

The Eternal Stranger:  
The Superfluous Man in Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the School of Communication  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in English

By  
Kelly Hamren  
4 May 2011

Liberty University  
School of Communication  
Master of Arts in English

Dr. Carl Curtis

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Thesis Chair

Date

Dr. Emily Heady

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First Reader

Date

Dr. Thomas Metallo

---

Second Reader

Date

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who have seen me through this project and, through support for my academic endeavors, have made it possible for me to come this far:

to Dr. Carl Curtis, for his insight into Russian literature in general and Dostoevsky in particular;

to Dr. Emily Heady, for always pushing me to think more deeply about things than I ever thought I could;

to Dr. Thomas Metallo, for his enthusiastic support and wisdom in sharing scholarly resources;

to my husband Jarl, for endless patience and sacrifices through two long years of graduate school;

to the family and friends who never stopped encouraging me to persevere—David and Kathy Hicks, Karrie Faidley, Jennifer Hughes, Jessica Shallenberger, and Ramona Myers.

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## Introduction

The superfluous man is one of the most important developments in the Golden Age of Russian literature—the period beginning in the 1820s and climaxing in the great novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. To understand the superfluous man is to understand a key cultural struggle, the battle for self-understanding of a Russian intellectual elite looking for solid ground along the fault between sophisticated Western philosophy and a Slavic heritage understood more instinctively than intellectually. The superfluous man is the bastard child of a volatile, centuries-long love affair between the Western mind and the Slavic soul. And yet it would be hard to imagine a term more loosely applied or more inadequately defined. Turgenev's Rudin and Bazarov, Goncharov's Oblomov, Dostoevsky's Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, and Tolstoy's Andrei Bolkonsky are just a few characters who have made the register of superfluous men simply by not fitting in or evincing a general disillusionment with life, the system, or the status quo. If being a misfit or a rebel, however, adequately defined the character type, why not expand the list to include Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge, Hugo's Enjolras, or Byron's Don Juan? It is what makes the superfluous man a peculiar phenomenon of the Russian mind, a representation of a particular cultural conflict in a particular place and time, that sets him apart from other more or less socially awkward or dissatisfied members of the literary canon. The superfluous man is the dual product of Russian culture and Western education, a man of exceptional intelligence who is increasingly and painfully aware of his failure to synthesize knowledge and experience into lasting values, whose false dignity is continually undermined by contact with Russian reality, and whose growing alienation from self and others leads to an unabashed exhibition of and indulgence in cowardly, ludicrous, and sometimes destructive instincts.

To understand the development of the superfluous man, it is crucial to understand a little of the history of Russia's troubled relationship with the West—or, initially, their lack of a relationship. James Billington, in *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretative History of Russian Culture*, points out that the early ties between the West and Kievan Rus' (the pre-Muscovite center of Russian civilization) loosened over time, as Russia turned its attention in the direction of the rising sun, toward which its civilization was moving (4). Centuries of relative isolation and internal struggle would lead to the cultivation of a unique culture, not merely divergent from that of the West, but in many ways ideologically incompatible with it. Most important, of course, was the form and content of Russian religion. Orthodoxy, while imported from Byzantium in the tenth century, took on distinctive attributes in Russia. In the first place, as Billington points out, "The unity of Kievan Russia was above all that of a common religious faith. The forms of faith and worship were almost the only uniformities in this loosely structured civilization" (13). Religion, in other words, provided stability and a sense of community for Russians as their civilization developed, until it became more or less equivalent to national identity: to be Russian Orthodox was to be Russian. And if Orthodoxy was the cement which held together the urban Muscovite, the hunter in the Urals, and the homesteader on the Central Asian steppe, it was also what separated all of them from the Roman Catholic West, a civilization in which (comparatively speaking) religious ties were increasingly more political than cultural. Later, after the Protestant Reformation and ensuing religious wars tore Western Europe apart, Western religion no longer meant unity in any sense, and such a religion would be, to the traditional Russian mind, as meaningless as the secularization that followed in its wake.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This general emphasis on religious unity did not, of course, mean that religious conflict was completely unknown in Russia. But as Riasanovsky and Steinberg point out, the rebellion of

During its years of isolation, Russia also cultivated a unique approach to aesthetics. According to Billington, this approach predated the introduction of Christianity into Russia, since ultimately “[t]he early Russians were drawn to Christianity by the aesthetic appeal of its liturgy, not the rational shape of its theology” (9). One might almost say that the Russian had not so much a unique approach to aesthetics as an aesthetic approach to life and truth—an approach with several important effects on the Russian mind. In the first place, as the same source indicates, the task of Russian theology was not primarily to delve into the complexities of doctrine, not to explain or to systematize, but rather to render spiritual reality more accessible and immediate (Billington 8-9). It was this approach to understanding that would make the painting of icons, those two-dimensional windows into a higher spiritual world, possibly “the most remarkable artistic development in Russian history” (Riazanovsky and Steinberg 56). It is also the reason why Russian Orthodoxy, in both theory and practice, became what many a Westerner would disparagingly call “anti-intellectual.” This accusation involves a misunderstanding of the function of Russian religious aesthetics. There is, within Orthodoxy, a sense that the path to union with God is not through an analysis of various aspects of his nature and the nature of his relationship with mankind but rather through an appreciation of the beauty of his nature and of this process as unities. Hence, Leonid Ouspensky argues that “beauty, as it is understood by the Orthodox church . . . is a part of the life to come, when God will be all in all . . . [and t]his beauty can be a path or a means of bringing us closer to God” (42). Drawing a diagram of such a path, labeling its various parts and explaining its progress through the

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“Old Believers” against the seventeenth-century reforms of Patriarch Nikon “constituted the only major schism in the history of the Orthodox Church in Russia” (185), and even that conflict did not result in the exponential multiplication of sects that the Reformation spawned in the West.

mysteries of divine reality will, in the Orthodox mind, be not merely pointless but potentially harmful, as it commits what one may call the “fallacy of means,” or the idea that when one has indicated how something operates, one has a greater knowledge of its essence. In reality, one has lost sight of the essence altogether. To preserve the connection of the believer to this essence is the function of the icon, as is indicated by the popular legend of the Orthodox priest explaining the relative lack of systematic theology in Orthodoxy by saying “Icons teach us all we need to know.”<sup>2</sup> For many in the Western traditions, “to know” means to understand, as one understands a mathematical theorem; for those in the Orthodox tradition, “to know” means something much deeper, the type of knowledge one has of a person rather than of an idea.

Only such an understanding of the religious aesthetics of Orthodoxy can enable one to perceive why, when Peter the Great dragged his country kicking and screaming into renewed contact with the West at the turn of the eighteenth century, many Russians would be so resistant to the analytical, pragmatic, and even reductive approach to reality developing out of the Western Enlightenment. In the traditional Russian mindset, “[m]an’s function was not to analyze that which has been resolved or to explain that which is mysterious, but lovingly and humbly to embellish the inherited forms of praise and worship—and thus, perhaps, gain some imperfect sense of the luminous world to come” (Billington 7). Hence, the Western drive to discover and explain, with its spirit of unrestrained inquiry, grated against the Russians’ inherited instinct for the preservation of mystery and distrust of unbridled curiosity. It is not that understanding was irrelevant to Russians but that certain things demanded a different kind of understanding than an

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<sup>2</sup> This story is often told, with inadequate attribution or none at all to a particular source. But its basis in fact is, perhaps, irrelevant to its importance as an expression of the Orthodox religious framework.

Enlightenment approach would allow. To someone with a traditional Russian—that is, Orthodox—sensibility, the Western methods of analysis must seem to trample on the sacred and destroy beauty through dissection and explanation, whether for its own sake or for the sake of religious dogma, just as vivisection snuffs out the life it seeks to understand. The essential quality of the being, or truth, is given up in the very process of inquiry.

Another facet of traditional Russian understanding that the increasingly secular West would come to challenge is the Orthodox fondness for metanarrative. Billington speaks of the Russians' "extraordinary sense of history" and of the importance of passing on the memory of "[l]ocal and contemporary saints" (8-9). Russian hagiography illustrates the importance of maintaining a context both spiritual and tangible, in space as well as time. To lose touch with this dual context is to lose sight of both identity and direction, to suffer historical dislocation. George P. Fedotov speaks of early "Russian chroniclers" having "not only the sense of the concrete, the love for artistic shaping of historical events, but also the sense of larger connotations, the desire to find the meaning of history as a whole" (382). Hence, the Russian approach to history is also defined by the Russian mind's privileging of beauty and its drive to make meaning tangible and accessible to human understanding, the same tendencies that governed Russia's characteristic approach to religion. It is therefore no surprise that, as Fedotov points out, "ancient Russian theology was entirely historical," or, one might rather say, apocalyptic (qtd. in Billington 11), so that from the very beginning, the destiny of the Russian people became inseparable from Orthodoxy. Several facets of Orthodox belief and practice make it exceptionally adept at cultivating a Russian sense of national destiny that Western skepticism would have difficulty eradicating. One of the most important is summed up well by Zenkovsky in his article "The Spirit of Russian Orthodoxy":

[I]n Eastern Christianity it is the idea of the resurrection that predominates Easter, whereas in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism [it is] Christ's crucifixion and sufferings . . . . In the West the recognition of sin has and does overshadow the awareness of God in the world . . . . In the Orthodox approach this is not so. Instead there is a fundamental realization that the world is saved through Christ's resurrection. In summary, the Church accepts the world and seeks to find its truth. I would call this idea the message of 'luminous reception,' of Christian cosmism. (49)

In other words, the reality of the kingdom of God on earth is not as far away from an Orthodox believer as it might be from a Protestant or a Roman Catholic. As Zenkovsky puts it, "The Russian Church lives in the awareness that it makes everything different" (49). And yet, ironically enough, it does so by guarding its traditions against dangerous innovations from within and dangerous new ideas from without: "Russian Orthodoxy and Eastern Christianity in general are characterized by two particular features: strict devotion to Church tradition and the use of the national language in the liturgy" (Zenkovsky 38). The purpose of the first is, as Billington points out, to keep untarnished the sacred traditions of the Church in anticipation of the return of her Founder (11-2). The second, whatever its original purpose, served to create a historical consciousness in which religious conviction and historical identity became irrevocably intertwined.

Yet another important facet of Russian civilization is its general tendency to privilege the community over the individual, a tendency that also has its roots in Russian Orthodoxy. Zenkovsky points out that the choice of the word *соборность* for the Greek *καθολον* in the *Credo* takes the idea of "one universal church" to an entirely new level:

The notion of *sobornost* took deep roots in Russian thought. Prince Serge Trubetskoi's theory of *sobornaya*, or the congregational nature of man's conscience, is its most remarkable derivation. According to Trubetskoi, our conscience is not personal because it contains many elements which are not from us but only in us. It is also not impersonal because it is a part of the personality. Therefore, the conscience is supra-personal, it binds us with all men. (44)

To lose one's moral sense is to be cut off from the Church and, hence, the community—and vice versa. It was the influence—even the residual influence—of such ideas on Russians that would make Western individualism so difficult to swallow. Ellen B. Chances, in spite of the emphasis in her scholarship on cross-cultural patterns, recognizes this distinctive attribute in the Russian cognitive framework when she points out that “[i]n Russia, we see that Boris and Gleb, the first saints to be canonized by the Russian Church, were admired for their refusal to rebel” (“Superfluous Man” 112). She also nods to the concept of *соборность*, remarking that “Russian Orthodoxy condemns the human being's attempts to lead an isolated or independent existence” (112).<sup>3</sup> Thus, if to be Orthodox was to be Russian, to join the increasingly individualistic West in

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<sup>3</sup> Chances, in this article as well as in her book *Conformity's Children: An Approach to the Superfluous Man in Russian Letters*, attempts to define the superfluous man by his refusal to conform to conventional social expectations and the various authors' instinctive drives to vilify him for daring to be an individual. Such an approach is insightful, in that it recognizes the Russian emphasis on submission to the needs of the community, but it is ultimately insufficient. Simply defining the superfluous man as a non-conformist is not enough, for the same reason that one cannot stop at defining him as a misfit. Both definitions beg the question. Chances has

dividing communal and private interests into separate spheres was to call into question the religious and national foundations of one's very identity.

To speak of all these ideas as being distinctively Russian is, of course, to generalize, but even so, Orthodoxy—with its emphasis on historical momentum, national destiny, and communal responsibility—left an imprint on Russian culture that would far outlast the days when it reigned supreme, largely unchallenged by foreign influences. After the reign of Peter the Great, with his determination to build a gateway to the West in a swamp on the Gulf of Finland—and, as Billington points out, to ensure that Russian learning and political discourse would absorb Western language and ideas (214)—Russia could no longer ignore the progressive culture of its “sophisticated” neighbors. Before long, the upper classes spoke more often in French than in Russian, until many of them could no longer express themselves adequately in their native tongue. The unapologetic rationalism of the Western Enlightenment, as well as the respective manifestations of Romanticism in Rousseau, Byron, and Schiller that followed in its wake, came to fascinate educated Russians. Poets like Zhukovsky and Vyazemsky wrote Romantic works in Russian and gained much popularity. Yet as Vladimir Nabokov caustically—and rightly—notes, Zhukovsky's verses were merely glorified paraphrases of Western originals (*Verses and Versions* 38). This slavish imitation of Western subjects and expressive vehicles would prove troubling to patriotic Russians like Alexander Griboedov and Alexander Pushkin, as would the fact that the individualism of the Romantic movement was a challenge to traditional Russian values. Billington suggests that the men and women of the new French-speaking elite were increasingly alienated from their own fellow Russians (210), and they must have had a

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simply provided a synonym for *superfluous* without indicating what makes this character type's particular brand of superfluity (or non-conformity) unique, significant, and ultimately disturbing.

troubling sense of the separation, even if they superficially adopted the prevailing European scorn for the supposed backwardness of their own country. Such a psychological move involves a degree of self-hatred, and the hated part of the self would necessarily resent its strutting Westernized counterpart. Noted historian A. J. Toynbee indicates that such is the usual struggle of an emergent “intelligentsia”:

[A]n essential characteristic of an intelligentsia is that it acts as a channel for the introduction and acclimatisation in its own country / of an alien culture; to which I would add: [that] the intrusive culture is recognised as in some sense superior to the native culture and yet the native culture is not just submerged, but persists as a living force seeking to come to terms with the intrusive culture. (para. in Seeley 92-3)

Russian values would not give way to Western challengers without a fight, and eventually the lingering influence of these values would lead to the polarization of the Russian intelligentsia during and after the reign of Peter the Great, as an enlightened society no longer fully in tune with traditional Russian ideas nor wholly reconciled with imported alternatives became increasingly dissatisfied with the impossibility of integrating the two on anything more than a superficial level. The splitting of these dissatisfied intellectuals into Westernizers and Slavophiles largely exacerbated the problem, since the reaction of the Westernizers against traditional Russian values merely drew attention to those values’ continued influence and ensured their lasting place in the discourse; similarly, the attempts on the part of the Slavophiles to return to traditional Russian values merely underscored the fact that they had lost touch with those values to begin with.

The problem thus became one of identity, since Russian intellectuals were unable to establish a stable self/other binary. They were just Western enough to step outside their heritage and feel pained by its “backwardness” and just Russian enough to sense that the West had no satisfactory substitute for the spiritual and communal dimensions of those “backward” traditions. Post-colonial discourse speaks of the hybridity of societies imperialized and overwhelmed by the influence of colonizing cultures, and though Russia was never technically imperialized by the West, the invasion of values created just the sort of identity problems found in, say, India in the wake of the British occupation or South Africa in the throes of competing British, Dutch, and native cultural paradigms. Homi Babha, in *The Location of Culture*, speaks of the process of constructing selfhood in such “in-between spaces”: “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (2). Russians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries found themselves operating along just such a fault between divergent ways of processing reality, and they found themselves generally unable to articulate a coherent cognitive framework, since they were caught in the intervening space between Western and Russian halves of a self that resisted integration into an understandable whole. If articulating the self/other binary was so problematic and painful, if not impossible, then the least the troubled intellectuals could do was to express what the growing awareness of their position meant—to develop a character illustrating the disturbed condition of someone no longer able to fool himself about his alienation from both others and the self: enter, the superfluous man.

The first attribute of the superfluous man is, of course, that he is the embodiment of cultural hybridity, too Russian to be truly Western, too Western to be truly Russian, a foreigner

both abroad and at home. Thus far he merely reflects the situation of nearly all Russian intellectuals of his day. He must, however, represent a peculiar concentration and hence powerful expression of the problem, and therefore he is presented as not merely well-educated (most often either in the West or by Western/Westernized tutors, of course) but also exceptionally intelligent and perceptive. Tragically, what the union of such an education and such a powerful mind would normally accomplish—that is, the equipping of a person to face both personal and occupational problems with discernment and the empowering of the same against, not vice perhaps, but folly—fails miserably. The superfluous man is not empowered by his education and intelligence, but rather crippled by both on a number of different levels. As Chances says, speaking of Mikhail Lermontov's representation of the superfluous man, "his mind will not let him live" (*Conformity's Children* 45). In the first place, he fails to synthesize education and experience, since a Western education hardly arms one against Russian reality or gives one the means to process residual Russian instincts. Joanna Hubbs points out how, even after many decades of Russian exposure to the West, Russian children underwent on the individual level the abortive process of developing these native instincts as a precursor to their ultimate loss:

Westernization of the upper classes, which proceeded through the eighteenth century and resulted in a forcible divorce from their traditional culture, was repeated with each generation through the customs of child-rearing: The higher ranks of the nobility continued to place their infant offspring at the breasts of peasant nurses. . . . It is perhaps for this reason that the idyllic memory of childhood floats over the writings of a number of nineteenth-century gentry intellectuals. It expresses their deep emotional attachment to those nurses and the

ever-remembered stories and customs of the *narod* with which the nurses surrounded their masters' infants. (208)

It is no surprise that the systematic undermining of nursery values in the Westernized schoolroom produced generation after generation of conflicted Russians. Of course, many refused to acknowledge the conflict on a conscious level, making possible the superficially Westernized society of the St. Petersburg salons and provincial drawing rooms that so characterized the nineteenth century. Many upper-class Russians could draw at will from contradictory sets of values, feeling but not ultimately acknowledging the ludicrous no-man's-land in which they operated. The superfluous man, however, has penetrated the illusion, being forced by his superior intelligence to recognize and despise the hypocritical intelligentsia from which he emerges. His characteristic attitude is sheer, unadulterated contempt—an initially passive contempt which, in later representations, turns into active spite.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the superfluous man is that he is superfluous to the very society that he understands better than anyone else does. His growing awareness of the problem does not equip him with the motivation or the ability to engage it constructively. Those around him might content themselves with incoherent values, but he has seen through them and yet has nothing more solid with which he might replace them. He will end up with no values whatsoever and, hence, no direction, no productive outlet for his understandable frustration with the surrounding world. This absence of value and direction is a crucial point, since it separates the superfluous man from all the literary embodiments of the intellectuals of the 1840s and even the radicals of the 1860s. The listless idealists of the 1840s had many values—most of them

aesthetic and abstract, and few of them practical,<sup>4</sup> as illustrated by the endearing, blustering, and ultimately pathetic Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky's *Demons*. Such values might have been as difficult to apply to Russian life as any others born of Western Romanticism, but the fact that such men had values at all clearly separates them from the superfluous man. Similarly, the generation of the 1860s, as exemplified by Stepan Trofimovich's radical son, Pyotr Stepanovich (and more famously by Turgenev's Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*), adopted for their values a sort of anti-value, a hatred of the previous generation's tenets that might not have provided them with a positive alternative but nonetheless gave them the capacity for action, gave them a negative agenda. The superfluous man has no agenda because he has no values, positive or negative. It is for this reason that the central concern of Dostoevsky's incomparable *Demons* is neither Stepan Trofimovich, who is still alive enough to undertake a spiritual journey, nor his son, who is still alive enough to undertake a mission of destruction, but rather the dark, enigmatic Stavrogin, who ultimately posits that he is capable of nothing, "not even negation" (Dostoevsky *Demons* 676).

The superfluous man's awareness—or, more accurately, hyperawareness—of the cultural conflict that has given birth to him becomes increasingly painful, festers, and turns him into one of the most bitter character types in all of literature. Not only is he unable to connect with Western Europeans or the Russian people, the *народ* who would inflame the imaginations of alienated intellectuals trying to "return" to an only partially understood heritage, but he is also unable to connect to those who, like him, are caught between the two worlds. He is incapable of joining them in comfortable self-deceit, and eventually he loses even the desire for human

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<sup>4</sup> The volatile socialist critic Belinsky might be an exception, as might Herzen, notwithstanding his ultimate exile.

connection. Pyman, speaking of Dostoevsky's representation of the superfluous man, offers a description that might apply to his literary predecessors as well: the superfluous man "has lost the ground from beneath his (or her) feet, . . . has become a spiritual 'wanderer', an 'outsider' . . . . Totally withdrawn into self, indifferent to others, amnesiac towards the need for the absolute, the loss of the 'positively beautiful', [he moves] inexorably from dialogue to monologue to self-destruction" (112). The progression is thus from alienation from others toward alienation from the self and, eventually, the dissolution of the self altogether. In his later manifestations, the superfluous man is more an absence than a presence, operating according to a dialectic that disrupts every attempt to synthesize the self until he is faced with his own moral insubstantiality.

The various representations of the superfluous man underscore the cultural dimensions of the problem he represents. In the first place, he is represented as having not merely a strong mind but, increasingly with later developments of the character type, a remarkably strong will as well. This quality is brutally ironic, since the hollowness of his soul makes certain that the superfluous man will be able to find no lasting channel for his will, nor will he maintain action toward any conceivable end. Freedom of action becomes its own end, and this lack of an external object, of a goal outside the will itself, will chip away at inhibition until all restraint collapses. Such a will must assert its own freedom to follow any arbitrary impulse, and since no coherent values govern the superfluous man's impulses, his actions will chase these impulses in increasingly erratic and outlandish directions. It is this dialectic in the character type that turns the bitter listlessness of his earlier representations into the destructive, dangerous, and frightening dimensions of his later representations. With each fresh treatment, the character becomes more aware of his own hollow nature and compensates by indulging unpredictable, vindictive drives against the relatively happy, self-deceiving occupants of the contradictory world through which he moves, forever an

exile. This turn of the character type toward darker dimensions is recognized by Seeley when he describes Lermontov's Pechorin, the first of the later representations, as having a "will to power"<sup>5</sup> [which] he experiences as 'an insatiable thirst devouring all that crosses his path'" (105). Speaking of the "cruelty" (105) of this will, Seeley goes on to describe how this later character "revels in regarding himself as an instrument in the hands of destiny, as the 'axe' or 'executioner' of fate striking down men or their happiness 'often without malice, but always without pity'" (106). And yet even the destructive actions of the superfluous man will take place in fits and starts. He will enact no awe-inspiring effort toward world domination but rather offer the occasional impulsive slap in the face of whoever happens to be standing nearby. For it is notable that the conscientious, ingenious, seemingly unstoppable doer of evil—or, to put it in nineteenth-century terms, the passionate nihilist—can inspire even in virtuous readers a little awe alongside the more socially validated response of fear and loathing. Even the hateful Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky of Dostoevsky's *Demons* is still human enough to care passionately about a cause, to worship someone (Stavrogin), and to motivate men (albeit weak men) to action. But the superfluous man is neither consistently<sup>6</sup> awe-inspiring nor, any longer, fully human, and it is for these reasons that he represents a problem much deeper and more disturbing to the Russian imagination.

It is here, in fact, that a key difference emerges between the modern, Western concept of evil and the traditional Russian concept of evil, a difference crucial to the context of the

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<sup>5</sup> To perceive this "will to power" as Nietzschean *avant la lettre* would not be amiss. It has the same capacity to turn its exerciser into a monolith.

<sup>6</sup> Initially, he might be very attractive, but his façade of dignity dissolves on closer examination.

superfluous man. Some might trace the development of this Western understanding of evil to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which the rebellion of Satan and the demonic horde is described with epic imagery that lends tragic dimensions to their position and, some would argue, a residual majesty to the character of Satan. This reading might be anachronistic,<sup>7</sup> a product of the uninhibited imaginations of the English Romantics, but whatever its origin, it is a reading that has taken over the discourse since the early nineteenth century. More significantly, Western representations of evil since the Renaissance and particularly since the Romantic era have manifested an emphasis on the awe-inspiring, majestic dimensions of evildoers that increasingly individualistic readers must find simultaneously attractive and repulsive—from the sharp, perceptive mind of Iago, to the daring of Faust, the “noble” suffering of Childe Harold, and even the seductive brilliance of Hannibal Lecter. This is, of course, to speak of a trend and not an absolute, and it is possible to gain much from encountering such guises of evil—provided that they are recognized as just that, guises. It would seem, however, that the bestial and grotesque

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<sup>7</sup> Actually, a holistic reading of Milton's epic reveals a situational undermining of Satan's pretensions, which are made ridiculous by his continual failure to overshadow the figure of Christ, who lets him take over the plot for a while and then demolishes his army with ease—a device reminiscent of the reader's gradual disillusionment with Hector in *The Iliad*, whose prominence in the plot and heroic reputation merely serve as a foil to highlight the greater prowess of Achilles, who, when he finally enters the fray, is unstoppable. But the Western critical tradition tends to gloss over the cracks in Satan's (and Hector's) armor in favor of an arguably unhealthy fixation on the mystique of the rebel or, in the case of Homer's epic, the so-called “underdog.”

side of evil—as represented in, for instance, the monstrous Grendel of *Beowulf*—has been largely subsumed in later Western works by characters who through their façade of glory and complexity suggest that the forbidden fruit might make one like God after all, albeit at a terrible price.

