into a conspiracy to murder Shatov. Dostoevsky obviously desired to show how those who espoused such foolish ideas could be easily drawn into Petr's subversive machinations. His whole cell is eventually arrested. Lebiadkin and his sister are murdered. Kirillov commits suicide and Stepan and Karmazinov are disgraced and humiliated at the fete. The disintegration of the fete into a fiasco is, incidentally, one of the few unfortunate events not engineered by Petr, but demonstrates how the town easily could degenerate into disorder, even without the intervention of Petr. Similarly, Liza Nikolaevna is murdered by the crowd because she is "Stavrogin's woman." Stavrogin commits suicide. Varvara and Dasha survive, but have lost everyone they love or value. Von Lembke goes insane. The only true survivors are the narrator

¹⁶ Ibid., 151-59.

and, frighteningly, Petr. In sum, virtually the entire world that Dostoevsky creates in Book I is destroyed in Book III, and this destruction is largely self-inflicted.

In other words the eventual fate of the *intelligenti* introduced in Book I suggests that that book was denuded of action in part in order to focus on portraying how the sleepy, morally shabby and intellectually mediocre world of the Westernized intelligentsia, a world that was superficially harmless, not only gave rise to the “demons” of the Sixties, but also that these demons, in a stroke of poetic justice, became the agents of the destruction of the world that spawned them. It was important to portray this world as static and seemingly harmless (and thus devoid of any real drama) precisely to increase the ultimate shock value of what would be its eventual self-destruction.

Little would the reader know at the end of Book I that the world that Dostoevsky had described in Book I was on the verge of self destruction. Dostoevsky obviously saw dramatic value in saving for Books II and III the ultimate implications of the ideas bandied about by the intelligentsia of this provincial town. The key to this scheme was initially painting a world that seemed incapable of any action other than the discussion of misguided ideas and ideologies. The pettiness of this world would be presented through satiric portraits of polite society discussing the ideas of the day, but the reader would understand the destructive potential of these ideas only at the end of the novel. To be sure, the narrator does tell us in the first paragraph of the novel that he will be narrating certain “strange events” in the town. That, however, in retrospect proves a colossal understatement for the series of cataclysmic events that transpire in Book III.

Dostoevsky thus wanted to portray two types of culture shock associated with the demons of the Sixties: the shock created by the criminal and moral transgressions of the demons themselves and the shock of realizing that “savants” like Stepan were their progenitors and would thus be the ultimate cause the destruction of their own world. The dramatic value of these “revelations” in Books II and III would be set up by a prolonged portrait of a seemingly harmless circle of intellectuals, whom the reader would only later learn had given birth to the agents of their own destruction.

Dostoevsky obviously feared the radicals of the Sixties and the danger they posed to the future of Russia. As a vision of the next one hundred and twenty years of Russian history, *Demons* is frighteningly prescient.

The radicals did eventually destroy not only the liberal society that had given birth to them but also themselves. Upon seizing power, the Bolsheviks swept aside the civil society that had developed during the last fifty years of the Empire, and then, in the Great Terror, the Old Bolsheviks themselves were systematically exterminated. The cataclysmic events of Book III of *Demons* were Dostoevsky's vision of the destructiveness that the radicals could visit upon Russia. Little do we suspect at the conclusion of Book I that the world portrayed there would give birth to this destructiveness.