The trend in Russian folklore, cultivated over centuries and passed on to nineteenth-century gentry by household servants, has been the opposite. Russian folk depictions of evil—and specifically of the devil—have tended to preserve an awareness of farce. The forbidden fruit is more likely to turn one into a beast, or even an insect, than into a god. To the Russian mind, the Satan of Milton (or more accurately Shelley) and his various literary descendants must have seemed strange. One can encounter such a figure and feel fear, loathing, or even hatred, but it will always be mixed with awe. As author Simon Franklin points out in his article “Nostalgia for Hell: Russian Literary Demonism and Orthodox Tradition,” it is not possible to respond in such a way to the devils of Russian folklore: “[D]emons are . . . morally unambiguous. They are not tragic or avuncular or nobly doomed free spirits. They are not Miltonic or Byronic. They can of course make themselves appear attractive . . . [but t]heir essence is thoroughly nasty. They are ceaselessly hostile. Their purpose, in their dealings with mankind, is to bring souls to damnation” (32-3). They are also less glamorous than their Western counterparts. Faith Wigzell draws attention to this distinctive treatment of devils, saying, “Folk *bylichki* and folktales often depict the devil as prankster, playing nasty tricks on men . . . . Hence the common euphemism *shut* (joker) for the devil” (“Dostoevskii” 37). A joker might inspire fear, but it will be a different kind of fear than that elicited by the powerful Satan of Milton, who has a “master plan” to conquer heaven and earth; he would be above such antics as getting someone lost in a snowstorm—as the evil spirit does, seemingly for fun, in Pushkin’s poem “Demon.” This work,

apart from indicating the interest of Russia's greatest poet in his country's folklore, also underscores another aspect of what Wigzell calls "the folk demonic"—that is, that the trademark of Russian folk devils is "mirthless, cruel or destructive laughter" ("Dostoevskii" 37). The devil that would lure a traveler off the road to his death—and that would do so for amusement, on a whim—embodies an evil just as real as that of the cosmic rebel in Milton, but the grossness of his evil is more obvious. And it is the habit of Russian folklore to continually draw attention to this grossness, to cultivate contempt alongside the fear evoked by evil spirits in any culture.

This foray into Russian devil folklore is important for several reasons. In the first place, for generations of *мужики*, the peasants largely responsible for the oral tradition that eventually gave birth to Russian literature, it was far from a passing interest. It is possible to say, without the slightest exaggeration, that Russian peasant culture was not merely fascinated by devils but obsessed with them. Wigzell points out that the typical Russian serf was more aware of the devil's presence than he or she was of God's ("Dostoevskii" 34). The devil was an immediate threat, and all the more frightening because, as Franklin notes, he had a thousand masks (35). It is likely then that the peasant nurses whose bedtime stories and superstitions left their mark on generations of the Russian intelligentsia would have communicated at least part of their awareness of such a central figure of the folk heritage. That they did so accounts for the number of devils who make their appearance, disguised or otherwise, in the pages of nineteenth-century Russian literature. Pushkin's "Demon" was followed by a poem of the same title by Lermontov. The most famous depiction is perhaps the petty, bureaucratic devil who manifests himself to the tortured consciousness of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's last novel. But beneath these obvious examples are a multitude of more subtle invocations, many of which tellingly surround the various representations of the superfluous man.

Most obviously, the superfluous man is a betrayal of traditional Russian values, particularly the exclusive belief in Orthodoxy and the accompanying faith in Russia as a stronghold for the sacred. Thus, it seems only natural for an author seeking a more authentic connection with his own culture (understood through its folklore) to indict his character through deliberate association with the demonic. On a less obvious and more interesting level, however, given the juxtaposition of such a character and such a context, the association seems somewhat unavoidable. One might take, for example, the implication of the following observation by Wigzell:

In Russian folk belief, certain places or times were designated as liminal. It was here that the unclean force in its various manifestations (including that of the devil) might be encountered; such times and locations, therefore, presented particular danger. Liminal places included cemeteries, crossroads and thresholds; times included Yuletide, midsummer and midnight. In folk belief pausing on a threshold brought dire consequences. (“Dostoevskii” 33)

The superfluous man, as a lost soul caught between two worlds, is in the most metaphysically compromising position imaginable. He is caught in the threshold between his native culture and the culture of the West, and therefore he must be either vulnerable to the devil or a devil himself—more likely the latter, since he is forced to operate in his liminal space indefinitely. As Wigzell indicates, it was through such spaces that devils might move freely between the underworld and the world of live beings. Thus, “[f]olk belief linked them [devils] with fissures in the earth’s surfaces, caves, abysses, or ravines; it was devils’ love of gaping holes that explained their proclivity for crawling into yawning mouths or through open doors” (“Russian Folk Devil” 65). Secondly, the superfluous man has no coherent self, and therefore he can manifest himself

only through various guises—exactly like the devil with a thousand masks. He has to operate as the devil does in order to establish even a semblance of reality or substance in his hollow soul. Thirdly, if the superfluous man's will can find an outlet only in petty acts of destruction, his resemblance to the joker (*uyym*) of Russian folklore will be inevitable, and this resemblance will increase with each further development of the character type. The verbal contempt of Chatsky will become a more volatile spite in Onegin, sadistic and destructive mockery in Pechorin, and finally, in Stavrogin, a deliberately debasing violation of every wholesome object within reach. One can hear, on every page, echoes of the diabolical laughter of Pushkin's sprites of the snowstorm.

It is also, perhaps, unavoidable that the dialectic between Western and Russian values that would give shape to the superfluous man would be expressed most powerfully by his internal dialectic between competing conceptions of evil. Seeing in himself a spirit of negation, a spirit that denies one set of values and rejects the other, the superfluous man might become a law unto himself in the tradition of Satan in *Paradise Lost*: if he must fall, his fall will shake the foundations of the universe! But the superfluous man is not fully Western and thus cannot maintain such a delusion of grandeur, for the Russian vision of the devil will slink across his mental horizon and deflate his tragic conception into a farce. It is for this reason that the superfluous man is not a Childe Harold, nor any sort of Romantic, for he is ultimately as incapable of believing in himself as he is of believing in anything else. As Stavrogin most tellingly puts it, he is capable of nothing, "not even negation" (Dostoevsky *Demons* 676). He will be continually confronted with a deflation of his own ego, often by those around him who still have some connection with Orthodoxy or the folk tradition, but also by his own consciousness. He can imagine himself for the moment to be a great metaphysical rebel, but he instinctively

knows better, knows that beneath the flimsy fabric of his soul there is merely an empty space echoing with hollow, mad laughter. And when he ultimately destroys himself, one has to wonder what, after all, was left to be destroyed.

The superfluous man, then, represents the most powerful expression of the most poignant conflict in nineteenth-century Russia. It was a conflict born with St. Petersburg, and in many respects it continues today, as Russia emerges from nearly seventy years of renewed, self-imposed isolation from the West. Whatever its literary influences, the superfluous man embodies a particular problem that was tearing apart a particular culture at a particular time, and it is for this reason that he must be understood in historical context. The approach might be somewhat ironic, since the superfluous man represents an exercise in alienating and de-contextualizing the Russian soul from its environment, from others, and from the self. But just as one can only process grief through understanding one's relationship with what has been lost, the nature of the superfluous man appears most clearly against the background of the inherited values from which he is irrevocably divorced. So much of what makes these characters of Russian literature mysterious to the Western mind is due to the fact that those who created them were writing in the throes of an agonized exile from something Western minds often fail to see, let alone understand. It is sadly true that the power of a heritage can be fully appreciated only by someone who has been infused with it from the cradle, grown up internalizing it, and, as in the case at hand, trying and failing to reconcile it with what more "sophisticated" foreigners believe. But one can hope that even a vicarious and belated immersion in that heritage can shed some light on the morally and socially crippled products of its encounter with the West. In any case, without such an exercise in immersion, the superfluous man will be as superfluous to a canon clogged with rebellious misfits as he was to the culture out of which he was born.

## Epiphany and Alienation:

The Abortive Synthesis of Chatsky in Griboedov's *Gore ot Uma*

Many discussions of the superfluous man begin with *Eugene Onegin*, and there is no denying the importance of Pushkin's character on the type's developmental arc. It is, however, an earlier figure who first opens the door into the void for his literary progeny, and that is Griboedov's Chatsky in *Gore ot Uma*.<sup>8</sup> One might even say that every subsequent character who fits into the parameters—defined in the previous chapter—of the superfluous man represents an attempt to follow this enigmatic figure in his flight from the stage at the close of the action. After Chatsky, each superfluous man begins with the knowledge of his own alienation, a knowledge that Chatsky himself gains in that moment before his flight. Thus, his journey is a precursor to theirs, and any attempt to understand them without first investigating the foundational figure that made them possible will be problematic at best.

As for why many critics overlook Chatsky, some may do so for the very reason that makes him crucial to the inquiry—he does not begin as a superfluous man. He is lacking that hyperawareness of his nature and position that will characterize Onegin, Pechorin, and Stavrogin. He fights that awareness throughout the course of the action, trying not to be “superfluous” to a world that cannot possibly understand him and that he himself does not want to understand. Therefore, one must look closely at the end of the play to recognize in Chatsky that which will define his literary offspring. Another reason why critics outside Russia might

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<sup>8</sup> There is no consensus on an appropriate translation of this title. Various renderings include *Wit Works Woe*, *The Trouble with Reason*, *The Misfortune of Being Clever*, and *Woe from Wit*. I have chosen to follow a minority of critics in side-stepping the confusion, merely transliterating the Russian.

overlook Chatsky is the shortage of Western criticism on Griboedov in general. If one were to ask someone in the West to name the most important figures of Russian literature, the answers would most likely be Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, perhaps Solzhenitsyn. A more informed respondent would answer Pushkin, and rightly so, for reasons that will be explored in the following chapter. Asked to name Russian playwrights, most Westerners would think of Chekhov. Yet notwithstanding the importance of his drama, it was not Chekhov who wrote the first play of lasting importance in Russian, nor was it one of his plays that became what is possibly the most widely quoted work of Russian literature.

*Gore ot Uma* was written during a time when Russia was struggling to establish its own canon, most of its literature before the eighteenth century having been oral folklore or sacred pieces in Old Church Slavonic. Unfortunately, as Malnick points out, “for the most part its playwrights were content to take their plots, characters and even much of their idiom from foreign models” (10). Many Russians must have felt the need for a more authentic voice and were listening for it intently enough to recognize it in the single important stage work of an obscure diplomat. As Balina indicates, Alexander Griboedov made a deep impression on his generation: “Griboedov’s contemporaries praised the folk origins of the style and the quality of the language of *Gore ot uma*. Meshcherikov quotes Odoevsky: ‘. . . Only in Griboedov do we find unforced, easy language; the exact language in which we actually converse in society. In his style we find Russian coloring’” (93). It is not, of course, the case that *Gore ot Uma* emerged in a bubble of native feeling, free of any foreign influence. Russian critic Veselovsky points out, for instance, the importance of Moliere’s *Le Misanthrope* as a definite influence on the play’s characters and structure. But *Gore ot Uma* transcends its models, rising above slavish imitation to speak to Russians about Russian problems: “It is in this that one finds the complete

independence of the comic writer—in his depiction of the morals, the various social questions, and opinions held by the foremost members of his generation” (52). Balina also underscores the deep and lasting influence of *Gore ot Uma* on ordinary Russians, again quoting Odoevsky: “[O]ne could often hear ‘whole conversations that consisted largely of verses from *Gore ot uma*’” (93). Pushkin once said that “one half of the play’s lines will become proverbs,” and his prophecy proved accurate (Karlinsky 286). On hearing of Griboedov’s violent death at the Russian embassy in Persia, Pushkin, who had earlier called him “one of the smartest men in Russia,” gave him the flattering epitaph of having “accomplished something. After all, he wrote *Gore ot uma*” (qtd. in Balina 85). Therefore, notwithstanding its relative obscurity in the West, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of *Gore ot Uma* for the generations of Russian literati who circulated it in manuscript and struggled to understand the nature of Chatsky and his journey toward superfluity.

The key that unlocks the meaning behind this journey might be found in the answer to a question posed by Pushkin regarding the central problem of the play—a problem that frustrated Russia’s greatest poet, notwithstanding his love for Griboedov’s work. Pushkin sums up the problem as follows: “Everything he [Chatsky] says is very clever. But to whom does he say all this? To Famusov? To Skalozub? To the old ladies of Moscow at the ball? To Molchalin? This is inexcusable!” (qtd. in Balina 89). In other words, as Karlinsky also indicates, Pushkin thought that Chatsky ought to have known better than to “cast pearls”—his wit—before the swine in the play. What is one to do with a character, supposedly insightful, whose insight fails to inform him that he is forcing his worldly wisdom down the throats of people who cannot possibly appreciate it? This problem, first noted by Pushkin, was pondered by later critics as well, including Belinsky (302-3). To call the validity of Chatsky’s intellect into question, however, is to call into

question the success of the play itself since, as Griboedov himself indicated and generations have recognized, “the decisive meaning of the play lies in how those who possess intellect stand in contrast to those who do not and how the two groups interrelate in life” (Balina 90). But it is entirely possible to explain Chatsky’s abortive rhetoric without putting his intelligence on trial. Chatsky is a complex character, defined by much more than superior intellect. His struggle in the play is, in fact, a battle between Chatsky’s intellect and his longing for genuine connection with his fellow Russians. Until the end of the play, his cynicism—often thought to be his defining characteristic—is merely a façade, or a shadowy barrier between himself and what his mind would force him to recognize—that the people of Moscow really are what they appear to be, ridiculous and shallow parodies of their own ideals, whether Western or native. That he himself is a parody is his final epiphany, for now that he really sees people for who they are, he has no desire to be the catalyst that would make them into something better. His very knowledge of the world makes him unable to care enough about it to accomplish anything—makes him, finally, superfluous and frighteningly alone.

First of all, it is important to establish from the text that Chatsky does have a genuine longing for human connection and, specifically, a connection with the people of Moscow—that he does, in the beginning, have a beating heart. The first indicator of his humanity is the fact that, after years of education in Western Europe, he decides to return to Moscow at all. And what he expects to find there is embodied in Sophia, his childhood friend and the world around which his adolescent dreams had once revolved. He seeks to rediscover in her, in spite of every attempt on her part to disillusion him, the girl he had loved before they were both superficially Westernized: “Where is the age of innocence we knew then? / Long evenings that I spent with you then. / We’d play at hide-and-seek, chase up and down the stairs” (Griboedov 24). He does not

recognize her, but he wants to, so he refuses to acknowledge the irreversibility of change. He invites her to return with him to a dead past. When she responds with “What childishness!”, he dismisses her words by saying, “Small wonder you affect this modesty” (24). Her exclamation contains neither modesty nor affectation, but rather annoyance at his presumption, even rudeness, to think he can barge into her life after many years of absence and silence and expect to find her devotion to him unaltered. He says, “But please / Say, are you not in love? I beg of you, don’t tease. / Enough confused prevarication” (24). Again, one can see self-deception in these lines. Sofia is not prevaricating. She is consistent from the beginning in making clear her lack of any interest or pleasure in Chatsky’s return. She asks him, for instance,

One thing I’d like to know.

In jest? in grief? in error? did there never come one

Occasion when you spoke a kindly word of someone?

Not now, perhaps—in childhood, long ago. (28)

Seeley makes an important point in defense of Sofia that underscores the unfair expectations Chatsky brings to their reunion: “Sof’ya, deals with him fairly honestly and plainly, but his vanity throughout forbids him to understand what he sees and hears” (101). Chatsky sees inconsistency in her treatment of him because he is reading into their interaction a connection that used to be there but has long since dissolved. In fairness to Chatsky, however, it is perhaps less vanity than desperation that lies behind his refusal to acknowledge the irretrievability of the past.

Another indicator of Chatsky’s longing to connect with Sofia—and, through her, his Russian past—is his continual seeking of reassurance from her, his invitations for her to contradict his superficial acknowledgements of a change between them in which he does not

really believe. He says on first meeting her, for instance, “Come, kiss me. Speak. I’m unexpected, out of place here?” (22). It is a question which invites a negative response. When it does not come, he rambles on awkwardly, teasing her and provoking her in an attempt to cover up her lack of warmth toward him. It is this occasional “defensive ring” to Chatsky’s dialogue that leads one critic to classify him as “a fundamentally modest and sensitive man who has been driven near to despair by the complacent insensitivity of those who surround him” (Richards 18-9). This description is a reversal of the typical—and problematic—reading of Chatsky as the insensitive wit and those around him as the innocent targets of his verbal barrage, however shallow and ridiculous they might otherwise be. Chatsky is effectively begging Sofia to assure him that something of what he remembered in the Russia he left has remained untouched by the intervening years. Gifford expresses the importance of Sofia in Chatsky’s search for the past as follows: “Sofya became symbolical; she represented the ideal that Chatsky was looking for in Moscow society, and fail[s] to find” (54). Unfortunately, Sofia has no interest in representing Russia, or anything else for that matter, for a man who as far as she is concerned is merely interrupting a life that has moved on without him—a life that for Sofia involves her platonic entanglement with the idealized Molchalin, her bickering with the maid Liza, and her attempt to keep her father from finding out that his secretary has spent an innocent but compromising night in her bedroom. Chatsky wants to return to what he left behind, but it is no longer there. It is not merely that Russian society has not held his place in line, but that the line itself has broken up. He asks Sofia, “Do you remember?” (24). She does not even want to. She is living in her own little world of imported Romanticism. She has idealized her father’s mundane, pragmatic secretary, Molchalin, into a noble sufferer worthy of a Richardson novel. Her father blames her

French tutors for her sentimentality—without, however, fully appreciating the truth of his own words:

We love these foreign vagrants now!  
 We take them in . . .  
 To teach our daughters every blessed thing.  
 It's dancing! Singing! Sighing! Romance thrives!  
 We might be training them as actors' wives. (13)

As far as Sofia is concerned, Chatsky has no business whatsoever intruding on her world of Romantic illusions by trying to dig up their well-buried Russian childhood.

One can therefore see in Sofia, as well as the others with whom Chatsky tries to interact, the sort of half-Western, half-Russian nonsense that, from the beginning, the blossoming intellectual from abroad cannot stand. It is not just Sofia's viewing of the gutless and self-centered Molchalin through the lens of Western sentimentality and Romanticism that infuriates Chatsky; it is the entire society's inability to adopt a responsible attitude toward Western influences. Famusov, for instance, on praising the virtues of Moscow society and especially its younger generation, judges them on their abilities to impress Westerners with how "Western" they are:

You know, His Majesty the King of Prussia came.  
 He was amazed—dumbfounded—by our Moscow graces,  
 And not just by their pretty faces.  
 Could they be better educated? When they know  
 How velvet, taffeta, each veil, each bow  
 Is being worn—and try discussion.

They never speak a simple word—all “strait-laced” Russian.

They’ll sing you French romances without pause,

Hit high notes like a primadonna. (50)

He then goes on, without a breath, to say, “They love a soldier. Why? Because / They’re patriots” (50). One can understand Chatsky’s temptation to laugh at someone who can imagine women as genuinely Russian who have applied all their energies to meeting foreign expectations. Later, when one of these society beauties playfully suggests that Chatsky marry outside Russia like so many other educated Russian travelers, he makes it clear what he thinks of such women:

Poor things! Should not you copies make them feel

The pain they cause their dear relations,

By daring to prefer the real

To Moscow imitations? (92)

At least women in the West, he is saying, are not in the business of constructing false selves. He himself is, of course, a hybrid as well, but his return to Moscow might be seen as an attempt to get back in touch with something authentically Russian that will assist him in establishing a workable self-definition. What he finds is a masquerade that refuses to recognize itself as such. Chatsky describes it as follows:

I met a Frenchman in Bordeaux . . . .

And he was telling them how he set out

To meet barbarians, in terror-stricken tears, . . .

[but m]et not a sound of Russian, nor a Russian face. (115)

This Frenchman apparently “thought himself at home again . . . / With friends in his own province. One short evening / In Moscow and he felt himself a little king” (115). Chatsky wants

those to whom he is speaking to share his recognition of this indiscriminate Gallomania as hypocritical and demeaning. He appeals to them wildly, in perhaps his most desperate attempt to break through their resistance. He prays, he says,

[t]hat God should smite the unclean spirit in this crowd,  
 Of empty, slavish, blind adoring imitation,  
 And fire one soul—make someone understand,  
 Who could, by words and actions, set them  
 A good example—take us all in hand,  
 Restrain this puerile longing for some foreign land. (116)

When he finishes, he has reached the height of passion and is all but begging those around him to listen, only to realize that not one person is paying him any attention. According to the stage directions, “*He looks about him, making a sweeping gesture which embraces the crowd, whirling around him in an energetic waltz. The old people have gone off to the card tables*” (117). His anguished appeals have fallen on deaf ears, but even after this undeniable failure to establish human connection, he refuses to acknowledge his irrevocable alienation.

It is the paradox of Chatsky’s character that he continually makes those around him the butt of his scathing sarcasm and yet, at the same time, expects them to “get it,” to laugh along with him. He thinks that there is something beneath their ridiculous façade that would be capable of recognizing the ludicrousness of their own hybridity. Veselovsky represents this paradox in Chatsky’s perception of others in the following lines, worth quoting at length:

If one were to gather together all the contemplations about people, things,  
 customs, and ideas which are scattered throughout Chatsky’s speeches, it would  
 constitute such a gloomy picture that one would immediately have to ascribe

misanthropic inclinations to / a man with such views. But at the same time this fierce accuser who spares nothing also believes in the possibility of rebirth . . . .

This confidence, which presents such a contrast to his merciless evaluation of reality, explains his unquestionable enthusiasm for preaching his cause: he gives himself over to it not only because he simply is not able to be silent, but also because he cannot rid himself of the deceptive hope of at last establishing contact with these decaying hearts, of ridding them of the mold which has covered them.

(50-1)

The essential observation here is that Chatsky is not a true cynic—not yet. He has built up too much psychological resistance against the recognition that his insight ultimately separates him from those incapable of appreciating it. Thus, he wants Sofia to laugh with him at her idol, Molchalin: “God knows what you’ve thought up for him, what you have planned, / How long that head of his has been so nonsense-ridden” (70). He even goes so far as to suggest, “Perhaps you have assigned your host / Of qualities to him whom you love most” (70). He is asking her to recognize and smile at her own self-deception! And he wants her father to laugh at his friends and, ultimately, at himself. For instance, he ruthlessly makes fun of the shameless fawning of Famusov’s generation on social superiors. But he follows up his tirade with an invitation to Famusov to “subtract / Some damning fact / To use against our generation” (40). He knows the sons and daughters are ridiculous too, in their own way, and he wants to draw out insight from Famusov. He wants sympathy from the very people whose comfortable self-assurance he continually penetrates. He seeks company and, hence, security, in his amusement; they, however, feel violated by his recognition of them as mere caricatures of whatever they would like to be. Famusov, for instance, replies with “Can’t stand depravity. Our friendship’s at an end” (40). He

refuses to understand Chatsky's witticisms, let alone reply in kind. Griboedov, in his correspondence, once defined *ум*, as used in the title, as referring to "the ability to feel deeply and sincerely and to elicit the serious feelings of others, [a quality that] stands diametrically opposed to the prevailing common sense" (para. in Balina 92), or the ability to merely work within conventions, however slavishly imitative or ridiculous those conventions might be. Hence, it only makes sense that the dialectic in *Gore ot Uma* is that between having an outsider's perspective on Moscow society and being able to function within that society. The two approaches seem to be incompatible, and therefore Chatsky's attempts to communicate with those trapped within that world are fruitless. Underneath his quips are "serious feelings," and it is just such serious feelings which those around him refuse to cultivate or respond to. After all, to do so, they would have to sacrifice their comfortable illusions about their own authenticity and the authenticity of the very world they inhabit. Chatsky wants to get through to them because he does not want to remain alone outside the illusions.

Thus, it is clear that both vision and the attempt to share it are crucial factors in *Gore ot Uma*, and it is only through an examination of the respective functions of perception and communication that the play can be understood. First of all, perception is, from the beginning, what separates Chatsky from those around him, and in the end it will be the expansion of perception that informs him of the finality of the separation. In the indispensable commentary on her new English translation of *Gore ot Uma*, Mary Hobson points to the use of light imagery as a key metaphor for the two kinds of perception in the play: "The first exclamation of *Woe from Wit* deplores the coming / of the light; the second regrets the too swift passing of the comfortable dark. Liza's line prefigures the views of everyone in the play except Chatskii" (490-1). Indeed, one might even say that Chatsky represents the light no one wants to see coming. Liza, for

instance, says, “It’s getting light! Lord, it’s already morning!” (3). She and her mistress prove equally unhappy about the appearance of Chatsky, who, as Hobson notes, “arrives with the dawn” (3). Light reveals things for what they really are, and so would Chatsky. He represents, at least in theory, an opportunity of redemption for the self-deceived. It is easy to overlook this opportunity, since it is rejected from the outset, from the very first act. According to Hobson, “Sofia, in I.3, appears with her candle, her source of artificial light. She, too, deplores the arrival of the real stuff . . . Artificial light is not to illuminate the truth, but to obscure it (491). Sofia’s decision toward the end of the play to spread the rumor that Chatsky is mad represents an attempt to turn the relationship between the two types of light on its head—to make Chatsky’s light out to be artificial and the false perceptions of the Muscovites to be natural. And the crowd’s eager and uncritical acceptance of this rumor reveals more than gullibility and gossip-mongering on their part: the people of Moscow are looking for a way to conveniently dismiss Chatsky’s insight as artificial light. Unfortunately, Chatsky cannot blind himself so easily or so finally. It is truly his “woe” (*zope*) to have too much “wit” (*um*). The expansion of his perception at the end of the action represents his transformation, at last, into the cynic that he has appeared to be throughout the play. This revelation of the true nature of Sofia and the Muscovites is just what was needed to make his disillusionment real. It is, as one critic argues, “the grief of not only social estrangement and isolation, but of the keenest kind of personal affliction, the recognition of the unworthiness of the object of one’s deepest love” (Brown 107). It also represents the end of all Chatsky’s efforts to share his perception or to find an intellectual equal among those whom he can now truly and completely despise. As Hobson has it, “When Chatskii arrives at the end of scene 12 . . . Liza drops her candle in fright; for the second time in the play artificial light gives way to genuine enlightenment, though this time Chatskii has not come to

impart it; he has just received it” (491). He sees, at last, how completely Sofia has given her heart to Molchalin and how wholeheartedly she has rejected himself. The spreading of the rumor is the final straw. Chatsky’s sense of betrayal in this scene is key, since Sofia has not willfully deceived him about her feelings—in fact, she has done all she can to undeceive him. It is his own expectations that have led him on. How can he help feeling betrayed when he returns to Russia and finds that, not only can he not reconnect with the world he left behind, but that the world itself is gone—or perhaps was never there, except in his mind—and has given way to sham on every level? Sofia is a mere scapegoat for Chatsky’s ultimate loss of faith in Russia as having sold its soul to the West: “I’ve lost the thread,” he says, “this isn’t how it should have ended” (147). Among his final words to the incorrigible Muscovites are “Dream on in happy ignorance” and “Away with dreams, the scales have fallen from my eyes” (148). His flight from Sofia is flight from a compromised Russia, and the flight is final: “Away from Moscow! I’m not coming here again” (148).

As for the failure of Chatsky’s communication, it is crucial to understanding the nature of his ultimate alienation and emptiness at the end of the play, when he has become at last a superfluous man. Patterson, in his book *Exile: The Sense of Alienation in Modern Russian Letters*, points to the role of dialogue in construction of the self: “The . . . difficulty lies in the failure of encounter; the word is offered but is not received. Thus it dies in the mouth of the one who seeks a place or a presence in the midst of encounter. And when the word expires, so does the soul” (4). Just as in Christian tradition, the “Word” is at the same time an extension of the divine self and a creative act, Chatsky’s words are meant to establish his own identity as well as to inspire better thoughts and actions in those around him. Their failure destroys not only his chance at doing some good in society but also that part of himself that finds it worthwhile to try.

Hence, while Chatsky might have theoretically tried to connect with a more authentic part of Russia than Moscow society represents—through *хождение в народ* (going to the people), as Dostoevsky argues he should have done (para. in Karlinsky 307)—he is now too wrapped up in his own despair to make a real effort at doing so. As Patterson argues, “The superfluous man’s failure to gain himself by offering himself lies in the narcissistic aspect of his discourse, in the word spoken of, by, and for himself alone” (8). To whom is Chatsky speaking at the end when he bids Moscow farewell and makes his dramatic exit? His speech at the end of the play is a self-conscious soliloquy, essentially “a cry of pain from an injured soul” (Richards 19), while many of his earlier speeches had been unconscious soliloquies, meant as dialogue but realized as monologue. And there is little hope that such monologue will lead anywhere but to the death of the word as a necessary consequence of its isolation within the self: “Gazing upon himself, the superfluous man loses his word to the gaze; the sign loses its referent, signifying only itself and therefore signifying nothing” (Patterson 9). To make anything in the finite universe self-referential is to make it meaningless, which is perhaps why so many in the history of humankind have sought the infinite “other.” What has led some twentieth-century philosophers to speak of the self as secondary to the other, as something that can be understood only as a reply, is indicative of this tendency, whatever its foundation, and the superfluous man is just as indicative of the human need to respond to something outside the self: “[A]s in the case of Narcissus, the superfluous man’s self-love becomes self-alienation; the word spoken only to the self and for the self becomes the word spoken against the self. Why? Because it meets with no reply other than its own echo. In his narcissism, as in all narcissism, he loves himself but cannot gain the thing he loves” (9). Chatsky’s loss of Sofia, of human connection, of faith in Russia, will lead to just such

a loss of himself, realized vicariously through his literary progeny—Onegin, Pechorin, and Stavrogin.

One cannot, of course, ignore the hopeful speculations of generations of readers that Chatsky might become a reformer, even a Decembrist, once he has left the stage, but they seem to have little foundation. As Brown so appropriately observes, “[W]hen at the play’s end its defeated hero makes his last speech, he ends it, not with any noble vow to devote the rest of his life to combating the manifest evil, but with the resolve to seek purely personal repose far from the hated Russian reality” (114). Chatsky has crossed a final threshold, has lost once and for all the will to make a difference in a despised world, and this loss becomes clear on more than one level. For one thing, as Hobson points out, the Chatsky who has never yet failed to remark on the pettiness and hypocrisy of those around him ends by letting grosser social evils pass without comment: “‘I’ll send you for hard labour, in the ranks’ (IV.14.441), Famusov tells Fil’ka. This sentence to hard labour in a penal colony was in effect a life sentence, if not a death sentence . . . . Chatskii makes no mention of this arbitrary abuse of power. He is too painfully concerned with his own feelings, it seems, to notice it” (493). His flight from the stage also represents a departure for his literary progeny, for the superfluous man will not return to the stage. The stage, after all, is a medium for the spoken word, of dialogue and the communal transmission of meaning. Later realizations of the character type emerge in poetry, short story, or novelistic form. And the characters therein will not tell their own stories—unless, as in the case of Pechorin, they tell it to themselves, or unless they use the telling to construct false selves (see, for example, Stavrogin’s “confession” at Tikhon’s).

In any case, at the end of *Gore ot Uma*, Chatsky has all the qualities that will characterize the figures later generations would call “superfluous men.” His education and exceptional

intellect put him in the difficult position of seeing things he would rather not see. His perception ultimately severs his ties to the world around him—the Russian world, however imperfect and falsely Westernized, to which he was trying to return. He fails to synthesize the insights with which his education has equipped him with his simultaneous desire to connect with people, and his failure involves the death of that desire. Since his intellect informs him of the unworthiness of those around him from the outset, one side of his character or the other will have to be sacrificed. One might even go so far as to say that Chatsky becomes a superfluous man when his “head” defeats his “heart,” a defeat that makes the “heartlessness” of later superfluous characters inevitable. The contempt which he expresses in his monological tirade at the end of the play is still embodied in words, but they are empty words, dying words, without the substance to satisfy a proud mind or direct the will of an angered soul. His flight is away from something—from Moscow, from Sofia, etc.—but it is not toward anything, and his literary progeny will be aimless wanderers, superfluous to the world and, in the end, to themselves.

“Yes—Feeling Early Cooled within Him”:

The Emptiness and Moral Lethargy of Pushkin’s Onegin

When Griboedov’s Chatsky fled the stage at the end of *Gore ot Uma*, he left a host of questions in his wake. His recognition of his own alienation represents the death of a soul and the birth of a literary type that would haunt the pages of Russian literature for more than a century. No one would hear again from the unfortunate young man who in his desperation for authenticity chased intellectual inferiors through the drawing rooms of Moscow. Yet amid the same agonies of cultural hybridity, very soon, another literary creation would be “[b]orn where Nevá flows” (Pushkin 1.2.10)—that is, in the city of St. Petersburg, itself a cultural artifice of the relentless, Westernizing Tsar Peter the Great. Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin would begin as Chatsky had ended—as a self-consciously hollow being, disillusioned and utterly incapable of forming a lasting connection with any real human soul. The absence of such real human souls in Griboedov’s drama leaves open the question of what effect they would have had on Chatsky, either before or after his tragic epiphany at the end of the action. Such is not the case with Onegin. In fact, Pushkin’s work is especially important for its development of the superfluous man from three key angles—his relationship with the shallow products of Westernization, his relationship with a living Russian soul, and his function as a spiritually dangerous being in his dealings with both.

The key difference between Onegin’s dealings with artificial people and Chatsky’s is that Onegin begins with the hyperawareness of their essential lack of substance and his own. In the Onegin who arrives in the provinces to claim an inheritance, human feeling is already dead. It is, of course, intimated that at one time, in his life in St. Petersburg, he had been capable of physical passion, at least:

Forever new and interesting,  
 He scared with ready-made despair,  
 Amazed the innocent with jesting,  
 With flattery amused the fair. (Pushkin 1.11.1-4)

It is key, however, that even in the throes of youthful passion, he is not disclosing a genuine self to the world, but rather projecting whatever fabricated front will gain him what he wants. He cannot long desire or ever respect those whom he cannot win except by entering into a game of artifice. Thus, the narrator informs us that “[h]e came to loath that worldly grind; / Proud beauties could no longer win him / And uncontested rule his mind” (1.37.2-4). One sees in this transition the growing recognition of, and loathing for, a world built on illusions, of which he himself has been chief. He is characterized, in the first chapter, by the self-awareness that Chatsky reaches only in the last scene of the last act. The narrator reveals the self-conscious hollowness of Onegin in stages, when he retreats from society as the frivolous game that it is and tries to find something more substantial in his own mind: “Apostate from the whirl of pleasure, / He has withdrawn into his den / And, yawning, reached for ink and pen” (1.43.6-8). Of course, it does not take him long to realize that he has nothing whatsoever to say; he never writes a single word. Neither does he find anything solidly human in the words of others—though one has to wonder whether there is really nothing there or whether he is merely incapable of recognizing real humanity when he sees it. In any case, “He read and read—in vain all delving: / Here length, there raving or pretense, / This one lacked candor, that one sense” (1.44.6-8). The detailed rendering of his character’s journey into cynical detachment and indolence is Pushkin’s way of making intelligible to the reader the utter lack of human feeling in Onegin’s musings on his

uncle's impending death. It is no accident that the opening stanza is the most intense and shocking rendering of Onegin's voice in the entire poem:

Is there hypocrisy more glaring  
 Than to amuse one all but dead,  
 Shake up the pillow for his head,  
 Dose him with melancholy bearing,  
 And think behind a public sigh,  
 "Deuce take you, step on it and die!" (1.1.9-14)

One could almost view the remainder of the work as the narrator's attempt to understand such a haunting voice from a safe distance. Nabokov draws attention to the fact that Pushkin's narrator (a voice the commentator questionably conflates with the author himself) underscores this distance in some of the early stanzas by keeping a pace different from Onegin's: "[L]agging behind at the ball . . . , [he] must again overtake Onegin on his drive home . . . only to fall behind again" (*Commentary* 108). It is Hoisington, however, who calls attention to the importance of this retreat from Onegin's perspective as a key component of the form of Pushkin's work in relation to its emotive dialectics: "Both playfulness and irony (and these two literary devices are widespread in *Eugene Onegin*) imply distance, a disparity between narrator and characters—precisely the opposite of the emotional identification characteristic of the romantic / poem" (144-5). Hoisington is rightfully contrasting Pushkin's more objective treatment of Onegin with Byron's close identification with his heroes, a contrast which leads to the dislocation of the reader as well: "The emotional identification between narrator and character is replaced in *Eugene Onegin* by an intimacy between narrator and reader" (145). Another way of looking at this dislocation is by seeing the narrator as a protective mediator between the reader and the

protagonist, whose spiritual exile from the world can then be viewed without the uncritical identification of Romanticism. In any case, Pushkin is clearly presenting Onegin as a problem, not an inspiration.

The working out of this problem takes place on several planes, not least of which is his relationship with Vladimir Lensky—a relationship which possibly represents one of the most unlikely friendships in all of literature. The narrator describes the two men as “none more unlike created, / Like wave and cliff absurdly mated, / Like ice and flame, or verse and prose” (2.13.5-7). Their gravitation toward one another is a mystery in itself. Lavrin, in *Pushkin and Russian Literature*, argues that “Onegin and Lensky were mutually attracted, not because they shared the same interests and ideas, but by the law of contrast which in the end made them almost indispensable to one another” (127). This statement should not be misconstrued to mean that they “complete” one another; such could hardly be the case. Rather, each man has something the other could never have and for which each must be respectively jealous. Lensky is in many ways a doppelgänger for Onegin. He is involved passionately in everything which Onegin has tried and found wanting—romantic love, education, and literary composition. For Lensky, these pursuits are no more substantive than they were for Onegin, but he is under the pleasant illusion that they are. As “a product of the German romantic movement with its quietist or reactionary feudal-medieval propensities” (Lavrin 139), the childlike Lensky has no ideas of his own. He can write his gushing lyrics only about sentiments he has borrowed from books and made ridiculous in the borrowing. As the narrator has it, “He mourned the wilt of life’s young green / When he had almost turned eighteen” (2.10.13-14). Thus, in spite of his genuine enthusiasm for life, Lensky has no real understanding of it, and not even the narrator can take him seriously.

It is brutally ironic that Onegin, with his superior intellect, might have had something much more interesting to say about all of these things had he been capable of real sentiment. But whereas Lensky is all feeling and no self-awareness, Onegin is all self-awareness and no feeling. Since creative expression is born from the action of consciousness on the world, no real creative expression can take place either with a lack of an active intelligence (Lensky's failing) or with a failure to care about anything outside the self (Onegin's much more serious failing). As Lavrin puts it, "There may have been a dormant strength in him, potential goodness and active intelligence; but lacking any deeper focus or rootedness, all his qualities remained sterile" (124). As a superfluous man, Onegin views the world from a critical distance that both deepens his perception and warps it, as Seeley points out:

And in fact the detachment of the 'superfluous man' did enable him to see things which the crowd overlooked or to see what it saw from a / different angle, in a different light. However the dandy's detachment, being not objective, but subjective, was apt to involve a lack of perspective, or rather a grotesque distortion of perspective due to immoderate inflation of the ego. (101-2)

Saying that Onegin sees through Lensky's passionate ramblings can be another way of saying that he fails to see them at all. Consequently, the narrator can set a scene in which Lensky reads verses and "[t]he while Onegin with indulgence, / Though he but little understood, / Took in intently what he could" (2.16.12-4). As a parody of his more cynical counterpart, Lensky is also a curiosity for Onegin. The misanthrope's mild, tolerant interest in his neighbor, however, could not hope to outlast the contempt he necessarily feels for an intellectual inferior. Nor does Lensky represent the possibility of real redemption for Onegin, since he merely serves as an unconscious version of the alienation that haunts the protagonist. This alienation is a by-product of the

Westernization of the Russian intellect and therefore cannot be resolved on an intellectual plain. Seeley describes the problem as follows: “[A]n intelligentsia is in the nature of things spiritually isolated, since its own people see in it the representatives and embodiment of a foreign culture, while to the bearers of that culture the intelligentsia appears as so many poor relations or spiritual hangers-on—at best amusing and quaint, but often merely pitiful or absurd” (94). Onegin, like Chatsky and unlike Lensky, has graduated to a consciousness of his own ludicrous position. All that Lensky ultimately does for Onegin is mirror the ridiculous elements in his own nature, a function almost guaranteed to generate resentment, not least because a greater awareness of the problem leads to a greater awareness that neither of them possesses the means to resolve it. Seeley suggests that “the drama of an intelligentsia lies in its struggles to break out of its isolation, which means to achieve organic reunion with its own people and, by bridging the outer gulf which divides it from them, to heal also the inner rift which festers and aches in its soul” (94). Onegin’s deeper problem is that he will not recognize the opportunity for such reconciliation when it—or rather, she—stares him in the face.

Tatiana has become a central figure in the Russian imagination in her own right, but understanding her larger function within Pushkin’s “novel in verse” is also a fundamental step towards understanding the protagonist. Tatiana represents an authentic Russian nature, just the sort of nature from which Onegin’s upbringing has progressively removed him. If Lensky grants Onegin the power to know himself through parodistic mirroring, Tatiana reveals more fully his function as a departure from or negation of what some would later call the “Russian soul.” One can hear more clearly the dissonance of his being against the harmony of hers, can see the aimlessness of his steps against the straightness of her path. Unlike Lensky, Tatiana represents everything that is missing for Onegin, everything that he subconsciously craves, and it is not

difficult to see why. In the first place, by imagining her as a woman and a provincial, Pushkin is associating her with an idyllic conception of Russian childhood as a nursery for native instincts and an authentic soul. Joanna Hubbs credits Pushkin with articulating such ideas for the first time:

Beginning with Pushkin, literature is charged with two opposing myths and images: The first one depicts the city, Saint Petersburg, associated with the impulse for state and individual self-aggrandizement; the second is that of the countryside, linked to the feeling of communion with the round of nature, with the warmth of family life, and with folklore, poetry, and the traditions of the *narod*.

Art is seen to emerge out of this latter domain, and its agent is woman. (210)

That native instincts and values should be associated with the feminine is no accident, since the introduction of foreign elements into the education of upper-class Russians often coincided with removal from a peasant nurse who embodied both the nurturing aspects often associated with femininity and the native idiom that would thereafter compete with imported alternatives, assimilated away from the home: “The break with the natural mother and peasant nurse quite often occurred simultaneously in the life of the male child, while his sister remained in the feminine realm . . . . The early ‘exile’ of the child (sometimes no older than seven) to a distant institution created a keen feeling of rootlessness and isolation” (Hubbs 208). Tatiana has known no such exile.

It is not enough to say, however, that as a provincial woman, Tatiana is one of those “sisters” whose soul is still whole and uncorrupted by the city or the systematic Westernization of institutional education. That in itself would be significant, but Pushkin’s narrator goes further in establishing her as an embodiment of the native feelings later idealized in the *narod*. As

Lavrin explains, “It goes without saying that Tayana is the opposite of Onegin: natural, straightforward and sincere in whatever she does. She is also rooted in her native soil—a fact conveyed even by her Christian name, used until then mainly by peasants” (129). The narrator actually offers a tongue-in-cheek apology for the use of such a name, which he clearly appreciates for the very qualities that would make the apology necessary: “What if it’s fragrant with a peasant / Antiqueness, if it does recall / The servant quarters?” (2.24.6-8). He describes her, as well, as reticent and imaginative, the sort of young woman who in her innocence shames the worldly-wise. She is particularly close to her peasant nurse, who is her first confidante in her growing love for Onegin. She is also responsive to nature, as indicated by a passage still memorized by Russian schoolchildren:

Upon her balcony at dawning  
 She liked to bide the break of day,  
 When on the heavens’ pallid awning  
 There fades the starry roundelay,  
 When earth’s faint rim is set to glowing,  
 Aurora’s herald breeze is blowing  
 And step by step the world turns light. (2.28.1-7)

This receptivity is important, since the idea of Mother Russia is closely tied to the concept of the “Russian soil,” a metaphor popularized by Dostoevsky but taken directly from the folklore. Hubbs, for instance, says that “[t]he peasant woman came to represent, for her charges, the bountiful and ever-nurturing avatar of Mother Earth” (208), an avatar with pre-Christian origins that underwent revision during the Christian era but was never fully eradicated. The overlapping of the respective myths of “Mother Russia” and “Mother Earth” is also significant, since they

represent a marriage of “the native” and “the natural,” a conceptual union particularly important for conflicted generations trying to find in their own culture a reality not conventional but organic.

It is essential to establish at the outset Tatiana’s closeness to the soil and the *народ*, since there is some resistance (at least among Western critics) to understanding her as an authentic Russian presence set against Onegin’s hybridity. Ryan and Wigzell, for instance, point to the fact that some of the folklore motifs and practices on which Tatiana operates can be found outside Russia (651), but to point that out is to contest the uniqueness of the folklore itself, in reality, not Tatiana’s closeness to the folklore as an ideal in Pushkin’s work.<sup>9</sup> He describes her as essentially and inalterably “Russian in her feeling” (5.4.1), and what one can see in this choice of ideal is the location of authentic “Russianness” in peasant culture, a theme trumpeted loudly by the Slavophiles but the influence of which was much more widespread. Williams, in an article on the articulation of the so-called “Russian soul,” speaks of this correlation as beginning in the late eighteenth century but being articulated most clearly and influentially by Dostoevsky and Grigoriev (*passim*). There is, of course, an irony in the fact that the Russian intelligentsia could only speak of the “Russian soul” and the virtues of the peasant *община* in terms borrowed from

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<sup>9</sup> Tatiana’s inability to express her feelings for Onegin in Russian is a more troubling problem, but not an unanswerable one. She has to resort to French because she, as the narrator puts it, “knew our language only barely” (3.26.5). He is clearly speaking, however, of her ability to formulate a love letter as a literary convention. Her experiences with literature are comprised of Rousseau and Richardson, whereas her knowledge of Russian comes from the oral folk tradition of her peasant nurse and the songs of the serfs at work. She is self-consciously adopting an artificial idiom, and it is this idiom that she does not know how to adapt to Russian.

Western Romanticism and nationalism. They were, as Williams observes, “[s]timulated by Rousseau’s ‘noble savage,’ Herder’s discovery of language and song as the ‘heart and soul’ of the nation, and Carlyle’s anti-industrial criticism of men with ‘soul extinct but stomach well alive’” (574). But it nonetheless significant that Russian intellectuals, operating necessarily within the idiom of their higher education, articulated so passionately the need to recover an idiom they had left behind—that what they saw in Goethe, Schilling, Rousseau, and the like was an arrow pointing back to Russia. And it is also significant that Pushkin associates his heroine so closely with native influences, since in doing so he is proposing a possible solution to a problem introduced by Griboedov at the end of *Gore ot Uma*: having fled the artificial world of Moscow, where can Chatsky go? According to Karlinsky, “Dostoevsky, in his notebooks and in drafts for *The Possessed* . . . condemned [Chatsky] for his lack of all contact with the Russian common people and also condemned him for his final flight abroad, which Dostoevsky interpreted as permanent emigration” (307). If Chatsky did return to the West, then, he was acting on a false dilemma between reality in the West and artificiality in Moscow, rejecting the possibility that there is an authentic Russian reality in provincial villages. It is this authentic and potentially redemptive Russian reality that Tatiana represents for Pushkin’s protagonist, and any attempt to read *Eugene Onegin* without recognizing this function of her character will be woefully inadequate.

For one thing, it is possible to gain a greater appreciation of the problem that Onegin represents by viewing him through the lens of Tatiana. Her own journey toward a deeper—and, one has to admit, more disturbing—appreciation of his emptiness is the reader’s journey as well, and his responses to her at different stages of their relationship indicate a deep failure of understanding on his part. At the beginning, Tatiana finds herself projecting onto him ideals of

her own, born out of a trusting and nurturing soul that seeks to recreate its image in the other. She seeks to find in him that which she has imagined, and it is key that her interest in him drives her deeper into Western sentimental novels:

With what unwonted fascination  
 She now devours *romans d'amour* . . .  
 Creative fancy's vivid creatures  
 Lend their imaginary features . . .  
 Our tender dreamer saw them blended  
 Into a single essence warm,  
 Embodied in Onegin's form. (3.9.1-2, 5-6, 12-14)

Perhaps she senses that there is something not quite Russian in him, and that she can meet him only on a plane both fictional and foreign. Through her own process of fictionalizing him, however, she deludes herself that she can find in him something more substantial. Onegin's initial response to Tatiana is just as telling. He says to Lensky after their first visit to the Larin's (home of Tatiana and Lensky's sweetheart Olga), "Your Olga's face lacks fire; / If I wrote poetry like you / I'd choose the elder" (3.5.6-8). He sees in Tatiana the true "fire" of a Russian soul, senses in her a spirit as native and whole as his own is alienated and fragmented. But as such a being, he lacks the inner resources to respond with authentic appreciation. His recognition of her qualities is vicarious, and since it involves a projection of natural, appropriate regard for her onto the poet Lensky, he presents this regard to both himself and his friend as somewhat artificial, like his friend's verses—worthy of sympathetic tolerance, but somewhat laughable nonetheless. Therefore, one can see that from the very beginning, Tatiana and Onegin can encounter one another only through the medium of art—whether it be her sentimental novels or his displaced

poetic admiration. Since art is an active process that involves giving substance to subjective vision, Tatiana and Onegin are in fact responding not to each other but to fictionalizations of each other which respectively present him as an authentic being and her as a poetic artifice.

Onegin's distorted vision of Tatiana is perhaps reinforced by her attempt to make him understand her love. She understands him through the veil of Richardson and Rousseau and assumes she has to adopt such a foreign idiom in order to open up real communication. It is problematic not merely that she writes to him in French but that she writes at all, adopting the "epistolary" medium of the eighteenth-century sentimental fiction that, as Todd points out, provides the "inspiration" for her fixation on Onegin (113). She also, to some degree unintentionally, gives away how little she understands who Onegin is—and is not:

I know thou art by God bespoken  
 To have and hold me to the end . . . .  
 In dreams of mine you kept appearing  
 And, sight unseen, were dear to me. (3.31.51-4)

He cannot help but pick up on the fact that she loves a creation of her own imagination, but he himself loses his last chance at redemption when he fails to recognize the deep current of genuine and lasting feeling beneath her misguided words, which merely confirm his projection onto her of his own shallowness in love. The fact that he fails to take her love seriously reveals just how unworthy he is of her and, consequently, of the native wholeness which she represents and that he unconsciously craves—hence, the projected admiration with which he torments Lensky. As Dostoevsky puts in his famous Pushkin speech,

He only believes in the utter impos / sibility of any work whatever in his native  
 land, and upon those who believe in this possibility—then, as now, but few—he

looks with sorrowful derision . . . . Onyegin did not even understand Tatiana when he met her for the first time, in a remote place . . . She passed through his life unrecognized by him and unappreciated: therein is the tragedy of their love. (47-8)

In Dostoevsky's framework (as in Pushkin's), the alienated soul can find redemption only in a return to Mother Russia, but the superfluous man has wandered too far and too long to recognize her voice when she calls him. Moreover, what is left of his soul, exhausted and deadened with a self-loathing that is somehow also self-worship (since he sees himself as the only one capable of "seeing through things," including his own artificiality), cannot rouse itself to respond when his "redemption draweth nigh," as it were. Only within such a context can one acknowledge that Onegin is quite right in informing Tatiana that he is not the man she has taken him for—"On me your perfect gift is wasted" (4.14.3)—and at the same time marvel at how easily he dismisses her love as a whim—the sort of whim he himself has experienced, over and over again, in the empty cycle of his Moscow days: "Your age may render the transition / From dream to dream as light and brief / As a young tree renews its leaf" (4.16.6-8). He is inhumanly cold throughout, and his casually drawn picture of how his own character would undermine any possibility of happiness together is an appropriation of power at her expense:

What in the world could be more arid  
 Than twosomes where the wretched wife  
 Pines for the worthless man she married,  
 Condemned to lead a lonely life? (4.15.1-4)

Seeley describes Onegin's response to Tatiana's declaration as an "icy sermon" (101), and Patterson generalizes on his character by saying, "This inability to offer a woman a word of love

is a feature of almost every superfluous man” (8). The ice around Onegin’s heart is too hard to melt, even when exposed to the flame that is Tatiana’s passion. And though the passion does not leave her, she begins during this time to understand that though wrong about her, he is right about himself.

Tatiana has yet to learn about Onegin, however, that for all his apparent passivity, his soullessness renders him spiritually dangerous. It is only when she finally begins to process him within her own idiom of folklore and imagination, of her native Russian soul, that she glimpses the sleeping menace beneath his sophistication. Had Onegin known the tactics she would use to discern her future and his possible role in it—e.g., consulting a book in order to properly “read” her dream images—he would have scorned her; it is highly significant that Pushkin’s narrator (and, some would argue, Pushkin himself) has a more nuanced attitude: “[A]lthough Pushkin is entirely jocular when speaking of ‘Martin Zadek’ (the book which Tat’iana consults to interpret her dream), and only slightly less so when describing folk beliefs, he is more serious in his account of the dream itself” (Ryan and Wigzell 648). Pushkin’s treatment of folkloric superstition in general is ambiguous, since he himself lent credence to it on occasion—allowing the sight of omens to defer travel plans, for instance (663). What is crucial for this narrative, however, is his sympathy for his heroine in opposition to his hero: “[T]he main purpose of the dream sequence is not to demonstrate the significance of dreams but rather to emphasize Tat’iana’s spiritual depth and roots in Russian society by contrast with the superficial, amoral and alienated Onegin” (666). In spite of her lack of refinement—or, rather, because of it—Tatiana comes to see what Onegin is.

Onegin is a bear—or, at least, that is the form he takes in the opening sequence of her dream. His manifestation is significant, since this particular animal “in folk dream divination

represents a husband” (Ryan and Wigzell 665). She would have expected to meet an image of her future husband, since placing a mirror under her pillow is calculated to conjure up just such a revelation (649). The circumstances of their encounter, however, are more surprising. She finds herself on the bank of “[a] stream, still free of winter’s chains,” where “[t]wo boughs which ice has fused together / Here form a parlous swaying plank / To join the near and further bank” (5.11.8-11). It is the bear rushing toward her which drives Tatiana into crossing the stream, an act which resonates with spiritual as well as physical danger. For one thing, the bear forces her into the sort of liminal position that folk belief associates with vulnerability to devils. For another, “folk belief also assigned devils a more precise habitat, apart from the yawning entrances: water, which in pre-Christian folk belief was believed to act as a boundary with and exit to the other world” (Wigzell “Russian Folk Devil” 65). Thus, Onegin’s role is problematized. He manifests himself as a husband, but he functions as a devil figure. This latter role is underscored by other aspects of the setting, not the least of which is the emphasis on the snow as hindering Tatiana and obscuring her path: “No path leads here; all blurred and hooded / The brush and hillsides rise and fall, / Enveloped deep in snowy pall” (5.13.12-4). The confusion strongly suggests the folk conception of hostile spirits who commonly “frolicked in snowstorms” (Wigzell “Russian Folk Devil” 68). Pushkin himself explored this idea in his shorter poem “The Demon,” in which a merry devil makes a game of leading a traveler astray, to his likely destruction. Tatiana has no more luck than the traveler at finding her way through the snow-covered woods.

Onegin’s role becomes even more ambiguous when he overtakes Tatiana and carries her to a place of surreal revelry. He seems to function as a husband here at first, bringing her safely out of the wilderness. But ultimately, he leaves her “on the threshold” (5.15.13), one of the most

dangerous of liminal positions, as established earlier: “In folk belief pausing on a threshold brought dire consequences” (Wigzell “Dostoevskii” 33). That Onegin becomes himself again amid the grotesquerie going on inside the hovel also has much suggestive power regarding his own spiritual condition:

There sits a monstrous company  
 At table: antlered, greyhound-snouted  
 Was one; a witch, goat-whiskered freak . . .  
 And here a thing half crane, half cat. (5.16.8-10, 14)

These are inhuman creatures, “the house-goblins of Russian popular belief” (Ryan and Wigzell 668). Tatiana notes that though Onegin has reassumed human form in this otherworldly throng, he is empowered by their presence and functions as, not merely one of them, but the chief among them: “He makes a sign—the others scurry; / He drinks—they duly roar and swill . . . / He clearly ruled here” (5.18.1-2, 5). Indeed, he almost seems to have too much control over this gathering for it to be anything less than a projection of himself, an extension of his own ego that surrounds him with surrogate selves, a parody of the Russian ideal of community and mutual submission as nurturing real human encounters. Hubbs comments on the significance of such unnatural “egotism” as follows:

As the avatar of the *narod* awaiting her deliverer, Tatiana is a counterpoint to and context within which the weak and “superfluous” men of Russian literature play out their destinies. Superfluous noblemen not merely by their undefined social position between tsar and *narod*, but in the expression of an individualism at odds with Russian traditional collectivity, they bring to their women the burden of an egotism which serves only to prevent their necessary reunion. (216)

The possibility of such a “reunion” for Tatiana and her lover is undermined by the relationship between Onegin and the creatures that surround him. The submission of these figures is total, and they mirror Onegin’s every move: “He laughs—all cackle in a hurry” (5.18.3). Their collective claiming of Tatiana on her timid appearance at the door becomes subsumed by Onegin’s own pronouncement—“She’s mine!” (5.20.1)—at which point they vanish into him. This destructive consumption of Onegin’s surrogates alerts Tatiana to the danger of being similarly drawn into him as into a black hole. Hence, when he rises to meet Tatiana, the eroticism in their meeting is accompanied by a reticence on her part:

He gently has half-led, half-borne her  
 To a rough trestle in the corner  
 And eased her onto this frail bed  
 And to her shoulder bent his head. (5.20.5-8)

She is passive, as though she were tolerating rather than welcoming his romantic posturing.

Overall, Tatiana’s dream represents a key step along her journey toward understanding not only why Onegin has been incapable of responding to her heartfelt declaration, but also what belonging to such an empty soul would mean. Onegin is the negation of everything she needs him to be, the embodiment of the cold and the darkness in her vision. He is the un-man, who has unmade himself and might therefore unmake others who get too close to him, un-creating them in his own image in a blasphemous parody of the Genesis narrative. And what she glimpses, at the end of her vision, is a prophetic revelation of the way in which his destructive tendencies will first manifest themselves—that is, through the baiting of Lensky into a fatal fight.

The duel between Lensky and Onegin has so many echoes and revisions in later literature—not least of which are the duels involving Lermontov’s Pechorin and Dostoevsky’s

Stavrogin—that its significance is unquestionable. Onegin’s motives for going through with it, however, have often been misunderstood. Seeley, for instance, speaks of both Chatsky and Onegin as being characterized by dandyism and a fear of embarrassment that enslaves them to the expectations of society in spite of their contempt for it: “The triumph of aestheticism, as the cult of appearances, over the will is perhaps best demonstrated by the abject submission in a crisis of all these men to convention, i.e. to the opinion of a public which they despise both individually and collectively . . . . The most strident example of this is Onegin’s murder of Lensky” (99). Hence, although Onegin has no qualms about publicly shaming his friend by exposing Olga’s shallow affections, he himself ultimately accepts Lensky’s challenge for fear of being labeled a coward. On the surface, the text seems to support this reading. Onegin indulges in superficial regret for his capricious toying with Lensky’s feelings, but nonetheless his first impulse is to accept the challenge, and he talks himself out of his own second thoughts thus:

“But still, one will not be exempt  
 From snickers, whispers, fools’ contempt . . .”  
 Our god, Good Repute, rose before him,  
 To which we feel our honor bound:  
 This is what makes the world go round! (6.11.10-13)

The fact that consideration of either honor or reputation has until now been foreign to Onegin, along with the narrator’s muted sarcasm, suggests that one should not take this reasoning at face value. Also, it is merely the follow-up to the nonsensical justification that he could not back out because he had failed to do so on the first opportunity, as though he were not free to change his mind if he really desired to do so. Onegin’s initial impulse, to accept the challenge, is probably a truer reflection of what he wants in this situation. It is the natural follow-up to his spiteful

monopolizing of his friend's fiancée at Tatiana's name-day party. He is a man driven not by honor, however defined, but by caprice. As indicated previously, Lensky represents both the hybridity Onegin despises in himself and the lack of self-knowledge he despises in others. Thus, his drive to torment and ultimately murder his friend is both sadistic and masochistic, a lashing out against both other and self, the boundary between which is as unclear for him in life as it was in Tatiana's grotesque dream. Dostoevsky, in the Pushkin speech, is acknowledging this destructive drive in Onegin when he says, "He had killed Lensky out of spleen, perhaps from spleen born of yearning for the universal ideal" (48). It is not that Onegin has a hatred of Lensky active enough to have prompted a self-conceived conspiracy against his life, or even a challenge of his own. It is rather that, just as there is not enough life in Onegin for active hatred, neither is there enough life in him for active nobility. Onegin, not knowing who he is and finding in his friend a parodistic mirroring of his own hybridity, is too resentful against the meaninglessness they both represent to bother refusing the challenge. The opportunity to shoot his somewhat ridiculous friend in cold blood is handed to him, and the horror and ease of the killing appeals to the very bitterness that engenders his own moral impotence. He cannot act with decisiveness and long-term purpose, but he can react with a vengeance when given the chance. No matter what Onegin tells himself or the reader, society is nothing more than a catalyst here: Onegin kills Lensky because he wants to.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth qualifying this portrait of Onegin by acknowledging that in spite of his aforementioned "spleen," he does in fact reveal that humanity, though it sleeps within him, is not entirely dead. He is not hardened enough to admit his true motives, even to himself, and after the fact he does exhibit some regret: "His heart with sudden chill congealed, / Onegin flew across and kneeled / Beside the boy . . . stared . . . called . . . No answer" (6.31.7-9). His grief must be

Onegin's departure from the province leaves Tatiana alone—as, indeed, she always has been—to continue her journey toward comprehension where he is concerned. He has left a corpse in his wake, killing Lensky just as he had done in her dream, and that he had little to offer her from the beginning is becoming increasingly apparent as she visits his former place of residence. It is as empty as the one who lived there, and the only traces she finds of him are, ironically, the traces of a deflated Romantic conception of himself—a conception in which he himself could not have fully believed—scrawled onto the pages of novels. The medium in which this self-defeating conception was realized is highly significant: “The bard of *Don Juan* and *Giaour*, / And certain novels with a power / To focus and reflect the age” (7.22.5-7). Many have connected Onegin with the Byronic hero, but whereas Onegin aligns himself with foreign Romanticism here, he has long since evinced a contempt for it as represented in Lensky. Is it that Onegin prefers English Romanticism to German Romanticism or, since the two conceptions overlap, that he adopts a self-contradictory attitude toward foreign models of exalting the self? The latter would make more sense, since Onegin himself is a contradiction, a hybrid, and thus incapable of unqualified commitment to anything, even his own ego. His spiral into moral apathy is increasingly reducing him to absence, and as a result, his Byronism does not give him substance but a mask. Pushkin himself rejected the idea of any essential overlap between his work and Byron's, saying, “*Don Juan* . . . has nothing in common with *Onegin*” (qtd. in Nabokov Introduction 72), but one could argue that between the respective title characters there is an even greater disparity—especially since Onegin comes more and more to be defined by the

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accompanied by a horror at the thought of what he has done and what he is becoming, and the fact that he is still capable of grief and horror sets him apart from the more relentless emptiness and inhumanity of Pechorin and Stavrogin.

refusal to adopt a consistent idiom, the sort of mystique that resists objectification by surrendering its “being” to “becoming.” Tatiana recognizes Onegin’s dissolution of his selfhood in the crucial lines below:

A strangely bleak and reckless creature,  
 Issue of Heaven or of Hell,  
 Proud demon, angel—who can tell?  
 Perhaps he is all imitation,  
 An idle phantom or, poor joke,  
 A Muscovite in Harold’s cloak,  
 An alien whim’s interpretation,  
 Compound of every faddish pose . . . ?  
 A parody, perhaps . . . who knows? (7.24.6-14)

Onegin is too slippery a figure to be defined in any absolute terms. He is not solid enough to serve as a workable referent for any signifier, and thus, Tatiana experiments with many that, together, suggest his lack of being. He is capable only of negation, and here he negates Byronism by his misleading assumption of it: “Pushkin is playfully debunking the Byronic hero here, irreverently questioning the authenticity of his spiritual malaise which he prosaically terms ‘chondria.’ In Onegin the characteristics of the Byronic hero are deglamorized” (Hoisington 140). Lavrin speaks of Onegin’s “boredom, which was not quite genuine either, but largely a reflection of his own snobbery” (125). Here, one can see that even his spiritual apathy involves posturing. It is hard to imagine what could be left after that.

The denouement of Pushkin’s masterpiece, which takes place years later in Moscow, illustrates that though Tatiana has come to understand Onegin, Onegin is no closer to

understanding Tatiana than he was when he first met her in the provinces. Having declined to be reborn in the image of the motherland, he now attempts to remake the humble Russian maiden in his own fractured likeness. Tatiana, however, is made of more solid substance than her would-be lover. Even after she has left her provincial home and entered the farcical world of Moscow—the world whose emptiness drove Chatsky into self-exile—she longs to be closer to the earth and the *народ* which, for her, represent everything that is real about Russia, everything that stands against the farces of urban society that shaped Onegin. He himself spends years in “aimless roaming” (8.13.9) from the same countryside that Tatiana longs for. Tatiana has, as Ryan and Wigzell point out, bathed “her face, shoulders and breast with the first snow from the bathhouse roof,” a ritual that “was popularly supposed to guarantee whiteness of skin” (652). Such a ceremonial cleansing is as suggestive of baptism as it is of her intimacy with the *народ*. She has surrendered her soul to the land of her birth. Onegin, on the other hand, has baptized that sacred land in the blood of his friend. Consequently, he is fleeing from it:

[He is] still vague of aim . . .

A martyr to his leisure’s labor:

No service, business, or wife

To occupy his empty life. (8.12.10, 12-14)

When he finally turns up in Moscow, he does so as a wanderer trying to return to something he has long since sacrificed to his own ego, just like Griboedov’s hero. Pushkin suggests such a connection when he remarks that Onegin “just like Chatsky, chanced to fall / From shipboard straight into a ball” (8.13.13-14). Unlike Chatsky, however, who reads what he has lost into the caricatures around him, Onegin finds what he has lost and treats it—i.e., her—as though she were such a caricature.

Onegin's letter to Tatiana, though brimming with emotion, is really addressed to a false conception of its recipient. In order to respond to it, she would have to become someone else—a shallower soul with disordered passions and fragile values. Onegin might subconsciously sense that Tatiana contains something deeper than that, but he could not possess even her image without visualizing her as one of the Moscow socialites that had served as his casual conquests in the past. As Seeley puts it, "Onegin could not appreciate or respond to Tat'yana as Tat'yana, but could manage to imagine himself in love with the wife of his friend and queen of St Petersburg drawing-rooms" (101). Onegin is worshipping an "image," but "[n]ot of poor shy Tatiana—trusting, / In love, obscure, and unrefined, / But of the princess who serenely" occupied "[t]he lush imperial Nevá" (8.27.1, 3-5, 7). And since he could not really love her without destroying everything valuable in her, he is here acting as just that spiritual danger with which he was associated in her dream. When he writes to her the self-conscious words "Your bitter virtue may be deeming / My meek entreaty false, I fear, . . . / Your stern rebuke rings in my ear" (8.32.55-56, 58), he comes close to acknowledging the hypocrisy of his position. He is essentially saying, "Sacrifice yourself for my happiness, as I would not do for yours." Such a sacrifice on her part might have been more pleasing to romantic readers, some of whom might feel that she is here behaving, not as a real woman, but as an embodiment of abstract virtue. But though Pushkin's heroine is no Anna Karenina, she is nonetheless all flesh and blood. That she responds to his entreaty as she does, with stony silence and then with painful but firm refusal, indicates not a lack of human feeling on her part—her tears belie such a conclusion. Rather, it reveals that she sees things as they are, and not as she would wish them to be. Dostoevsky makes the following remarkable statement, well worth quoting at length, concerning her reasons for refusing Onegin:

I think that even if Tatiana had been free and her old husband had died and she become a widow, even then she would not have gone away with Onyegin . . . . She knows beyond a doubt that at bottom . . . . it is not her whom he loves, that perhaps he does not love any one, is incapable of loving any one, although he suffers so acutely. He loves a caprice, but he himself is a caprice . . . . He has no root at all, he is a blade of grass, borne on the wind. She is otherwise: even in her despair, in the painful consciousness that her life has been ruined, she still has something solid and unshakable upon which her soul may bear. These are the memories of her childhood, the reminiscences of her country, her remote village, in which her pure and humble life had begun: it is “the woven shade / Of branches that o’erhang her nurse’s grave.” . . . Here is contact with her own land, with her own people, and with their sanctities. And he—what has he and what is he? Nothing, that she should follow him out of compassion, to amuse him, to give him a moment’s gift of a mirage of happiness out of the infinite pity of her love, knowing well beforehand that tomorrow he would look on his happiness with mockery. No, these are deep, firm souls, which cannot deliberately give their sanctities to dishonor, even from infinite compassion. No, Tatiana could not follow Onegin. (“Pushkin Speech” 52)

She could not follow him because “she is the same Tanya, the same country Tanya as before! She is not spoiled; on the contrary, she is tormented by the splendid life of Petersburg” (Dostoevsky “Pushkin Speech” 49). She means it when she thanks Onegin for undeceiving her about his character, perhaps the only truly honest thing he has done, and she means it when she says, “To me, Onegin, this vain clamor, / this tinsel realm appears inane” (8.46.1-2). And when

she gives him her final word, “I love you still (yes, why deceive you?), / But I was pledged another’s wife, / And will be faithful all my life” (8.47.12-14), she is not sacrificing herself but gaining herself. Onegin, meanwhile, leaves with a renewed sense of his own exile, significantly the same exile he has carried with him since before he met her in the provinces. Unlike Chatsky, who in losing his vision of Sophia loses himself, Onegin has been a lost man from the very beginning.

What Pushkin has done in this poetic masterpiece is create a world in which a man painfully aware of his own hybridity and consequent emptiness encounters a soul that is truly beautiful in its wholeness. Whereas in his relationship with Lensky, Onegin meets a blind caricature of himself, what he encounters in Tatiana exposes him, both to himself and to others, as a caricature. He is “a Muscovite in Harold’s cloak” (7.24.11), a parody of the metaphysical rebel who might strut through the West in the guise of a brilliant seducer or tragic sufferer but diminishes into ludicrousness when juxtaposed to the “Russian soul,” which is here concretized in Tatiana. Onegin loses his last chance at redemption when he rejects her and stains her province with Lensky’s blood, and when he throws himself at her feet in Moscow, it is as that parody of Childe Harold that would reduce her to his level, not allow Tatiana to raise him to hers. Despite his multi-layered interaction with various characters in Pushkin’s narrative, Onegin is ultimately static, as empty and as aware of his own emptiness at the end of the story as he was at the beginning. It is Tatiana, along with the readers who identify with her struggle, who grows in her understanding of Onegin as an absence who by definition can neither grow nor change.

A Soul not Dead but Dying:

Pechorin in Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*

In the listless, capricious, and occasionally spiteful hero of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, one can see the beginning of a frightening incapacity to respond to others as human beings, rather than as surrogate selves or projections of shallow and fleeting desires. Griboedov's Chatsky had projected onto others an authenticity they did not actually possess, only to have flung back at him the shattered myth of self from which he then fled in despair. His successor, Onegin, begins with this disillusionment and plays out its consequences for Pushkin's readers, who might well shiver a little at the frigidity that keeps him from responding to the beating heart of Russia when it calls to him through the awkward confessions of a provincial girl. One might shudder as well at his impatient slap at the innocent happiness of Olga and Lensky, as though they were irksome flies, and at the fatal duel, in which Onegin's spite, disguised as honor, finds a ready-made outlet. But these tendencies have yet to develop to the deeply disturbing proportions they will reach in *A Hero of Our Time*, the single prose work written by Mikhail Lermontov, a poet misleadingly dubbed "the Russian Byron," before his premature death. Lermontov's Pechorin represents a key transition from the listless, peevish, but relatively lethargic superfluous man to the more intensely self-reflective, dark, and malicious type that will be fully developed in Dostoevsky's Stavrogin—and through Pechorin, Lermontov exhibits the beginning death throes of a soul bent on the destruction of both others and the self.

First of all, Lermontov goes out of his way to present Pechorin as particularly alienated from those who would attempt to understand him. In the first chapter of his episodic novel, Lermontov mediates the reader's knowledge of Pechorin through a nameless first-person narrator, who himself comes to know Pechorin through Maksim Maksimych, a simple,

transparent, good-hearted officer who will serve as a foil for the capricious protagonist. Thus, from the beginning, there is a certain resistance in Pechorin to being known—that is, objectified, given a fixed and stabilized identity outside of his own control. He is like a creature of the night, scurrying frantically away from the beam of artificial light cast about in search of him, as though it would kill him on contact. There is a sense in which he exists only in movement, not in substance. This attribute comes across most strongly in the second chapter, “Maksim Maksimych,” in which the title character runs across Pechorin by chance and is as excited as a child at the thought of seeing his old friend. Pechorin, however, after ignoring his friend’s note, responds thus when they meet face to face: “[Maksim Maksimych] was about to fall on Pechorin’s neck, but the latter, rather coolly . . . stretched out his hand” (62). Pechorin also, as though to deliberately embarrass his over-enthusiastic friend, addresses him *a вы*—that is, with the formal “you”—when it is clear that as far as Maksim Maksimych is concerned, they had long been *a ты*, on informal terms. Lastly, Pechorin resists all efforts to detain him even for a minute, insisting simultaneously that his life is boring and that he has to rush off to Persia as though there were something interesting in the rushing off.

Pechorin’s adoption of such an off-putting stance with his friend seems to suggest, “You don’t know me,” and perhaps, if Maksim Maksimych had been paying attention before, he would have noticed how purposefully reticent Pechorin has been all along. In “Bela,” on Pechorin’s first arrival in the fort, Pechorin responds to Maksim Maksimych’s provocative question, “You’ve probably been transferred here from Russia?” with a simple “That’s right, sir” (23), offering no further information about his origin—for instance, where in Russia he is from. Pechorin even seems guarded when his voice finally takes over in the journal chapters—chapters significantly written for Pechorin himself and reaching the public, the reader is told, only through

the intervention of the original narrator. One source remarks on the fact that “[i]n general we know nothing about Pechorin’s past; we do not even / know why he has turned up in the Caucasus” (Eikhenbaum 164-5). And this lack of knowledge gives birth to a sense of mystery that seems, not accidental, but rather cultivated by Pechorin himself as an aura of false importance—a substitute, it turns out, for a solid soul. The fragmented, indeterminate nature of his identity is underscored further by the structure of the novel, which is not only episodic and thus disjointed but also a-chronological. It is difficult to determine at times when a particular episode occurs in relation to the others. As Nabokov indicates in his foreword, presumably the events narrated first—those in “Bela” and “Maksim Maksimych”—take place after those in “Taman,” “Princess Mary,” and “The Fatalist” (4); moreover, the amount of time that passes between each episode is uncertain, and the shift in narrators only compounds the effects of the discontinuity. Ultimately, as one source has it, “*A Hero of Our Time* renders attempts to create a biography for its hero ultimately fruitless” (Todd 151), and it seems as though the character would prefer it that way.

The surest thing the reader can know about Pechorin is that he has no roots in the Russian soil—that metaphor that would be exploited so powerfully by Grigoriev and Dostoevsky. It is no wonder that Dostoevsky once described the superfluous man, as exemplified by Pechorin, as a “homeless wanderer” (qtd. in Stenbock-Fermor “Lermontov” 225). Pechorin moves restlessly and continually from place to place, like a ghost unable either to rest or to reunite with its body. He is forever arriving (as in “Bela,” “Taman,” and “Princess Mary”) or departing (“Maksim Maksimych”), never at home. Even his death takes place on the open road: “I learned not long ago that Pechorin had died on his way back from Persia” (Lermontov 67). It seems that he is always neither here nor there, in a state of flux and transition. Of course, it has been established

that being stuck in an “in between” or liminal position is itself evocative of folklore superstition regarding the passage of devils between worlds; therefore, Pechorin is in a position that either associates him with devils (cf., Onegin in Tatiana’s dream), places him in a position of spiritual vulnerability, or affords him desired access to the Otherworld. Wigzell points out that Russian peasant culture was alert to times and places in which “the unclean force roamed the earth and could be tapped by the brave for predictions about the future” (“Russian Folk Devil” 63). This function for the folklore overtones is probably less significant than the first two, as will be indicated later, but it is nonetheless applicable to one of the few facts revealed about Pechorin’s childhood. Chances describes the ramifications of this incident:

[W]hen he was very young, an old woman told his fortune; she told his mother that he would perish because of the influence of an evil woman . . . . In order to counteract the forces of fate, he attempts to control them himself . . . . Fate has decreed that a female would bring about his downfall, so he takes matters into his own hands and places a barrier between himself and women. (*Conformity’s Children* 44-5)

Pechorin is resisting more than fate here, however; he is resisting definition by anyone outside himself, specifically this unnamed woman who seems to suggest the spiritual (if, here, occult) energy of the *народ*. But he does so by response; he does not act but “counteract[s].” He is reduced to throwing a resounding negative back into the face of forces to which, by his constant wandering, he makes himself more vulnerable than ever, since the otherworldly forces in folklore “attacked those bold characters who left the safety of the village and went travelling on the high road (bol’shaia doroga)” (Wigzell “Russian Folk Devil” 67). Pechorin gives the prophecy substance by attempting to evade it, even as he turns himself into a negative, a “not thus.”

Lastly, the larger setting of the episodes in the novel is suggestive regarding Pechorin's dark, brooding façade and fragmented soul. It is no accident that Lermontov spends so much time building up word pictures of the Caucasus which, notwithstanding Nabokov's description of them as "crude," "commonplace," and "redundan[t]" (Foreword 7), are nonetheless vivid and striking. In the opening pages of "Bela," for instance, the narrator describes the mountain pass as follows:

On all sides rise inaccessible mountains, reddish cliffs, hung over with great ivy and crowned with clumps of plane trees; tawny precipices streaked with washes, and, far above, the golden fringe of the snows; below, Aragva River, infolding another, nameless river which noisily bursts forth from a black gorge full of gloom, stretches out in a silver thread and glistens like the scaling of a snake. (17)

This description paints the landscape as imposing and mysterious, as full of dark secrets as Pechorin—or at least Pechorin as he represents himself to others. Lermontov seems, in fact, to be reaching for the sublime (though Nabokov might argue he never quite gets there); in any case, the Caucasus generally has such associations for the Russian imagination. Marsh points out that "[t]he Caucasus . . . was regarded as an exotic adventurous place on the far-flung borders of the Russian empire" and that Lermontov himself enjoyed painting its landscapes in order "to penetrate the unknown" (35). This region, like the protagonist who will eke out his miserable existence among its villages, fortresses, and watering places, also resists the stabilization of its identity. In a note to his collaborative translation, Nabokov explains its troubled history as follows: "The gradual annexation of the Caucasus by Russia went on intermittently from the capture of Derbent (1722), by Peter I, to the capture (in 1859) of the chieftain and religious leader of the Lezgians, Shamil" (176). Furthermore, during the period of Lermontov's Caucasian

service (and the composition of his novel), Russia was participating in “a fierce war with the mountaineers . . . [of] Chechnya and Dagestan” (176). Thus, for decades, the Caucasus was Russian and not Russian, of uncertain religious affiliation (many of the local tribes were Islamic), and in continual turmoil. It would have been difficult to contrive a more appropriate setting for a character as restless, amoral, and ultimately destructive as Pechorin will prove to be, and though using nature to mirror his protagonist’s wayward and alienated soul approaches the pathetic fallacy, functioning on some levels as an awkward throwback to the more purely Romantic gestures of Lermontov’s earlier and simpler work, it nonetheless gets the point across.

It would be appropriate, at this point, to establish how and why Pechorin represents a logical extension, rather than a mere imitation, of Onegin, particularly since Onegin too is somewhat of an enigma and a wanderer (though not in the Caucasus). That the two characters are connected is beyond dispute. Even their names suggest an association, as Gifford indicates: “Onega and Pechora are both rivers of northern Russia. So, when, at the end of the 1830’s, Lermontov chose the name Pechorin for his hero, he was hinting at a relationship with Onegin” (102). Nonetheless, there is a clear progression from the one to the other, the journey of the larger character type, the superfluous man, into a downward spiral toward darkness and nothingness. Dostoevsky describes this progression as being, not the unique visions of two individual authors, but rather manifestations of a larger cultural awareness of a growing problem: “That type finally penetrated into the consciousness of all our society and started to transform itself, being born anew with each generation. In Pecorin it achieved unquenchable bitter spite and a peculiarly Russian contrast of two heterogenous elements: egotism carried to self-deification, and at the same time spiteful disrespect of oneself” (qtd. in Stenbock-Fermor “Lermontov” 220). For Russians on the edge of the emerging modern world, understanding who they were in

relation to the deeply religious, technologically backward culture out of which they emerged and the technologically advanced but spiritually impoverished society toward which they had been vainly reaching could not fail to divide the Russian self into respectively self-glorifying and self-deprecating functions, each of which might take on a life of its own. Such is the case with Pechorin. Whereas Onegin is unable to put pen to paper (except in the notable exception of his letter to Tatiana), Pechorin writes much, but only about and for himself. His revelations are marked by painfully heightened awareness of his own insubstantiality— Seeley refers to a “new and significant intellectual development in Pechorin[,] . . . the striking increase in self-knowledge,” which separates him from Chatsky and Onegin (106)—and, at the same time, evasive maneuvering to avoid the self-objectifying gaze empowered by his own intellect. Both capacities have an ultimately deadening effect on his humanity, as Pechorin himself admits in a remarkably candid statement:

Out of life’s storm I carried only a few ideas—and not one feeling. For a long time now, I have been living not with the heart, but with the head. I weigh and analyse my own passions and actions with stern curiosity, but without participation. Within me there are two persons: one of them lives in the full sense of the word, the other cogitates and judges [i.e., objectifies] him. (148)

He has been busy, in other words, undermining his own natural impulses—perhaps, initially, his own better impulses—with cold, hard reasoning, glorying in his own power to pin his natural inclinations against a wall.

Yet Pechorin’s cold, detached, rational side is not really—or not often—presented in opposition to passion in its true sense. As Pechorin himself says elsewhere, “I am no longer capable myself of frenzy under the influence of passion” (116). Rather, Pechorin’s other side

manifests itself most strongly in a destructive will. He says, “[A]mbition is nothing else than thirst for power, and my main pleasure—which is to subjugate to my will all that surrounds me .

. . . [is t]o be the cause of sufferings and joys, without having any positive right to it” (116).

Seeley describes this sadistic drive as “first and foremost, a will to power . . . ‘an insatiable thirst devouring all that crosses his path’” (105). It is not really a human passion but an angry slap in

the face of a world that parades lesser beings in front of him—beings which possess no more substance than he does and yet dwell in happy ignorance, like Onegin’s doppelgänger Lensky.

Like Onegin, Pechorin is alienated from others by a superior intellect that will not permit him to blind himself as they do, even if he would like to do so. As Chances so aptly puts it, “his mind will not let him live” (*Conformity’s Children* 45). Denied humanity, he will reach for godhood

and then bemoan the cruelty of “fate” for deflating this vision of himself into a cosmic joke. This force of nature is, apparently, forever depositing him “in at the dénouement of other people’s

dramas, as if none could either die or despair without me” (Lermontov 124). In other words, by making others suffer, he makes himself peripheral to their suffering and then proceeds to blame

fate for making him “the indispensable persona in the fifth act . . . the miserable part of the executioner or the traitor” (124). Through despising and persecuting others, he becomes less than

they are, becomes a mere afterthought. One can here see that (1), Pechorin’s split self reduces

him in both cases to a function, whether as critic or as stage actor; and (2), self-glorification will always end in extraordinary self-pity. He paradoxically sees through his own selfish

machinations, exults in the seeing, and then indicts the world for making him into something which he cannot help but despise.

As the story unfolds, this paradoxical development of a greater self-awareness and a more fundamental loss of self, as well as a more concentrated capacity for sheer meanness, will

become increasingly evident, particularly with regard to certain plot devices that Lermontov also adapted from Pushkin. The duel between Onegin and Lensky has spawned so many allusions in later literature that it eventually became something of a commonplace; Lermontov's, however, is of particular interest for several reasons. For one thing, as established in the last chapter, Onegin murders Lensky because he harbors a deep-seated resentment toward his friend's blind happiness. But this resentment finds an outlet only because certain circumstances lend themselves to it. Onegin does not deliberately instigate a duel with Lensky; he flirts with Olga to anger his friend, but he does so on a whim. His actions are not calculated, and he seems to give no thought to their possible consequences. Furthermore, he justifies his decision to participate in the duel by appealing to convention and public opinion, thereby disguising from himself his own fundamental drive to destroy Lensky (though he must realize, on some level, that he is rationalizing). Thus, despite Onegin's awareness of his own superfluity, he possesses on other levels a moral cowardice in the face of his own base inclinations. It will not be so with Pechorin.

The duel with Grushnitsky in "Princess Mary" reveals much about Pechorin's character. First of all, exactly what he is attacking—what Grushnitsky represents for him—is particularly important. One source suggests that "[t]he rival is now himself, or rather a parody of himself" (Peace 29), and in that case, Grushnitsky would be a non-self-conscious and slightly ridiculous version of Pechorin—again, a parallel to the role that Lensky played for Onegin. On some levels, this reading works; for instance, on first running into Grushnitsky in "Princess Mary," Pechorin makes the following remarkable summation on his character: "[A]ll his life he had been occupied with his own self. His object is to become the hero of a novel. So often had he tried to convince others that he is a being not made for this world and doomed to suffer in secret, that he has almost succeeded in convincing himself of it" (85). This self-preoccupation bordering on

solipsism, combined with self-exaltation and delusions of grandeur, does indeed resemble Pechorin, who in his brooding journal makes himself the center of all things. The difference is that there is a deep irony in Pechorin's self-consciousness that makes possible the simultaneous self-pity and self-glorification alluded to earlier—that is, he worships himself as one who is aware of his own nothingness, or his own expendability and lack of substance; he can pity himself as a victim of the crushing power of the universe, and he can worship himself as one who, unlike other blind fools, faces the void without flinching. By admitting that he is “the indispensable persona in the fifth act” (124), an extra, a nobody, he takes pride—or tries to—in his honesty with himself, about himself. Decades after Lermontov's death, Friedrich Nietzsche would make the remarkable observation, “Whoever despises himself still respects himself as one who despises” (271), and it is only through such a splitting of the self that Pechorin achieves even a semblance of substantial selfhood. His judgments are continually and simultaneously revealing exceptional honesty and enacting existential power plays.

It should be clear, then, that Grushnitsky is on some level Pechorin's Lensky, and yet, whereas Onegin seems to have deceived himself for a time concerning his inability to hold real respect for the naïve poet, Pechorin admits from the outset a clear awareness and uncompromising judgment concerning men like Grushnitsky, who “solemnly drape themselves in extraordinary emotions, exalted passions, and exceptional sufferings” (84)—in other words, those marked by unapologetic and overblown Romanticism, as Lensky was.<sup>11</sup> Pechorin drily

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Lensky's romanticism was, to borrow the Western classifications, more Wordsworthian than Byronic. He was, in spite of his building castles in the air, a gentle and sympathetic soul, faithful to his Olga, genuinely attached to Onegin, and really hurt by his betrayal. There is something childlike, if nonetheless pathetic, in him that seems

remarks, “I have seen through him, and that is why he dislikes me, although outwardly we are on the friendliest of terms” (85). He also admits, to himself and to readers, “I don’t like him either: I feel that one day we shall meet on a narrow path, and one of us will fare ill” (85). However, though it may be true to say that Pechorin is on some level squashing an unconscious and far less subtle manifestation of his own weaknesses, it would be a mistake to assume there is nothing more to the duel than displaced self-loathing. For one thing, Pechorin initially adopts a less extreme way of making Grushnitsky miserable—his petty game of usurping Grushnitsky’s desired place in Princess Mary’s affections, a project he takes on out of “that nasty but unconquerable feeling which urges us to destroy the sweet delusions of a fellow man” (Lermontov 116), the same sort of capricious slap at a friend’s happiness that drove Onegin to dismantle Lensky’s faith in Olga. It is an outlet for Pechorin’s will to dominate others for the sake of domination, an indulgence in envious impulses to punish others for their happiness, that is at the same time a way of aggrandizing himself with the universe that has cast him out as a freak of nature, a man without a country or an identity; as such an outcast, he offers himself back to the world “as the ‘axe’ or ‘executioner’ of fate striking down men or their happiness ‘often without malice, but always without pity’” (Lermontov qtd. in Seeley 106). But at the same time,

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utterly lacking in the ostentatious posturing of Grushnitsky, of whom Pechorin remarks, “He told me himself that the reason which impelled him to join the K. regiment would remain an eternal secret between him and heaven” (85). If one can believe Pechorin’s representation of him (and it is a fair question whether or not one can, but it is all the reader has to work with), the difference between Grushnitsky and Lensky might suggest a difference between the two protagonists they respectively parody. In that case, Onegin retains a little more humanity than his literary successor.

he blames the larger order of things for sending him into such exile and rendering impotent, through granting him the intellectual power to see through things, his better, more human inclinations—inclinations which are embodied in his selfish and impossible but nonetheless real love for a married woman, a love that brings him closer to genuine humanity than anything else:

Surely not by coincidence does Lermontov have Pechorin love Vera, or in Russian, faith. For what else can a superfluous man pursue? Even he himself continues to hope that somewhere in the universe there exists a beautiful truth (verity) that will give his life meaning and purpose, and that this will eliminate for him the vicious pain of feeling useless on this earth. But Pechorin's faith and truth always remain married to someone else; has someone else to take care of, and has someone else's children. (Clardy and Clardy 13)

It is also no mistake that Pechorin's lost ideal is embodied in a woman, since, as previously noted with Tatiana, there is historically a correspondence in the Russian mind between women and the spiritual roots of the nation—an ideal less narrow, if no less exploitative on some levels, than the Western myth of woman as the guardian of the hearth. It is perhaps at least somewhat redemptive, from a feminist point of view, that Russian men, as embodied in protagonists like Onegin and Pechorin, were increasingly deprived of stable selves, were in fact “the others” to the self that remained firmly fixed in the unattainable feminine. Hubbs describes this phenomenon as follows:

Male identity is perceived as precarious, contingent, existing only in the ethereal world of ideas rather than rooted in the “real” world. Woman, on the other hand, is regarded as the essence of stability, of life, of growth, of *lichnost'* (individuality) itself. She is ‘whole’ (*tseľ'naia*), while man is neurotic, torn.

Russian literature to the present day repeats the theme of the prodigal son's return to the motherland for absolution, empowerment, and rebirth. (231)

Pechorin, however, cannot return to Vera; she belongs to someone else, and his love for her serves merely as a painful reminder of what he could never fully possess—since, even if circumstances were different, he would still be himself, still be as incapable of cultivating a healthy, consistent devotion to anyone as he was when he let her go in the first place. He is as unworthy of Vera as Onegin was of Tatiana.

At this point, it is crucial to realize—for otherwise, it is impossible to understand the duel or anything else Pechorin does—that he is not quite yet a *мёртвая душа*, a dead soul, à la Gogol. He is not yet turned to stone, not yet a total absence, but in the process of becoming so. He is a dying soul, not a dead one, and it is the death agonies of this soul that will do so much unspeakable harm to those around him; it is the fact that he can still feel psychological pain—not passion, as noted, but pain—that will drive him to act out his decaying soul's anguish in ways that drive him further and further from the faith and reconciliation that might relieve it. It might be his hyperawareness of the undeserving nature of others—Grushnitsky, for instance, and the shallow if good-hearted Mary—that initially keeps him from responding to them with anything other than contempt; but the fact that he is still human enough to feel pain at their natural, ensuing resentment of him is the catalyst that makes him vindictive toward them rather than merely indifferent. Seeley makes the important observation that “[e]motionally, the chief difference between Pechorin and his predecessors is that their coldness was, by comparison, balanced and passive. Pechorin's incapacity to love is matched by his craving to be loved . . . and that craving expresses itself in terms of his lust for power as a mania for exploiting people emotionally” (106). He is still alive in his capacity to suffer, still alive in his will, and therefore

his will turns into an agent of destruction against others, as well as against his own humanity as that which opens him up to moral suffering. He is engaged in a process of dismantling his own better impulses, of denying them, dismissing them as less than real when they may be the only real thing about him—if “real” can be taken to mean a positive quality, rather than capacities which involve negation or destruction. Hence, he analyzes his own reaction to Vera’s departure in “Princess Mary,” and the analysis destroys the life within the emotion as surely as vivisection destroys animal life: “Yet it pleases me that I am capable of weeping. It may have been due, however, to upset nerves, to a sleepless night, to a couple of minutes spent facing the muzzle of a pistol, and to an empty stomach” (159). He can then speak of the specter of grief in utilitarian terms: “That new torment produced in me . . . a fortunate diversion . . . [I]f I . . . had not been compelled to walk ten miles home, that night, too, sleep would not have come to close my eyes” (159). In other words, grief is no longer a legitimate feeling but rather the means of destroying what would have been another legitimate feeling—the potential guilt he might have suffered over Grushnitsky’s death. Sleep itself, moreover, involves the death of feeling, the numbing of the soul against the bitter world. Therefore, Seeley can speak of Pechorin’s will as being defined by “its cruelty” (105), but it is a cruelty directed against himself as well as others.

In light of these observations, one can make sense of the fact that Pechorin conceives the idea of killing Grushnitsky only when he overhears Grushnitsky and company concocting a scheme against his own life. It is not that he cares so much for his life but that the scheme triggers his sense of being victimized, calling up his infinite capacity to feel sorry for himself, in spite of the fact that he knows he drove Grushnitsky to such measures in the first place: “What do they all hate me for?” he asks himself. “What for? . . . Could it be that I belong to the number of those people whose appearance alone is sufficient to produce ill will?” (136). Pechorin knows

better, surely! He has set out to ruin Grushnitsky's happiness for the sake of ruining his happiness, and he is too intelligent not to realize that Grushnitsky would want to retaliate. Nonetheless, Pechorin's sense of injury at the hands of "fate," however he chooses to define it in a given moment, makes him feel that no matter what injury he does to others, it is nothing compared with the blows he has suffered himself. Hence, his vengeance will be uncompromising. He lays a trap for Grushnitsky as coldly and deliberately as a hunter would lay a trap for fowl—it is not coincidental that Pechorin was associated with hunting in "Bela"—and enjoys watching Grushnitsky act under the illusion that he is laying a trap for Pechorin. He watches Grushnitsky give up chance after chance to come clean and admit that he has schemed to load only his pistol and not Pechorin's, watches him beat back his conscience again and again. That Pechorin does so can be misleading. Gifford, for instance, suggests that "Pechorin never does wrong for the joy of it . . . Thus he murders Grushnitsky, but only after it is obvious that Grushnitsky can never change" (131). To Pechorin, it had always been obvious that Grushnitsky would never change. He might say, in one breath, "I was sure he would fire in the air!" and in the next add, "Only one thing could interfere with it: the thought that I should demand another duel" (152). Pechorin is daring Grushnitsky to demonstrate how much he really deserves what Pechorin is about to do to him. Gifford, in fact, acknowledges that "Grushnitsky is the incarnation of a hostility which meets Pechorin at every turn, even though he has only himself to blame for it. His murder is a revenge on society" (131).<sup>12</sup> And Pechorin drags out this revenge as

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<sup>12</sup> This indictment of society ought not to be overlooked. It is common, in treatments of the superfluous man, to blame the fragmented, hybrid society out of which these characters emerge for the general havoc that they wreak wherever they go. And, indeed, it is partly the assimilation of incompatible epistemologies, the paradigm built up by centuries of Russian

long as he can, taunting Grushnitsky until the latter screams at him, “Shoot! . . . I despise myself and hate you. If you do not kill me, I shall cut your throat in a dark alley” (155). Killing Grushnitsky is merely the climax that follows the dismantling of his ego, the hollowing out of his own Romantic image of himself. Pechorin’s pronouncement on his death, “*Finita la commedia*” (155), indicates just how much of a joke Grushnitsky had always been to him. And yet, oddly enough, there is no catharsis for Pechorin in playing out his comedy to the end: the victory is as hollow as the players. As Pechorin puts it, “[A] stone lay on my heart. The sun seemed to me without luster; its rays did not warm me” (155). Gifford suggests that after the duel, Pechorin “wanders like Cain” (131), a fitting image for a man more aware than ever of having reaffirmed yet again his own exile from humankind.

Pechorin’s capricious vindictiveness does not, however, limit itself to cowardly and ridiculous objects like Grushnitsky—who does, after all, ask for it by plotting against Pechorin first. The innocent also suffer at his hands. Princess Mary, for instance, genuinely likes Pechorin,

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Orthodoxy versus a paradigm dominated by materialism and individualism, that makes the superfluous man “superfluous” in the first place—or, perhaps more accurately, it is his simultaneous hyperawareness of the dilemma and powerlessness to synthesize its oppositions. But one can blame society only up to a point, since there is also a point at which self-knowledge can be made constructive again. Rejecting hybridity involves the building up of a new self out of whatever fragments in the old self have salvific potential. Theoretically, Onegin gives up a real opportunity for redemption in Tatiana, and Stavrogin will later give up more than one such opportunity. Pushkin and Dostoevsky both situate the possibility of salvation in the *народ* and, in the case of the latter, in the Orthodox tradition as well. And if Pechorin’s Vera does indeed represent faith, so does Lermontov.

and he deliberately raises her expectations with regard to his own feelings toward her, all the time intending to break her heart: “She will spend a sleepless night and will weep. This thought gives me boundless delight: there are moments when I understand the vampire” (134). The psychoanalyst would rightly recognize his response as sadistic, but his sadism is less psychosexual than it is envious and parasitic. He hates the blind and happy multitude that he cannot join without sacrificing his self-understanding, and he hates them for being happy; he himself can achieve only a fleeting semblance of happiness by bleeding it out of them, like a vampire. And the one he bleeds most cruelly is, of course, Bela, the native Circassian girl whose happiness and life he destroys on a whim.

The chapter on “Bela” is particularly important, since it makes clear from the outset that Pechorin is without scruple and completely governed by impulse; there is no larger sense of morality or even compassion that might govern his inimitable “will to power.” As one source puts it, “Pechorin’s pursuit of evil is as gratuitous as it is deliberate. He even welcomes hostility as an opportunity and justification for letting himself go . . . . [H]e pursues power as a substitute for the affection which he needs so desperately, but in the possibility of which he cannot believe” (Seeley 107). It only makes sense that without a proper sense of self, Pechorin will also have an improper sense of the other; people, therefore, become objects to him, and he treats them as such. Grigoriev speaks of Pechorin, and of superfluous men in general, as heartlessly preying on other human beings: “Characters, for Grigoriev, are to be divided into two groups: those who are ‘predatory’ (‘xiščnyj’) and those who are ‘meek’ (‘smirnyj’). In his terms, Pechorin exemplifies the former” (qtd. in *Chances Conformity’s Children* 41). And the heartlessness of Pechorin’s treatment of Bela becomes increasingly disturbing throughout the tale. For one thing, he begins by turning her into a commodity, exploiting the obsessive desire of her brother Azamat for an

unattainable horse: “[Y]ou will own that steed; but in return you must give me your sister, Bela. Karagyozy [the horse] will be the *kalym* [dowry]” (31). The concept of a dowry here is a joke, since Pechorin is actually having her kidnapped; the trauma she endures by being tied up and abducted in the middle of the night by her own brother seems to escape his notice, let alone his concern. When Maksim Maksimych confronts him about his crime, Pechorin says, “If you only knew what a worry torments me!” (33). The worry, it turns out, is that Bela is refusing to respond to his advances—a refusal hardly surprising, one would think. His justification for his actions is even more telling. To Maksim Maksimych’s masterpiece of understatement, “Look here, Grigory Aleksandrovich, you must admit that it was not a nice thing to do” (34), Pechorin remarks, “Suppose I like her?” (34). The statement indicates that Pechorin’s governing characteristic is the exercise of his iron will in the pursuit, not of any metaphysical scheme of meaning, larger social goal,<sup>13</sup> or long-term plan, but rather every wanton impulse that presents itself to his imagination. And those impulses apparently are in no need of justification. Pechorin speaks of evil designs, presumably those in himself, as being “organic creations. Someone has said that their very birth endows them with a form, and this form is action” (117). Traditionally,

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<sup>13</sup> This is what separates the superfluous man from the Westernized intellectuals of the 1840s, such as Herzen, Belinsky, or, on the fictional plain, Dostoevsky’s Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky. These men are dedicated to something outside themselves—esthetic ideals, social goals, etc.—which, however detached from reality in themselves, nevertheless humanize those who pursue them. The same distinction applies regarding the kind of 1860s radical represented in Bazarov in Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* or Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*. The atheistic Bazarov is dedicated to science, and the ruthless Pyotr Stepanovich to social transformation; the true superfluous man is dedicated to nothing.

God alone has been conceived as one whose will yields (instant) actualization of the thing willed, whereas with humankind, there are barriers between will and action (generally considerations of larger concerns, concerns outside the individual human being—anything from conscience to pragmatism, or Freud's superego and ego, respectively). Thus, Pechorin's allowing every fancy to govern his will and, if necessary, redefine the lives of others in relation to himself—as he says, concerning Bela, "I've hired the wife of a Tatar [to] accustom her to the idea that she is mine, for she won't belong to anybody but me" (34)—is yet another kind of self-deification.

Leatherbarrow speaks of Pechorin's toying with fate in such terms, saying that "his claim to authorship is a bid to displace God" ("Pechorin's Demons" 1013), but it seems he has been doing so long before his fatalism gets the better of him. Thus, Bela's eventually warming up to Pechorin, which a modern reader would recognize as Stockholm Syndrome, represents a remaking of her so that she fulfills the needs of the man who controls her fate—her god, in other words. And while the remaking eventually disguises itself as benevolence (as imperialism often does to the victimized culture), it is nonetheless unnatural and exploitative: "Pechorin would dress her up like a little doll, he would pamper her and dote on her, and her beauty improved marvelously under / our care!" (43-4). He is treating her more like a plaything than a human being, and like all playthings, she eventually ceases to interest him very much. On the unfortunate incident that leads to her death, Maksim Maksimych remarks, "Ah, she did well to die! What, indeed, would have become of her if Pechorin had abandoned her? And this is what would have happened, sooner or later" (53). More disturbing than anything, however, is Pechorin's response to her death. First of all, Maksim Maksimych, who was genuinely fond of Bela, becomes irritated that "his face did not express anything unusual" (54). Then, in response to Maksim Maksimych's all-too-human attempt to "comfort him, mainly for the sake of

propriety,” Pechorin “lifted his head and laughed” (54). Grief, “propriety,” human feeling—all are a joke to this man; Maksim Maksimych is rather slow to realize this, but even so, the “chill” he feels at Pechorin’s laughter drives him away for a time. Richards speaks of this “despairing, nihilistic laugh” as indicative that his manipulative, “malicious wit” has “degenerated” to the point at which he is too empty to offer even the semblance of humanity that manifests itself through clever discourse (24). Pechorin truly cares about nothing.

There is more to this laughter, however, than indifference; it opens the door to the rather sophisticated treatment of the demonic that takes place throughout *A Hero of Our Time* and goes much further than the associations explored with Onegin in Tatiana’s dream. In the first place, as with Onegin, there is a continual undermining of Pechorin’s self-conscious adoption of Byronism. His stance as “a metaphysical rebel” (*Chances Conformity’s Children* 21) associates him with both Byronic Romanticism and the reconfiguration of evil involved in it. Leatherbarrow acknowledges this association, referring to Bakhtin’s idea that “Romanticism invested the devil with a high seriousness and philosophical gravitas in excess of anything he had previously possessed” (“Pechorin’s Demons” 1001). In this sense, one can see the glorification of evil tacit in this form of Satanism, which involves a fictional recapitulation of the initial rebellion of Lucifer against God. In the nihilistic Pechorin’s case, however, he is trying desperately to fill a perceived vacuum (where God should have been) with his own ego: “His Romantically demonic disenchantment and despair—what Faletti terms his ‘sense of exile from human involvement, resembling that of a fallen angel’—are erected upon a dismal view of a universe structured on blind chance and contingency, one from which God and meaning are excluded” (Leatherbarrow “Pechorin’s Demons” 1009). Pechorin’s capacities for negation and destruction underscore his adoption of this role, as do “his desolate view of life and, secondly,

his tendency to look upon others in an authorial way” (1009). But his Westernized demonism will ultimately prove artificial, a cosmic masquerade that dissolves into grotesquerie as the Miltonic/Byronic associations gradually get overtaken by other images. Leatherbarrow speaks of this dissolution as follows: “As this alternative reading of Pechorin’s demonism takes hold in the narrative, it becomes clear that it is heavily ironized by the travelling narrator’s growing suspicion that the hero’s Byronic demonism—although good enough to persuade the socially limited Maksim Maksimych—might in reality be little more than an affectation, a fashionably Romantic pose” (“Pechorin’s Demons” 1006). Pechorin himself seems to be aware that he is posing before his own critical nature as something that he could, if he believed in his own charade, respect enough to retain the will to live. His greatest fear is the deflation, the collapse, of the charade. He admits, on the one hand, “I have become incapable of noble impulses” (137), a fact in which, at times, he seems to glory; but in the very next breath he says, “I am afraid of appearing laughable to myself” (137). Laughter undermines all pretense to dignity in its object, and as such, it is a function of the will to power—hence, people speak of having “the last laugh.” The context of Pechorin’s laughter at the death of Bela, however, appropriates his power play into a less dignified framework. It is an act, as Leatherbarrow notes, which is “also redolent of the devil in that Russian popular belief ascribed to laughter a highly sinister significance” (“Pechorin’s Demons” 1005). Wigzell also points out that “[t]he propensity for spirits to play jokes at the expense of man was also transferred to the folk devil; mocking laughter could often be heard as man was led astray. Indeed, one of the commonest euphemisms for the devil is ‘joker’ (shut)” (“Russian Folk Devil” 68). Consequently, the fact that the destruction of Bela is a joke to Pechorin and not part of some larger design displaces him from Byronism into the idiom of devils as grotesque pranksters. It diminishes, rather than elevates, his manifestation of evil—

though it in no way lessens the seriousness of the crime from a moral standpoint—just as in mythology, those who presume to the divine often end up as beasts or get turned into stone.

The images that associate Pechorin with the folklore devil and thus undermine his façade of Byronism are almost too numerous to recount. For instance, the setting through which the narrator and Maksim Maksimych travel at the onset of the narrative in “Bela,” when Pechorin’s name is first mentioned, is so full of suggestive details as to be almost overdone. Leatherbarrow calls attention to some of the strongest images below:

[T]he opening of “Bela” and the meeting of the narrator with Maksim Maksimych occur at sunset as the travellers are crossing a mountain. In both time and place, this is a “threshold” or “liminal” situation, held in Russian folk belief to be particularly susceptible to demonic intervention. The landscape is characterized by deep ravines, believed in folklore to be holes in the earth, gateways to the “Other World,” from which evil seeps and devils intrude. The weather is prone to snowstorms, again associated with the devil's presence in folk belief [cf., Tatiana’s dream in *Eugene Onegin*]. The river lying far below is described as serpent-like . . . . The difficult terrain and uncooperative locals elicit from the narrator and Maksim conventionally demonic verbal responses, such as “that accursed mountain,” “the devil take them,” “those shaggy devils,” etc.

(“Pechorin’s Demons” 1004)

The last observation is key, since in Russian folk belief, it is dangerous to name the devil, lest he take the invocation as a summons (1007). The association of Pechorin with liminal hours and locations continues through each of the episodes of the novel. In “Maksim Maksimych,” for instance, “[h]e arrives in Vladikavkaz at the liminal hour of nightfall, and he is referred to

subsequently as ‘the one we were expecting’ (*tot, kotorogo my ozhidali*)” (1007). He is also, in the moment he finally succeeds in gaining emotional power over Bela, positioned on a threshold, and he first takes physical liberties with Princess Mary while they are crossing a stream. His control over them is consummated in locations that allow passage between this world and Hell. But suggestive power notwithstanding, these incidents are only externalizations of deeper associations concerning his function as a character.

The very fact that Pechorin operates in the guise of Byronic Satanism, that he assumes a role, is itself an undermining of that guise. Franklin notes that according to the Russian conception of the devil—or, more accurately, devils—most of the time “demons do not look like demons. Frontal assault is not their normal style. They much prefer disguise. They can appear in the shape of that which we detest and fear” (38). But they can also “make themselves attractive” (38), assuming the kind of seductive role adopted by Pechorin in relation to Bela, Princess Mary, and others. With the notable exception of the kidnapping of Bela, Pechorin is often subtle in his machinations, luring his prey gradually into the vortex of his control. This *modus operandi* is significant, since “one of the defining characteristics of the folk devil [is] his guile” (Wigzell “Russian Folk Devil” 66). The irony of Pechorin’s triumphs over his victims, however, is that everything Pechorin does to sublimate his evil ends by deflating it into the sort of laughable grotesquerie he fears. For instance, there is no cosmic resonance in his petty toying with the feelings of Princess Mary; the delight he takes in her suffering is the sort of demeaning, dehumanizing delight of a rebellious adolescent defacing a work of art or urinating on an altar rail—the irritable slap in the face of the beautiful or the sacred that seems, at first glance, to make a statement, but actually spirals into sheer pointlessness.

Not only is Pechorin's Satanism de-centered by the folk tradition, but it also turns out that even the caricature of evil he is able at times to realize, within that tradition, is ultimately bigger than he is and, moreover, out of his control. In the end, he is de-centered yet again by the essential paradigms of the homeland from which he wanders in exile. There is more of the folklore devil in him than there is of the Romantic conception of Satan, but he is not solid enough to sustain either forever; he is caught between these two competing visions of evil—another form of the liminality and hybridity that will drive him toward absence and nothingness and a foreshadowing of Dostoevsky's Stavrogin, who speaks of being capable of nothing, "not even negation" (*Demons* 676). The self can suffer division only so many times.

Key to this final division is the chapter "Taman," which is so Romantic on the surface that, as with the landscape descriptions in "Bela," one might be tempted to classify it as a throwback to Lermontov's earlier work. It transcends this association, however, in its treatment of Pechorin in relation to its Romantic framework. Leatherbarrow's landmark article touches on the fact that "the narrative . . . serves not to associate Pechorin with the folk-demonic, but systematically to disengage and distance him from it" ("Pechorin's Demons" 1008). This distancing is rather complex and has to do with the Russian conception of the demonic as being a real spiritual force—or, more accurately, real spiritual beings. Franklin points to this fact when he says, "To put it crudely: in Orthodox tradition for most of the / centuries of its existence, there is no such thing as *demonism*. Instead, there are demons. There is no demonization; instead there is demonology. Demons are external, not externalizations. *We* may choose to psychologize them . . . but such choices would arise out of *our* ways of cultural modelling [*sic*], not out of Orthodox understanding" (32-3). The key insight has to do with the fact that, while Lermontov is operating within an awareness of the literary device of demonism, or the appropriation of the demonic as a

metaphor for purely human phenomena, he is synthesizing this concept with a more traditional notion that evil is both real and supernatural. Hence, Pechorin does not realize what he is inviting when he says, on arriving in Taman, “Take me somewhere . . . . Let it be the devil’s” (69). Here, the spiritually dangerous Pechorin is represented as also spiritually endangered, as the human appropriation of devilry will always be imperfect and the invocation of supernatural evil an authentic risk.

Overall, the incidents in “Taman” illustrate Pechorin’s propensity to invite his own paradigms of destruction to turn around and destroy him. Richard Peace, in a remarkable article on the function of this otherwise underrated chapter, points out that “the position of Pechorin in *Taman*’ [is] tinged with irony. The victim of authority has himself been placed in the position of authority in respect to the ‘honest smugglers,’ but at the same time has been defeated by them” (16). These smugglers are the inhabitants of the lonely cottage on the edge of town, by the cliffs overlooking the sea (a more Romantic setting one could hardly imagine); throughout the chapter, Pechorin is caught up in the mystery of the deaf old woman, the wild, seductive girl who sings on the roof of the cottage, and the blind boy whose reticence excites Pechorin’s curiosity and suspicion. He says, “I confess I have a strong prejudice against those who are blind, one-eyed, deaf, mute, legless, armless, hunchbacked, and so forth. I have observed that there always exists some strange relationship between the appearance of a man and his soul, as if with the loss of a limb, the soul lost one of its senses” (Lermontov 70). There are echoes in this comment of the Russian superstition against the lame as associated with the devil, and as Peace indicates, the demonic resonance of these folklore figures, in comparison to Pechorin, could hardly be overstated:

Thus Pechorin calls the blind boy “a little devil” when trying to penetrate the mystery of his nocturnal wanderings on the beach, and Pechorin’s orderly curses the girl as a “she-devil” when she knocks over his tea . . . . [He also] seems to hint at something uncanny about her in the boat incident, when he talks about her “snake-like nature” and the “supernatural force” which threw him against the side.  
(27)

Behind Peace’s continual reinforcement of the fact that Pechorin is displaced from the center of the demonic imagery is the recognition that Pechorin is here revealed to be still vulnerable on many levels—and he does not like being vulnerable. As Peace puts it, “Here it is not Pechorin who steals from the outlaw to give to the boy in order to gain the heroine [;] it is rather the boy who steals from Pechorin for the outlaw, whilst Pechorin is being deceived into thinking that he has gained the heroine” (28). Pechorin resents being made ridiculous—again, his false dignity being reduced to the ludicrous—by people whose limitations merely underscore his own loss of control: “Really, would it not be absurd to complain to the authorities that I had been robbed by a blind boy, and had almost been drowned by an eighteen-year-old girl?” (Lermontov 81). Incidentally, the fact that the girl overpowers and nearly drowns Pechorin in a boat indicates that he has gone into an element—supernatural evil—against the true nature of which he is ultimately powerless. Since water is seen as “a boundary with and exit to the other world” (Wigzell “Russian Folk Devil” 65), it is no accident that he does not know how to swim.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Neither is it an accident that Pechorin begins to see his own human impulses—or the traces of them, anyway—as making him vulnerable to the Otherworld. Peace points to the fact that on seeing the blind boy, Pechorin “gazed at him for a long time with an involuntary feeling of pity. . . .” and as the word ‘involuntary’ (*nevol'nyy*) suggests, it is a flaw in the concept of

Pechorin's sojourn in Taman, with its invitation to the supernatural to overcome him if it can, is part of a larger dialectic of fatalism in *A Hero of Our Time* and indicates further that Pechorin is still capable of psychic anguish in the face of the spiritual void. He seems to take delight, throughout the novel and not merely in the appropriately titled chapter "The Fatalist," in seeing if there is something out there capable of striking him down; at times, it seems as if it would be a relief to Pechorin if it did. For instance, in "The Fatalist," he says, "I do not know for certain if I now believe in predestination or not, but that night I firmly believed in it" (169). One gets the sense that he would like to recapture that moment, not because he is suicidal, for he is not so yet, but because he is like a man screaming into the abyss in the vain hope of hearing something back besides the echo of his own voice. In some ways, solipsism is the worst type of hell man could invent for himself. Hence, Pechorin insists that the duel with Grushnitsky take place on the edge of a precipice, and he chooses, against the better judgment of others, to leap through a window and tackle a desperate man with a gun (at the end of "The Fatalist"). Pechorin is, strictly speaking, an agnostic, who makes no room for God and yet clings to the remote possibility of God as a buffer against final despair. Pechorin's brand of doubt, however, provides only an illusion of hope, as he himself admits. He speaks of the credulity of previous generations with an envious contempt, saying,

Whereas we, their miserable descendants, who roam the earth without convictions or pride, without rapture or fear . . . , we are no longer capable of great sacrifice,

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Pechorin's *volya*: Pechorin's better feelings emerge against his own will" (17). This resistance to and resentment of the superfluous man's humanity will be explored further in the deliberate and debasing attempts of Dostoevsky's Stavrogin to determine how thoroughly he has managed to erase his own conscience.

neither for the good of mankind, nor even for our own happiness, because we know its impossibility, and pass with indifference from doubt to doubt, just as our ancestors rushed from one delusion to another. (169)

The power of an illusion dies once it is recognized as an illusion. Thus, Pechorin wanders through life pretending to doubt, indulging from time to time in the fleeting comforts of fatalism while he apes the part of the capricious Olympians against his fellow human beings. Engaged in a progressive loss of humanity, Pechorin wanders through the Caucasus in exile from, not merely from others, but also from his own dying soul.

The importance of *A Hero of Our Time* in the development of the superfluous man could hardly be overstated. In it, one can see a transition from the relative lethargy of Onegin to a man with a truly “demonic energy” (Gifford 131), an energy that will be taken all the way to its logical end, in self-destruction, by Dostoevsky’s Stavrogin. The novel is Lermontov’s first and last successful foray into prose, and its occasional rough patches reveal that he is still honing his authorial skills, but the proverbial “diamond in the rough” is no less a diamond than its polished counterpart. In *A Hero of Our Time*, Lermontov explores the capacity of his native folklore to dismantle the trappings of western Romanticism and uncover the spiritual poverty of his character—a transcending, moreover, of a tradition he himself had adopted in his earlier work. The sophisticated dialectic involved in revising Pechorin’s demonism, as well as treating his fatalism as resistance to psychological collapse, is a remarkably subtle move for such a young author. Also remarkable is the treatment of Pechorin’s will as being a will to power and as being disengaged from any governing principles, so that for Lermontov, Pechorin represents the sort of monolith that will be explored with considerably more affirmation by Nietzsche a half century later. Overall, what Lermontov has done is take the superfluous man to new levels of self-

awareness, emptiness, and darkness, all of which will converge yet again, and with still greater contextual subtlety, in Dostoevsky's Stavrogin.

### Where There's a Will:

#### Stavrogin's Road to Self-Destruction in Dostoevsky's *Demons*

Undoubtedly, the most complex and mature example of the superfluous man can be found in Dostoevsky's *Demons*, a novel rarely given due credit for its subtle brilliance, whether in Western or in Russian criticism. Nancy Anderson, author of the novel's single book-length treatment in English, remarks that "[i]n its homeland, *The Devils* has been more frequently treated as a mere political satire than as a complex and multilayered work of art" (1). And indeed, Dostoevsky originally conceptualized it as a work of propaganda, only to be overtaken by the vision of a character who filled his imagination and transformed what would have been an ill-tempered slap at the "men of the sixties" into a work with spiritual resonance. Concerning this vision, which gradually began to weave itself into the fabric of the story, Dostoevsky writes, "Everything is contained in the character of Stavrogin. Stavrogin is *everything*" (qtd. in Leatherbarrow "Devil's Vaudeville" 299). And indeed, Stavrogin does not merely become the core of the novel, revising it around himself through the uncanny magnetism of his personality; he also represents the end of the superfluous man as a dynamic figure in Russian literature, since Dostoevsky leaves no corner of his imaginative or metaphysical potential unexplored. In Stavrogin, Dostoevsky ironically contextualizes a man who, adrift and alone in himself, refuses at every turn to submit himself to meaningful contextualization; he also follows the character type's arc of hybridity, alienation, empty capriciousness, and grotesque demonism—which began with the flight of Chatsky—to its logical end, in the self-destruction of a soul facing the horror of its own emptiness.

#### Background

Before looking at Stavrogin, it is important to establish why Dostoevsky represents him as the most self-aware and gifted member of a generation shaped by Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky—a comic caricature of the aesthetically sensitive, superficially Gallicized, and generally narcissistic men of the 1840s. As Joseph Frank indicates, this was a generation with which Dostoevsky himself had once partially identified; at the very least, he had flirted with its benevolent utopianism regarding the transformation of Russia by intellectuals who in reality knew very little about their country. Dostoevsky, however, had been awakened rudely during his Siberian exile to the indifference of the *народ* toward their would-be saviors; at the same time, he was made aware of the possibilities in a native wisdom to which the intelligentsia, whether Westernizer or Slavophile, were largely blind—a wisdom increasingly associated with the people’s Orthodoxy (*Years of Ordeal passim*). However tempting it might be to associate Dostoevsky with the Slavophiles (and many have yielded to the temptation), he nonetheless recognized that the movement’s ill-informed worship of the people was often a symptom of distance, not intimacy, with them. Leatherbarrow, referring back to Frank, is pointing to this essential distinction when he says, “Dostoevskii acknowledged that the questioning of national identity that gave rise to both the Westernizing and Slavophile tendencies was itself a product of such alienation” (“Misreading” 16). Hence, Dostoevsky places his own hope in the reintegration of the alienated intellectual with the ancient faith of his race, a faith to which he himself aspired and once described as “not so much Slavophile as Orthodox, that is, close to the beliefs of the Russian peasant–Christian belief, that is” (qtd. in Wigzell “Dostoevskii” 28). One might therefore speak of his development of the *почвенники* (men of the soil)—which, as Chances rightly acknowledges, involved a native turn that transcended rather than affirmed the Slavophile/Westernizer binary (94-5)—as being first and foremost religious in nature, and

Dostoevsky therefore differed radically from the typical Slavophile in possessing a well-defined notion of exactly what quality in the Russian people had salvific potential—their Orthodoxy.<sup>15</sup> In his conception, the Westernized Russian intellectuals, whether represented in the liberals of the 1840s or the radicals of the 1860s, whether Westerizer or Slavophile, are all wandering without realizing how lost they are. Hence, Dostoevsky's story of "fathers and sons"<sup>16</sup> is quite different and more nuanced than the work of that title by Turgenev. According to Anderson, "For Turgenev, the ideological stress lies on the difference between liberalism and radicalism, which are depicted as essentially different philosophies appealing to different types of men. For Dostoevsky, on the other hand, radicalism is the natural offspring, the logical extension, of liberalism" (25), since both generations are equally uprooted and stumbling about like drunkards on the highway. And Dostoevsky's superfluous man, Stavrogin, emerges out of this revel of blind alienation only to be turned against all who take part in it, including himself, by his hyperawareness of its essential madness—a madness presented explicitly, perhaps for the first time, in terms of a lost faith.

#### Madness and the Mask

Stavrogin's upbringing, first of all, greatly contributes to his alienation—specifically from that particular form of insanity embodied in Stepan Trofimovich. He begins as Stepan

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<sup>15</sup> It is not that Orthodoxy was never a part of the Slavophilic program but that it often got lost among vaguer and more sentimental conceptualizations of the *narod*.

<sup>16</sup> Or, rather, *father* and sons, since Stepan Trofimovich is the only father—and often a surrogate one, at that—present in the novel. Dostoevsky will explore the theme of fatherhood more fully in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which he suggests a connection between the absence of the fathers and the waywardness and moral anguish of the sons.

Trofimovich's pupil, receiving from him the exalted wisdom of the West and at the same time suffering emotional exploitation at his hands. The narrator notes that "[m]ore than once he awakened his ten or eleven-year-old friend at night only to pour out his injured feelings in tears before him, or to reveal some domestic secret to him, not noticing that this was altogether inadmissible" (40), a consummate understatement if ever there was one. Stavrogin's experience, in pre-adolescence, of such suffocating moral intimacy with an adult is only exacerbated by the fact that his mother is largely distant and that "in the whole business of education and moral development, [she] fully trusted Stepan Trofimovich" (40). This unhealthy situation develops in Stavrogin a premature self-awareness, which grows out of the collapse of the child/adult binary in his world: "Stepan Trofimovich managed to touch the deepest strings in his friend's heart and to call forth in him the first, still uncertain sensation of that age-old, sacred anguish which the chosen soul, having once tasted and known it, will never exchange for any cheap satisfaction" (41). Included in this "cheap satisfaction," however, are the natural and humanizing impulses in which other children indulge at his age, and therefore one might recognize that Stavrogin is already alienated from the innocence of his own childhood and from those with whom he might have shared its harmless trivialities.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> However tempted the psychoanalyst might be to read into these passages a suggestion of sexual molestation on Stepan Trofimovich's part, such a reading goes against the grain of the text. For one thing, Dostoevsky is hardly shy in speaking about such things with regard to Stavrogin's rape of Matryosha in the censored chapter "At Tikhon's." For another, the question is beside the larger concern of the chapter, as established by the context of the novel as a whole. Also, the lingering suspicion of some critics that Dostoevsky's work contains latent sexual

Appropriately, then, the details of Stavrogin's childhood are only briefly presented, and when the reader encounters him again, he is a grown man with something of a reputation. As the narrator has it, his initially brilliant career in St. Petersburg (significantly the most westernized of Russia's two capitals) begins to suffer from a sabotage of his own making: "[T]he young man, somehow madly and suddenly, started leading a wild life. Not that he gambled or drank too much [in other words, it was not mere incontinence]; there was only talk of some savage unbridledness, of some people being run over by horses, of some beastly behavior towards a lady of good society" (41). The rumors begin to pile up: Stavrogin works hard to gain a favorable position and then, as if deliberately, throws it away. He loses his rank as an officer, succeeds through hard work at regaining it, and then resigns his commission immediately afterward. Anderson speaks of the fact that he "veers from one role to the next, choosing each one apparently for the contrast it offers with its predecessor" as an emergent example of his "determination to exert his own will" (59) at any cost. The young Stavrogin also represents something of a contradiction: he wastes away in low company and then shows up at home a well-groomed, sophisticated young man of good taste and education. It is as if he is not really living, but only trying on and discarding lives like external shells, or perhaps as so many sets of eveningwear, to see if something will offer more than a "cheap satisfaction." In this way, like Pechorin and Onegin before him, Stavrogin sees through the ridiculous and hollow existence of his fellow human beings, manifested in the lives he throws away, but in doing so he becomes

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tensions stems largely from Freud's own misreading of it in "Dostoevsky and Patricide." For a thorough demolition of Freud's argument, see Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt*.

somehow less superhuman than inhuman. The narrator betrays an acute sensibility to this inhumanity when he describes Stavrogin's physical appearance:

[H]is hair was somehow too black, his light eyes were somehow too calm and clear, his complexion was somehow too delicate and white, his color somehow too bright and clean, his teeth like pearls, his lips like coral—the very image of beauty, it would seem, and at the same time repulsive, as it were. People said his face resembled a mask. (43)

This passage opens up several planes on which Stavrogin might be understood. The image of the mask, apart from serving as an obvious indicator of there being something fake about this volatile protagonist, suggests three more nuanced ideas: a connection to the folklore devil motif that has dominated considerations of the superfluous man since Tatiana's dream in *Eugene Onegin*; a connection to the larger progress of Russian history; and a connection to the notion of beauty in Orthodox aesthetics. In Dostoevsky, each of these themes takes on a deeper significance in relation to the others.

#### Folklore Devilry Revisited

Most obviously, a mask hints at the folklore devil's habits of self-deception. Dostoevsky is drawing upon "the common motif of the devil disguised found in tales of various kinds" (Wigzell "Russian Folk Devil" 44), and he is doing so even more overtly than his literary predecessors. The title of his novel, for instance, is *Becu*, sometimes rendered in English as *Demons*, at other times as *The Devils*—which is probably the best rendering, since it is more evocative of the folkloric.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, out of the numerous possible words for *devil* in Russian,

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<sup>18</sup> Constance Garnett's rendering, *The Possessed*, is probably the most familiar, but it has the disadvantage of being a mistranslation.

only two are of Slavic, rather than Byzantine, origin: *бѣс* and *чепм* (Franklin 36). Not only did Dostoevsky choose one of these two for the title of his novel, but he chose *бѣс*—the one that, as Wigzell points out, “came through the Orthodox [rather than pagan] tradition, and tended to retain a more ecclesiastical feel” (“Russian Folk Devil” 66). The link between the title and a conception of evil with both native and religious resonance is underscored further by the two epigraphs of the novel. Pevear describes one of them, a fragment from Pushkin’s “Demon” involving the merry devil in the snowstorm, as a “phantasmagoria that touches lightly on the strings of Russian folk memory” and goes on to suggest that the passage from St. Luke that follows it is meant to counter its playfulness with something more substantial (xv-xvi). It may, however, be that neither passage is understandable without the other: that is, the story of the demons cast out of the man—here, representative of a spiritually sick culture—and into the herd of swine is frightening but also somehow laughable. The latent ludicrousness of an evil that self-destructs emerges through its juxtaposition with the sheer pointlessness of malevolent play as revealed in the Pushkin poem.

Significantly, “malevolent play” is nothing if not an apt description of Stavrogin’s antics on his first homecoming to “our town,” the nameless provincial setting of the novel. The narrator describes these antics significantly as “two or three impossibly brazen acts upon various persons—that is, the main thing lay in their being so unheard-of, so utterly unlike anything else . . . so paltry and adolescent, and devil knows why, with no pretext whatsoever” (45). The invocation of the devil is never arbitrary in a work so consciously folkloric in its construction, and Stavrogin’s pranks associate him strongly with that sort of evil which, in the Russian as opposed to the Western imagination, has no agenda, no larger purpose in mind. It follows, then, that neither the idealistic Stepan Trofimovich nor the amoral but politically motivated Pyotr

Stepanovich (neither the liberal nor the radical, in other words) achieves the level of demonism that Stavrogin does when he pulls an upstanding citizen across the room by the nose or forces passionate kisses on Liputin's wife in public and without apology. His capricious pranks reach the height of demoniacal gratuitousness when he finds himself called into the governor's office to give an account of his actions. On a whim, Stavrogin offers to whisper into the governor's ear and then instead "[catches] the upper part of his ear in his teeth and clamp[s] it quite firmly" (50). Such acts lead the narrator to comment on the "calculated and deliberate ugliness" (46) of Stavrogin's actions and to speak of him as a "monster" (51). He is enacting the role of "the devil as prankster, playing nasty tricks on men, especially the pious" that Wigzell speaks of in relation to other characters of the novel ("Dostoevskii" 37) but not, inexplicably, in relation to Stavrogin. It is hard to imagine any of them fitting the description as well as Stavrogin does. Even though the townspeople blame his pranks on brain fever, the narrator remarks that "some among us remained convinced that the scoundrel was simply laughing at us all, and that his illness was beside the point" (52). One suspects that his laughter would sound something like the hollow, demonic mockery of the devil in Pushkin's snowstorm.

#### The Imposter in Russian History and Folklore

But Stavrogin's demonism is contextualized on deeper levels than the obvious prank-playing would indicate. For instance, the motif of the mask is explored on the plane of Russian historical notions of the imposter. Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky, a typically self-important 1860s radical, is one of many characters looking to Stavrogin to fulfill a role that, as a hollow man, he is incapable of fulfilling even if he cared enough to try. He is all mask and no substance, as the progress of the novel will indicate, and yet his function is like that of a black hole drawing all those around him into his own nothingness. Pyotr Stepanovich understands himself as such a

satellite and appeals to Stavrogin as “my idol,” saying, “You are a leader, you are a sun, and I am your worm” (419). He not only worships at the feet of Stavrogin, who is completely mystified and completely indifferent, but he also speaks of Stavrogin as the center of his plan for the destruction and reinvention of Russia. Stavrogin, to whom every ideal (even a base one) is a joke, smiles “maliciously” at Pyotr Stepanovich’s groveling and says, “So you’ve seriously been counting on me?” (422). And yet Pyotr Stepanovich persists in his worship of Stavrogin, applying to him several names with cultural and historical resonance. He speaks first of the Pope, saying, “Listen, the Pope will be in the West, and we, we will have you!” (419). For Dostoevsky, who, having grown up reading Karamzin’s generally anti-Western *History of the Russian State*, was never able to think of the Roman Catholic Church except as a spiritually compromised and thoroughly corrupt seat of political power, this is a particularly loaded metaphor. Pyotr Stepanovich is essentially asking Stavrogin to serve as an antichrist, drawing the people’s worship away from Orthodoxy and thus making them vulnerable to the political machinations of the radicals. This theme of Stavrogin as false Christ is developed further when Pyotr Stepanovich speaks of him as Ivan Tsarevich: “Russia will be darkened with mist, the earth will weep for the old gods . . . Well, sir, and then we’ll bring out . . . Ivan Tsarevich—you, you!” (421). Stavrogin rightly recognizes that he is being asked to play the role of “imposter” (421), and not just any imposter but one pretending to a role of particular meaning in Russian folklore. According to Pevear and Volokhonsky, Ivan Tsarevich appears in a number of tales and is “generally the third and youngest of the tsar’s sons . . . who does the work, endures the tests, and wins throne and princess in the end” (728). Hence, Pyotr Stepanovich represents Stavrogin as a pretender to the Russian throne, a role not without spiritual significance, which Murav makes clear in an important article on the seventeenth-century Time of Troubles (a time of many such pretenders)

and its relationship to *Demons*: “The Soviet semiotician Boris Uspenskij has traced royal imposture as a cultural phenomenon. The true tsar is a channel of divine grace, but the false tsar receives his power from the devil. The seventeenth-century sources denounce the imposter as an idol and [employ] an Antichrist-imagery which is also linked to Stavrogin in *The Devils*” (60). A country that understands its rightful ruler as sanctified is positioned well to understand royal imposture as sacrilege or even blasphemy, as Pyotr Stepanovich’s conception of Stavrogin as an “idol” suggests.

That he is not merely an imposter but *the* imposter, or antichrist, becomes even clearer as the novel progresses. Leatherbarrow points to Dostoevsky’s abiding interest in the Apocalypse of St. John as operative in his development of the relationship between Stavrogin as antichrist and Pyotr Stepanovich as false prophet:

The false prophet, moreover, “maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men,” “deceiveth them that dwell on the earth,” and causes “that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed” (Rev.13:12-15). It is not extravagant to discern behind these devils the figures of the mysterious “wild beast” Stavrogin and the serpent-tongued deceiver Petr Verkhovensky. Petr’s first appearance in the novel is when he comes on ahead to announce the advent of Stavrogin, whom he plans to make men worship. On the night of the fête he too makes fire come down to earth by organizing the incendiarism that claims the lives of the Lebiadkins. (“Devils’ Vaudeville” 303)

Throughout the novel, Stavrogin simultaneously operates within and subverts images and roles that frame him as a Christ figure. His coming is looked for as an advent, his child by Shatov’s estranged wife is born when she arrives as a homeless wanderer in the night (like the child of

Bethlehem), and he is the ever absent center of everyone else's frame of reference, a complex role that will be explored more fully later. Even his name has suggestive power in this line: "[H]is surname, Stavrogin, suggests 'stavros,' the Greek word for 'cross,' while his Christian name and patronymic, Nikolai Vsevolodovich, respectively mean 'victor' and 'ruler of all'" (Anderson 57). Hence, from this perspective Stavrogin seems doomed from the outset, unable to resist spiritual imposture without resisting his own name and negating himself.

Significantly, however, as has been indicated, the Ivan Tsarevich of folk legend wins not merely the "throne" but also the "princess," and it is therefore fitting that the full import of Stavrogin's imposture on the respective levels of the national and the sacred (if, indeed, those levels can be effectively separated within Dostoevsky's Russian Orthodox framework) will emerge only in relation to his "princess," Marya Lebiadkina, a character whose nuanced spiritual resonance is easily overlooked but vital for any understanding of the novel. First of all, she, like Tatiana in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, represents the Russian people on many levels. The narrator's description, on first meeting her, indicates that she is sitting in front of "a candlestick [,] . . . a small rustic mirror, an old deck of cards, [and] a tattered songbook" (141), objects suggestive of the common methods of peasant girls for divining whom they would one day marry—though Marya is seeking instead the true face of the man who has married her and not consummated the marriage. Wigzell is exploring this connection as well when she points to the fact that "[h]er surname, Lebiadkina, [as well as her long neck,] connects her with swans, a traditional image for the maiden in folk lyrics and wedding laments, while her use of the term 'prince' is partly taken from the folk wedding ritual, in which the groom was termed 'prince' (although it also carries overtones of 'the prince of darkness')" ("Dostoevskii" 42). The parenthetical comment suggests a volatility in the spiritual energy of the *народ* as native,

organic, and fundamentally wholesome, yet nonetheless prone to open up avenues into the occult when it fails to be governed by Orthodoxy. Wigzell speaks of the fact that “a girl divining with a mirror at midnight, in the hope of glimpsing her intended in the glass, risked seeing not him but the devil [once again, the devil wears a mask]. Maria’s marriage to Stavrogin is thus a union with the / devil (revealed in her recognition that Stavrogin is not her prince), but may be said to represent Russia’s doomed marriage to Western political ideas” (“Dostoevskii” 42-3). One can see here that Dostoevsky’s view of the *narod* is actually more complex than he is sometimes given credit for, and Marya’s imprisonment in the house of her brother can be seen as a kind of spiritual purgation of/for her worship of Stavrogin (she kneels at his feet in his mother’s drawing room) just as Russia must undergo a purgation of/for her worship of the spiritually compromised West. It is no accident either that Marya is lame, a “motif [that] serves to fuse the representation of human suffering with the suggestion of the presence of the devil” (Ivanits qtd. in Wigzell “Dostoevskii” 36), since her proximity to and adoration of Stavrogin make her spiritually vulnerable to his demonism, which she will ultimately recognize and reject.

Marya’s recognition of her “prince” as an imposter is particularly evocative regarding the folk tradition she represents. The crisis takes place in her brother’s house, where Stavrogin finds her sleeping and waits for her to wake up. Wigzell, who points to the fact that Stavrogin has a habit of standing in doorways, where anyone operating within the folk tradition would expect to meet a devil, points to Marya’s reaction as particularly telling (“Dostoevskii” 33). Marya takes note of his malevolent look (and location), and “the poor woman’s face took on an expression of complete horror; spasms ran across it, she raised her hands, shaking them, and suddenly began to cry, exactly like a frightened child; another moment and she would have screamed” (Dostoevsky *Demons* 272). This is a mystical fear, such as one would express on seeing a ghost. Minutes

later, when she has recovered, she says to him, “I beg you, Prince, to get up and come in” (275). She cannot bear the thought of his inhabiting her threshold and wants to see him pass through it quickly like a man and not a devil, but he refuses. She wants to fuse her image of Stavrogin as her prince and her image of the devil on the threshold, but they refuse to integrate themselves, and she begins increasingly to speak of her “prince” and Stavrogin as two different personalities: “You look very much like him, you do, maybe you might be his relative . . . . Only *mine* is a bright falcon and a prince, and you are a barn owl and a little merchant” (277). Her classifying him as a creature of the night and an undignified “little merchant” involves an emptying of the bright promise of her now compromised vision of him, an emptying reminiscent of the folkloric devil yet again trumping his majestic Western counterpart. Stavrogin is not her “prince,” against whom she speaks of being “guilty” (275) and whose image she fears to tarnish with her doubts; one can fairly assume she has mistaken antichrist for Christ and must now turn back to the real thing, away from the mirror of divination and toward the icon illuminated in the corner of her room.

Her rejection of Stavrogin, when she is finally ready to reject him, involves yet another overt appeal to the notion of royal imposture in relation to Russian history. The association is at first indirect, tentative (she is still struggling): “Listen, you: have you read about Grishka Otrepev, who was cursed at the seven councils?” (275). She is speaking of the False Dmitri, whom Russian history has labeled “the Pretender,” a renegade monk from the Time of Troubles who claimed to be a surviving son of Ivan IV and the lawful heir to the Russian throne. The False Dmitri’s rebellion led to the overthrowing of the newly established dynasty of Boris Godunov and ultimately to decades of political instability, bloodshed, and moral confusion in Russia. In Marya’s association, the reader encounters yet again the notion that “if the real Tsar

may be likened to Christ [i.e. a creation of God, not man] and perceived as an image of God, a living icon, then a pretender may be regarded as a false icon, i.e. an *idol*” (Leatherbarrow “Devils’ Vaudeville” 295, bracketed portion in original). Hence, the fact that she eventually addresses Stavrogin directly as “Grishka Otrepev, anathema!” (278) means that she has seen through him once and for all.

### The Aesthetics of Orthodoxy

The notion of “seeing through” or unmasking Stavrogin is not only key with regard to the Russian historical perspective, but it also deepens the contextualization of his character with regard to the relationship between beauty and the sacred in the Orthodox tradition. Marya has historicized Stavrogin—a man who, as will be seen, has no more liking than Pechorin for being pinned down in a context not of his own making—but she has also deconstructed him aesthetically. If the tsar is an icon for Christ, and thus an image of a substance, then Stavrogin is merely the distorted image of an image, behind which lies no substance. The idea that beauty is substantiated by what lies behind it has particular resonance in Orthodoxy aesthetics—which, as Riazanovsky and Steinberg indicate, depend so heavily on iconography (56)—and, to some degree, on the aesthetic ideas of ancient Athens assimilated in Russia through Byzantium. Anderson suggests that “Dostoevsky believed in the identity of the Good and the Beautiful” (123), implying not merely that both exist—that is, have an essence—but that they reinforce each other. She goes on to indicate that Dostoevsky was deeply troubled by “the Romantic [i.e., Western] fascination with demonic beauty, a motif which runs through Byron’s works” and which Russia was gradually assimilating. According to Dostoevsky’s beliefs, such a conceptualization of beauty was self-contradictory:

[I]n contrast to the Romantics, such “beauty” was only a mask . . . behind which the true ugliness and baseness of evil hid itself—a mask which would inevitably slip. This unmasking is performed through the figure of the double, a character who seizes upon the ideas and actions of the would-be Romantic-demonic hero and pushes them to their grotesque extreme. (125)

But whereas Anderson argues that the “doubles” are the 1860s radicals led by Pyotr Stepanovich (126), Stavrogin’s false beauty will be largely undermined not by others but by himself; as a divided self, he is his own “grotesque” doppelgänger. It is clear, then, that Pyotr Stepanovich merely builds up an aura of false beauty around his idol, an aura the idol himself will fail to sustain: “Stavrogin, you are beautiful!” he says. “I am a nihilist, but I love beauty!” (419)—a contradiction in terms, since true beauty involves affirmation, not negation. Leatherbarrow rightly recognizes a connection between this type of false beauty and the “‘beauty of Sodom,’ [or] intoxication with the aesthetics of evil” referred to in *The Brothers Karamazov* (“Devils’ Vaudeville” 297). The beauty of Sodom will always collapse on closer examination—hence, as Panichas notes, Stavrogin will be continually surrounded by “images” of “ugliness and decay” (98)—whereas true beauty signals the presence of underlying truth.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> It is only such a conception of beauty that can account for Dostoevsky’s famous and controversial declaration of faith, so often misread as a capitulation to doubt:

How much terrible torture this thirst for faith has cost me and costs me even now, which is all the stronger in my soul the more arguments I can find against it. And yet, God sends me sometimes instants when I am completely calm . . . [and] believe that nothing is more beautiful, profound, sympathetic, reasonable, manly, and more perfect than Christ; and I tell myself with a jealous love not only that

False beauty also represents spiritual endangerment to all who follow it—or rather, in the novel, follow *him*, Stavrogin. For this reason, Frank points to Stepan Trofimovich’s rather ridiculous draft of a novel involving “a youth of indescribable beauty [chased after by] an immense multitude of all nations,” a figure who ultimately “represents death,” as foreshadowing Stavrogin’s advent in “our town” (“Masks of Stavrogin” 165). Russia, as inheritor of a true conception of beauty, is thus vulnerable to being overthrown by the “beauty of Sodom” only if she loses sight of her Orthodox heritage, which is clearly the case in “our town” even before Pyotr Stepanovich shows up to wreak havoc—or one could argue that this is why he shows up, since the town has made itself vulnerable. The new governor, his wife, and the society surrounding Liputin are an assortment of half-baked liberals (i.e., hybrids) seeking to recreate themselves into the image of something foreign, something they do not understand any more

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there is nothing but that there cannot be anything. Even more, if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and that *in reality* the truth were outside Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth. (qtd. in Frank *Years of Ordeal* 160)

The controversy surrounding these words represents a failure to understand Dostoevsky’s affirmation of the aesthetic over the rational as the more reliable pointer toward the truth. There is an irony in his use of the terms *argument*, *proved*, and *in reality*, since any reality conceptualized outside Christ would be confined within the limits of the rational, itself inadequate to account for the entire picture. And such a limited reality or partial “truth,” as sure to fall apart as the world around the “false Christ” Stavrogin, is not something one would want to be a part of. It would be better to reject such reason in favor of a transcendent “logic,” to retain spiritual life at the expense of worldly respect or even, in one’s weaker moments, self-respect.

than they understand the image they have left behind. They have blown out the flame before the icon and made themselves vulnerable to an unholy fire. And it is this unholy fire that Frank is speaking of when he draws attention to the historical context of the novel and its aesthetic implications for Dostoevsky:

Dostoevsky had been filled with horror and rage at the flames engulfing Paris during the last days of the Commune. Of the Communards, whom he held responsible, he said: “to them . . . this monstrosity doesn’t seem madness but, on the contrary, *beauty*. The aesthetic idea of modern humanity has become obscured” (italics in text) . . . . The calm and impassive figure of Stavrogin is thus surrounded in Dostoevsky’s imagination with the infernal halo of the flames that had recently been crackling in the heart-city of Western civilization. It is he who has brought to Russia all the “beauty” of this idolatrous negation, which, if allowed to go unchallenged by the “authentic beauty” of Christ, would light the same torch of destruction in Holy Russia that was already ravaging the West.

(*Miraculous Years* 471)

It is no accident that Pyotr Stepanovich’s program to disrupt the easy complacency of “our town” involves arson.

One might well ask, at this point, exactly where true beauty is realized in the novel as a counterpoint to Stavrogin’s false beauty. The answer lies yet again in Marya Lebiadkina and her relationship to popular Orthodoxy. When first happening upon Marya, the narrator sees the trace of this beauty, marred by abuse and a compromising alliance with Stavrogin, but not eradicated. He says at first, “Some time ago, in early youth, this thin face might have been not unattractive; but her quiet, tender gray eyes were remarkable even now” (142); he goes on to say that “I found

it almost pleasant to look at her from the very first moment, and it was only pity, and by no means repulsion, that came over me afterwards” (142). This response is the exact reverse of one’s response to Stavrogin as initially attractive and later loathsome, since Marya Lebiadkina has virtues that lie behind her beauty and validate it, increasing rather than eradicating the awareness of it over time. She represents the tradition of the *юродивы*, or holy fools, so popular among the *народ*. As Wigzell indicates, “[H]oly foolishness was regarded as an essentially Russian phenomenon. Indeed, it could be said to symbolize the widely held messianic view of Russia as poor, wretched and economically backward, but with hidden spiritual resources which would ultimately be revealed” (“Dostoevskii” 39). Hence, though Marya seems to be mentally and emotionally compromised, there is wisdom behind her madness, as seen in her recognition of Stavrogin as an imposter. Anderson speaks of holy folly as the idea “that through the rejection of ordinary, earthly reasoning, a higher, heavenly understanding would be able to manifest itself” (80). By blinding herself to what is obvious to everyone else, Marya sees things they cannot, just as the holy fools “throw stones at the houses of the virtuous yet kiss the walls of the houses of the wicked” (Franklin 40). Such a holy fool is not insane but in possession of a higher sanity, a spiritual sight: “His stones are not for the virtuous but for the envious demons who throng around them, and his kisses are not for the wicked but for the grieving angels who gather to them” (40). There is a sense in which Marya sees further and sees more than anyone else in the novel, and she will die for the clarity with which she sees Stavrogin. The attack on her is spiritual as well as physical, since she is found “lying on the floor of the doorway,” the threshold (Dostoevsky *Demons* 517). It is significant, however, that “the silver casing of her icon had not been touched” (517), the higher reason in which she participated being ultimately invulnerable.

#### A Closer Look at Stavrogin

Up to this point, much has been said about the way in which others conceptualize Stavrogin—and rightly so, since so many (his mother, Pyotr Stepanovich, Marya Lebiadkina, Shatov, Kirrilov, Liza Tushina, etc.) look to him as though he were some sort of messiah whose advent will coincide with the realization of their incompatible ideals and illusions. But he is extraordinarily resistant throughout to being known at all, much less contextualized within the vision of another—even if he serves as the vision’s center, which he invariably does.

Leatherbarrow speaks of Stavrogin being surrounded by “attempts on the part of others to label, objectify or, in Bakhtinian terms, ‘finalize’ him in the light of expectations fed by ‘explanatory models’” (“Misreading” 3). This is yet another reason why Stavrogin refuses to be tied down to a single mode of existence, gaining and discarding social status with a casualness that mystifies those around him. He is trying to escape the deadening properties of the gaze of the other, and yet in his attempts he becomes completely insubstantial—like Pechorin, neither here nor there, realized only in movement. As Leatherbarrow has it,

[h]e is surrounded by uncertainty, his personality is like a shadow cast by the expectations of others, and he comes in and out of focus like an optical illusion.

When he does move from the fringes of rumour to the centre of the novel’s action, he retains this passive, intangible and ill-defined quality. We sense his immense gravitational pull at the heart of the novel, but the nature of that pull is elusive; he hardly speaks or acts, and we rarely penetrate his soul. (“Misreading” 14)

One might begin to wonder if he has a soul at all, but it is possible to glimpse it on occasion, if only in the impressions it makes on the souls of others. In fact, *impression* is hardly a strong enough word. Stavrogin virtually lives and pursues meaning through others, possessing them (again, functioning as a devil) to explore vicariously the possibilities latent in the various

philosophies open to him as a Westernized intellectual. He then visits these “others,” each in turn, in what Stenbock-Fermor refers to as “a quest for ultimate truth and initiation into the mystery of life” (“Stavrogin’s Quest” 1931). Anderson rightly points out that “in visiting these two figures [Shatov and Kirillov, in the chapter “Night”] who are reflections of himself, Stavrogin is able to see already worked out the final results of two paths which are open to him and to judge whether either of those paths offer [*sic*] what he is seeking” (68). On the one hand, one can see in his coming to them in the night the faint image of Nicodemus seeking out Christ in the same manner; on the other hand, Stavrogin can hardly expect to find Christ in the workings of his own intellectual experiments. He is more likely to find himself looking in the mirror.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, one can see in the fact that he has spent time fostering in these two young men, Shatov and Kirillov, ideas in which he himself does not believe, a kind of parasitic influence—as though he can live only by bleeding psychological and moral energy from more vulnerable souls. And these souls have come to worship the one who takes advantage of them. Kirillov, after having matter-of-factly explained that he is going to kill himself as an act of consummate self-affirmation, to overcome time itself in the pursuit of man-godhood, says, “Remember what you’ve meant in my life, Stavrogin” (239). Shatov has, at least, recognized that his idol Stavrogin is false (hence, the slap in the drawing room), but he is forever damaged by

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<sup>20</sup> James Billington points to the fact that Shatov and Kirillov both “live on Bogoiavlensky (Epiphany) street. They are both looking for a new epiphany, the appearance of the lost God” (420). One could turn this reading around and suggest that it is just as much Stavrogin who is seeking an epiphany in the two of them, but his epiphany is that they have little wisdom to offer.

Stavrogin's influence. As Anderson puts it, "The would-be prophet of Russian Orthodoxy [Shatov] not only cannot save another, he cannot even save himself; he cannot so much as truthfully pronounce the very first words of the Nicene Creed" (75). He says, stumbling, "I . . . I will believe in God" (Dostoevsky *Demons* 253). His faith is deferred, like Stavrogin's identity. He does not have the inner spiritual resources to do anything more than aspire to faith. This aspiration at least allows him, however, to spell out the problem as Dostoevsky conceived it; as Shatov says to Stavrogin, "You've lost the distinction between evil and good because you've ceased to recognize your own nation" (255). Anderson speaks of Shatov as having recognized Stavrogin's spiraling toward non-being through his ceaseless and restless movement among substantial vortices: "Shatov sees Stavrogin's failure to adopt any consistent position (even a consistently ugly and cruel one) as ultimately producing, not the oscillation between extremes which one might expect, but a sort of leveling in which all distinctions become meaningless" (77). Stavrogin is never solid enough to suffer objectification, even by his own gaze, but the price of escape from the gaze is his own selfhood, which could be realized only through vulnerability to others. And as he continually rejects such stabilization, one can begin to see the simultaneous moral lethargy and concentration of all remaining psychic energy in the will that were so ironically and fatally operative in Pechorin.

First, Stavrogin begins to lose the ability to appreciate the human needs of those around him; one begins to suspect that he has nothing but contempt for what makes others human, qualities which must indeed seem weak in comparison with his own inhuman psychological power. One can see this tendency in his approach to the duel with Gaganov (yet another echo of the Onegin/Lensky duel in Pushkin), whose outrage over Stavrogin's treatment of his father (whom he famously pulled by the nose) bewilders Stavrogin. He does not understand why a

simple apology will not make up for it. In fact, the incident was an attack on the man's dignity far more heartless and complete than an attempt on his life would have been—for at least then he would have been attacking the man as an equal, not toying with him as an inferior. To Stavrogin, the moral sensibilities of others, who to him are flies to be swatted at absent-mindedly, do not make sense. He says to Kirillov, of the younger Gaganov's provoking letter, that it was "strange if only in that it contained no explanation of why it had been written" (233). Only Stavrogin would have needed an explanation.

The duel itself exhibits Stavrogin's lethargy in regard to his own honor as well as that of others. He sends the challenge almost as an afterthought and treats the entire matter like a joke. One can see here an increasing difference between Stavrogin and his literary predecessors. Onegin knows his resentment of Lensky is no excuse for wanting to kill his friend, but he nonetheless has that desire and is forced to disguise it with rationalizations. And even Pechorin is capable of feeling active contempt and undisguised hatred for Grushnitsky and seeking his life without apology. Rumor has it that in the past, Stavrogin has also destroyed others in duels. But now, he almost lazily aims off target, as though he cannot bring himself to care about the outcome. He says to Gaganov, "I fired high because I don't want to kill anyone anymore, neither you nor anyone else . . . . It's true that I do not consider myself offended, and I'm sorry that it makes you angry. But I will not allow anyone to interfere with my rights" (287). These words might be misleading, since one could take them as meaning that Stavrogin is loath to kill out of respect for human life; in fact, the opposite is the case. It is as though Gaganov is such a non-entity that he is not capable of offending Stavrogin. Hate implies equality; one cannot hate an insect. Stavrogin is asserting his own rights—his will to power—in the situation by reinterpreting it according to his own whims. If he feels like firing in the air, he will do so, but there is no

principle behind his decision. This lackadaisical mood comes across even more clearly near the end of the action, at which point the narrator says that Stavrogin has to be reminded that the duel is still in progress: “Stavrogin seemed to have forgotten to fire as he examined the hat [his own, with a bullet hole in it] with Kirillov. [When called,] Stavrogin gave a start, looked at Gaganov, turned away, and this time without any delicacy fired off into the woods” (288). The fact that “Gaganov stood as if crushed” (288) has no effect on him whatsoever. The narrator says, “There was spite in his face” (288), but it is a different level of spite than that exhibited by Onegin or Pechorin. Stavrogin’s spite is against anyone—or in this case, any convention—that would limit the freedom of his will.

#### The Will to Power

Stavrogin’s indomitable will is one of the most notable aspects of the novel, and much has been said concerning its exercise. Frank has spoken of the earlier incidents—the biting of the ear, etc.—as representing “Stavrogin’s refusal to bridle or check / his impulses in any way, his rejection of any internal or external restraints on the absolute autonomy of his self-will” (“Masks of Stavrogin” 669-70). Any redemptive qualities in this undeniably remarkable human being have been, according to Frank, “crippled and distorted by . . . his enjoyment of the outrageously perverse, shocking, and sheerly gratuitous manifestations of his absolute self-will” (“Masks of Stavrogin” 677). One could see this will, like Pechorin’s, as a Nietzschean “will to power” *avant la lettre*, since the damage it does to others is always accidental (though no less criminal), while the damage it wreaks on the self is calculated, deliberate, and dehumanizing in the highest

degree. It is from this perspective that the censored chapter “At Tikhon’s”<sup>21</sup> becomes indispensable, because it illustrates what Stavrogin is doing to himself, letting his will tyrannize over captive, dying instincts that might otherwise manage to humanize him. Self-alienated from childhood by the awareness of the superfluity of his own hybridized education, as well as contemptuous of the inconsistencies and follies of those around him, Stavrogin indulges in a kind of masochistic experimentation with those inconsistencies and “follies” in himself, seeing how well they stand up to the deadening blows offered by his self-will. He speaks of being “intoxicated from the awareness of the depth of my meanness. It was not meanness I loved . . . but I liked the intoxication from the tormenting awareness of my baseness” (693). In reality, he is enjoying the death throes of everything in him with salvific potential. As Anderson puts it, “Stavrogin’s crime [narrated in the censored chapter] reflects a total, conscious rejection of morality: he has chosen the victim who most deserves pity, and chosen her for that reason; he is trying to kill the very sentiment of pity within himself” (98). Self-hatred is always a twisted form of self-love, an indulgence in the desire to transcend that which one despises in oneself; and Stavrogin despises his own humanity as weakness, as a thing which would make him vulnerable to the lesser souls that surround him. But his attempts to transcend his own humanity will, like Kirillov’s suicidal attempt to become the “man-god,” approach the bestial rather than the divine. Like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, who sees himself as committing an act with universal resonance when he is in fact killing an old pawnbroker, Stavrogin expects through

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<sup>21</sup> The debate over the inclusion of this chapter in the novel has involved much spillage of unnecessary ink; suffice it to say that Dostoevsky never resubmitted it to the censorship because he knew it would never be accepted—and not because he had come to see it as unnecessary.

molesting an innocent girl to rise above those who would have been too weak to overcome the resistance of conscience. In reality, he falls far below them.

It is only through such a lens that one can make sense of the paradoxical reticence in Stavrogin's self-disclosure to Tikhon. He has drafted a "confession" to reveal his own basest action to the scrutiny of the world, theoretically as an act of penance, but Tikhon sees beneath this new mask to Stavrogin's true motives. Feuer Miller makes a remarkable connection between this confession and that made by Rousseau, the guiding light of the Western Romanticism Dostoevsky distrusted on so many levels: "Dostoevsky repeatedly implies that a literary, purely secular confession constitutes simultaneously an act of private masturbatory self-gratification and an obscene act of self-exposure to others" (89). Stavrogin thus indulges the lingering traces of his own desire for absolution, and yet he attempts to do so by psychologically exulting in the world's shock and awe at the audacity of his crime. "I'll make them hate me even more, that's all," he says. "And so much the easier for me" (707). By inviting the outrage of the world upon himself, the haunted Stavrogin is trying to erase yet another human impulse—guilt—by reinterpreting it to himself as something else: "[B]ut since he refuses to acknowledge that there could be any standard of judgment higher than his own will and thus that an action which he willingly performed could be one which should not have been performed, he must find some other explanation for the sense of shame which haunts him. Accordingly, he blames it upon what he sees as his own cowardice" (Anderson 105). He will face the world's outrage, and it will affirm him as a man apart, an *übermensch avant la lettre*, so to speak.

Tikhon, however, exposes Stavrogin's self-deception, or rather self-glorification, for what it is. Anderson suggests that "if Stavrogin is not prepared even to accept forgiveness, with its assumption of equality between himself and others, he is certainly not prepared to accept a

position in which others, so far from regarding him as their equal, will regard him as much less than that, will indeed treat him as an object of derision” (114). Hence, Tikhon tells Stavrogin that he must be prepared to accept not the hatred of the world but rather its scorn, even its “pity”:

“There will be horror on all sides, and, of course, more false than true . . . . The laughter, however, will be universal” (709). At this point, one can see that laughter as a theme in this novel is remarkably complex: on one level, it is evocative of the folk devil’s cackle of delight at pulling the proverbial rug from under a vulnerable humanity; on another level, it has the capacity to deflate the false dignity of Byronic Romanticism and has a legitimate place in the exposure of the grotesque nature of Stavrogin’s evil. According to Anderson, this theme of exposure is part of the central dialectic of the novel: “Evil can be defeated, and its defeat lies in its unmasking: in recognizing it as an ape, a counterfeit of true good—a counterfeit which is given away by its ugliness” (14). One could also see exposure as part of the central dialectic of the superfluous man, whose Byronism is continually trumped by folkloric conceptions of the debased and ludicrous side of evil and whose superior intellect leads from alienation from others toward alienation from the self until he becomes a mere caricature of a human being. Pyman points to this progression as being tied to the loss of ideals that could otherwise pull human beings out of the mire of their own insufficiency and contextualize them into a harmony with the whole picture of “reality”: “This reality can only be shut out by the individual who has lost the ground from beneath his (or her) feet, who has become a spiritual ‘wanderer’, an ‘outsider’. Such a one is Stavrogin . . . . Totally withdrawn into self, indifferent to others, amnesiac towards the need for the absolute, the loss of the ‘positively beautiful’, they move inexorably from dialogue to monologue to self-destruction” (112). It is possible to observe this progression in the return of

Chatsky's word upon itself and in the plethora of grotesque doubles surrounding Onegin, Pechorin, and Stavrogin. He who sees only himself in reality will ultimately fail to see even that.

It is the exposure of his own hollowness, of the grotesquerie in his own nature, that Stavrogin fears. Thus, his confession is designed to put off its hearers from a real understanding that would "finalize" him, if one might return to Bakhtin's idea. Bakhtin is significant here, since he speaks of Dostoevsky's poetics as involving self-existent voices operating as subjects, resisting objectification and moving through a world of self that refuses to acknowledge the other: "Dostoevsky's hero is not an objectified image but an autonomous discourse, *pure voice*; we do not see him, we hear him; everything that we see and know apart from his discourse is nonessential and is swallowed up by discourse as its raw material, or else remains outside it as something that stimulates and provokes" (53). But in Dostoevsky's larger epistemological framework, this type of self-creation by the hero is presented as a weakness, a spiritual lack. The hero is providing himself with false context, or with solipsistic context, and therefore when reality separates from his self-consciousness he reaches a psychological crisis, forced to recognize the existence of the other. Hence, Bakhtin recognizes in Stavrogin a fear of being erased, rather than made more real, through encounter: "The truth about a man in the mouths of others, not directed to him dialogically and therefore a *secondhand* truth, becomes a *lie* degrading and deadening him, if it touches upon his 'holy of holies,' that is, 'the man in man'" (60). He goes on to talk about the "impermissibility of some *other outside person* penetrating the depths of a personality . . . heard in Stavrogin's angry words uttered in Tikhon's cell" (60), referring to Stavrogin's seizing of the definitive word and throwing it at his interlocutor in a verbal act that cuts dialogue off at the knees: "Cursed psychologist!" (714). A little psychoanalysis might not be inappropriate here: Bakhtin's word *penetration*, used repeatedly

throughout the quoted passage, is significant. Stavrogin's crime as rape is also significant in being pre-emptive. He fears the invasion of his personality by someone who would enter it and objectify it as something controllable. Holquist describes this anxiety as follows: "He fears that *his* name is Legion, because many *others* enter into himself, because he is not an autonomous identity . . . . [When] Stavrogin says, 'nothing has come from me but negation,' [it is] a recognition that all his attempts to erect a self have merely been denials of the . . . extra-subjective forces [which are] making him what he would not be" (146).<sup>22</sup> His will, his constant rejection of being and restless movement, constant becoming—all represent his fear of objectification as psychological rape. He is haunted, not by Matryosha's suicide, but by her "brandishing her little fist at me threateningly and shaking her head in reproach" (699)—at her having recognized him as *something* capable of standing still long enough to receive her blame. Stavrogin can find no ground safe enough on which to stand and finalize himself—as Dostoevsky would say, because he is uprooted from the Russian soil. He recognizes that the attempts of those around him to finalize him are inadequate, that they all inevitably distort some part of himself—and yet what self can one speak about? Without finalization, whether achieved by the self or the other, Stavrogin is nothing but movement, restlessness, a "meaningless" will "with no purpose beyond its own exercise" (Anderson 13), an extension of self in a continuous and pre-emptive rape of the other. His becoming, however, reduces him to absence because unless he is becoming *something*, he is becoming nothing and therefore *is* nothing.—just as in

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<sup>22</sup> Holquist is here arguing that Stavrogin's tragedy is his failure to establish an independent self; in Dostoevsky's framework, however, the tragedy is that his attempts to establish an independent self prevent his establishing a proper self. The root of his problem is not the failure of his attempt to become Kirillov's "man-god" but rather the attempt itself.

Dostoevsky's framework, Russia no longer knows what she would like to be, only that all proposed identities are inadequate and distorting. Russia herself is therefore self-alienated, searching for her own image in a hundred distorted mirrors until she forgets what she looked like to begin with. Hence, Chances can argue that "Dostoevsky's conclusion is that Russia, if it is a Westernized Russia, is superfluous" (*Conformity's Children* 104). And Stavrogin, as the bastard offspring of her illicit union with the West, is certainly so.

### The Downward Turn

The outcome of Stavrogin's visit to Tikhon marks a pivotal point in the development of his character. He has come seeking absolution, has come with a pre-conceived, ready-made penance in the form of his "confession." But Tikhon recognizes the impossibility of such a confession to effect a real sanctification in Stavrogin's soul. He therefore challenges Stavrogin to overcome himself on a different level—not through the exercise of the will but through the surrender of it: "You are in the grip of a desire for martyrdom and self-sacrifice; conquer this desire as well, set aside your pages and your intention—and then you will overcome everything. You will put to shame all your pride and your demon!" (Dostoevsky *Demons* 713). This appeal reveals the twisted nature of Stavrogin's previous "overcoming" of himself—that is, killing everything of worth in himself—by asking him to turn his practice of overcoming on its head. Specifically, Tikhon challenges Stavrogin to submit to an elderly "hermit and monk," to whom he might "put [himself] under obedience" (713). This is not the sort of penance Stavrogin has in mind, and he rejects it outright. Anderson sums up the truly damning import of his decision to walk out on the holy man as follows:

Stavrogin's refusal to renounce his self-will, to repent, does not merely return him to the state he was in before coming to Tikhon, as bad a state as that was. Before

he came, Stavrogin did not know where the path of forgiveness lay; now he does know—and he has deliberately rejected it. In doing so, Stavrogin has condemned himself irrevocably . . . [J]ust as he has chosen to put his own will before all else, so now God gives him up to follow his own will; he has become one of those whom, in the expression which so struck Ivan Karamazov, “God forgets.” (115).

From this moment on, Stavrogin will be moving headlong toward the ironic turning of his will against its last adversary—himself.

One can see in the chapters that follow “At Tikhon’s” the results of his soul’s deterioration. Whereas Onegin is still capable of desiring Tatiana (albeit for the wrong reasons) at the end of the action, and even Pechorin is still capable of grief over Vera (though he explains it away), Stavrogin will prove by the end completely incapable of true passions. Anderson’s summary of his situation is remarkable enough to quote at length:

The most terrible crime lying ahead of Stavrogin is his own spiritual self-destruction, a crime which becomes inevitable once Stavrogin has refused to repent and instead chosen to assert his *своеволие*, his unlimited freedom to act as he wills. Once Stavrogin has made this choice, the paradox already noted previously—that Stavrogin’s apparent strength is actual weakness—reaches its fullest expression. There is no longer anything that Stavrogin recognizes as a barrier to obtaining whatever he wants; but at the same time he has become incapable of wanting anything. For to want something means to want it in preference to something else; but if Stavrogin were to allow himself to want one thing and not another, to love one thing and hate another, the desire to obtain or avoid the object of his emotion would necessarily impose a condition upon his

conduct; his will would no longer be absolutely free. Absolute freedom of will can be maintained only at the price of total impassivity and indifference to everything—of / being, in the words of the passage from Revelation which Tikhon quotes, neither hot nor cold. (116-7)

The most poignant example of this inability to feel the slightest sustaining interest in anything is Stavrogin's illicit liaison with Liza Tushina. Anderson suggests a connection with Pushkin's "Egyptian Nights" (138-9), a poignant fragment in which Cleopatra offers to spend the night with any man in her court provided he allows her to kill him in the morning. Anderson's suggestion is that "while / Pushkin's Cleopatra has not yet experienced total spiritual suffocation but is still capable of some form of arousal, although only by the most 'monstrous, abnormal, sadistic' sensations, for Stavrogin even the knowledge that Liza has consented to be ruined by him awakens in him no demonic love, no sense of cruel satisfaction" (138-9). What Anderson fails to note, however, is that the moment involves a last grasp at humanity on his part, and it slips through his fingers. He is capable of feeling only horror at what he has done to himself: "I knew I didn't love you, and I ruined you . . . I had a hope . . . for a long time . . . a last hope" (524). But this hope has been smothered through one last act of debasement. It turns out that for Stavrogin, even when he yields, if only for a moment, to the dying desire to become human again, his yielding leads to more dehumanization. Panichas envisions a connection between Stavrogin, who is in terror before his own moral and emotional paralysis, and "Father Zossima's words in *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.' It is in such a 'hell' that Stavrogin finds himself" (96). Liza sees right through to this hell at the core of his nature, confronting him with the vision of himself that he could not bear in his visit to Tikhon: "[T]he thought has settled in me that there is something horrible,

dirty, and bloody on your soul, and . . . at the same time something that makes you look terribly ridiculous” (524). Stavrogin is finally in a position to realize, as Liza has at least glimpsed, that the cost of absolute autonomy turns out to be himself. The fact that there is something horrible in what he has done to himself impresses itself on Liza, and she has no interest in sharing it, despite her physical and psychological interest in him: “It has always seemed to me that you would bring me to some place where there lives a huge, evil spider, as big as a man, and we would spend our whole life there looking at him and being afraid” (524). Stavrogin would lead her out of herself, not to a higher realm of free will, not to a life with the man-god, but to a plane of existence populated by horrors.

Stavrogin’s last letter to Darya Shatova is nothing if not the last feeble gasps of a dying soul, more aware than ever of its being torn up by the roots and slowly decaying for lack of nourishment. He even goes so far as to recognize the ultimate source of his loss of self, though it is too late to do anything about it. He says, “Your brother [Shatov] told me that he who loses his ties with his earth also loses his gods” (676) and “Nothing binds me to Russia—everything in it is as foreign to me as everywhere else” (675). The “everywhere else” is key here, since he is recognizing the irreversible and total nature of his exile. He cannot commit to anything, makes statements halfway and then backs away from them halfway, incapable of defining that which he has made indefinable—himself: “I am as capable now as ever before of wishing to do a good deed, and I take pleasure in that; along with it, I wish for evil and also feel pleasure. But both the one and the other, as always, are too shallow, and are never very much” (675). In other words, it is not that he cannot feel but that his desires have become mere, fleeting accidents, totally meaningless. He speaks of the nihilists, who are theoretically bereft of all ideals, as possessing more of the soul’s energy than he does: “Do you know that I even looked at these negators of

ours with spite, envying them their hopes? . . . I could not be their comrade, because I shared nothing” (675). Similarly, he says of the suicidal Kirillov, “[N]or can I ever believe an idea to the same degree as he did. I cannot even entertain an idea to the same degree” (676). And yet Kirillov’s idea came from Stavrogin! It would seem that Stavrogin never had enough substance in himself to allow an idea to take root. He had to plant seeds that interested him in better soil, which apparently even a nihilist could provide. It is in this context that one must understand his pivotal statement “what poured out of me was only negation, with no magnanimity and no force. Or *not even negation*” (676, emphasis mine). In order to negate something, one has to care about getting rid of it, contradicting it—one has to have, in other words, a reverse ideal, like the nihilists who pretend to care about nothing but in fact care a great deal about social change because they have deceived themselves into thinking such anti-values have meaning. Stavrogin recognizes that without faith in something bigger than the self, one cannot maintain even these acts of negation; hence, he is prevented by his superior understanding from committing himself to a cause, which even the heartless Pyotr Stepanovich can do. Like Pechorin, Stavrogin is in a position in which “his mind will not let him live” (*Chances Conformity’s Children* 45). Thus, he will die in the way his victim Matryosha died, hanging himself and perpetuating even in his suicide note that self-defeating and solipsistic glorification of the will that has unraveled his being: “Blame no one; it was I” (678).

One can see in many critics a temptation to view Dostoevsky’s *Demons* in purely political terms or to dismiss his concept of a soul “uprooted from the Russian soil” as an uncritical capitulation to nationalistic instincts; a careful reading of Stavrogin, however, will undermine such reductionist moves. What gives the Russian people strength for Dostoevsky is not the fact that they are Russian—a stereotypically Slavophile argument that does not really say

anything—but the fact that certain Russian traditions linger in their midst. Dostoevsky spent more than enough time among the peasantry in a Siberian prison camp to recognize that the Russian people are as capable of outrageous crimes as anyone else, but in his mind, they still have a few things that the intelligentsia have lost sight of—the cultivated impulse for communality, the principles of self-denial and quiet endurance of suffering, and the kind of higher wisdom manifested in Marya Lebiadkina. All of these might be summed up in a single word: Orthodoxy. And it is the attention to Orthodoxy that makes Dostoevsky's treatment of the superfluous man so important, since he establishes more clearly than Griboedov, Lermontov, or even Pushkin just why the superfluous man cannot exist suspended between a lingering awareness of his spiritual heritage and a perverse attachment to the largely secular wisdom of the West. By exploring more fully than his predecessors the context that through its absence disrupts the superfluous man's identity, Dostoevsky indicates that the implications of that loss are not merely cultural but spiritual. And in the suicide of Stavrogin he follows the course of a man aware of his own metaphysical collapse to its logical end, in the final volley of the will against the expiring soul. In this act, the development of the superfluous man in literature also reaches its climax, and despite echoes of his personality in later works, he has largely spoken his last definitive words in Stavrogin's suicide note.

## Conclusion

Stavrogin's journey in Dostoevsky's *Demons* leads to both the end of the most intense representation of the superfluous man in the Russian canon and the most definitive proposition of a solution to the problem of the alienated and hybridized superfluous man. Stavrogin, like Onegin and Pechorin before him, rejects every possibility of redemption that comes his way, but the possibility for cultural and spiritual renewal is nonetheless a dynamic and energetic presence in Dostoevsky's novel. It demonstrates more clearly than any work that came before it the significance of the superfluous man as not merely a character type but an attempt by four extraordinarily gifted writers to come to terms with a central existential and cultural conflict playing itself out among the Russian intelligentsia throughout the nineteenth century. These Russian intelligentsia were engaged in a painful search for a stable identity—or, at the very least, a means of processing for themselves and their readers why it was so difficult to synthesize a stable self along the fault between Russia and the West. Only a deeper understanding of what “being Russian” meant could enable them to understand why they could never more than superficially Westernize themselves, and only an understanding of the ways in which Western epistemology violated native epistemology could reveal to them the dialectic of their own hybridity. Being caught in that hybridity, with a hyperawareness of its consequences, would always make one “superfluous” to Russia, to the West, and ultimately to oneself. It was finding a path, however tentative, out of the inconsistencies of national and personal history that offered these troubled intellectuals an equally tentative hope for existential rebirth. Pushkin embodied this hope in Tatiana, Lermontov at least by implication in Vera, and Dostoevsky in the Orthodox *народ*, as represented by Marya Lebiadkina.

Notwithstanding its importance to an understanding of Russian cultural history, however, Western scholarship—when it has paid attention to the superfluous man at all—has manifested an unfortunate tendency to define him reductively. Ellen B. Chances, for instance, makes the mistake of speaking of the superfluous man as merely a nonconformist (*Conformity's Children passim*). Others have made similar errors, including in the catalogue of superfluous men such characters as Turgenev's Bazarov or Rudin, Goncharov's Oblomov, or Dostoevsky's Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky. What these characters have in common is somehow not fitting into their respective worlds, whether through a vague listlessness (Oblomov) or through following ideals not well-suited to productive engagement with Russian problems (Bazarov, Rudin, Stepan Trofimovich). The superfluous man as a character type, however, emerges in a clear line of development beginning with Chatsky—whom some Western critics have overlooked entirely—and climaxing in Stavrogin.<sup>23</sup> He does not possess any ideals and is not merely lazy—indeed, he has from the beginning a strong will, if nothing to direct it towards. He is being gradually consumed by the cancerous awareness of his own hybridity and the impossibility of believing in anything or, by extension, becoming anything. The cancer in his soul is first and foremost a spiritual cancer, and it is undeniably emergent with regard to a particular cultural-historical situation.

For this reason, each example of the superfluous man is evocative of Byronic heroism from a certain point of view while at the same time undermining the validity of the Byronic hero

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<sup>23</sup> This is not to deny that he may indeed have echoes in such twentieth-century works as Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*. But, as observed in the previous chapter, Dostoevsky has fairly wrung from this particular literary phenomenon the last drops of imaginative potential and contextual application.

as a fitting embodiment of non-Western spiritual and cultural concerns. The Byronic hero becomes increasingly problematized and, when removed from his natural habitat into the Russian canon, can manifest himself only through parody and grotesquerie and suffer eventual dissolution in the face of folkloric doppelgängers. It perhaps says something about Russian literature as a viable idiom that, in spite of the hybridity of its intelligentsia and the relative youth of its *belles lettres*, it is nonetheless substantial enough by the nineteenth century to deconstruct Western literary importations. In any case, no contextually aware treatment of the superfluous man could responsibly conflate him with this importation, whose catalyst for self-destruction is primarily passion, rather than a self-awareness of hybridity.

Possibilities for further study with regard to the superfluous man might include a more complete consideration of his difference from both the aesthetic liberals of the 1840s and the anti-aesthetic radicals of the 1860s. This difference is a central interest of Dostoevsky's novel, which suggests that the spiritual death suffered by Stavrogin represents the logical outcome of self-recognition, whereas the liberals and radicals are self-deceived and represent dangers in their self-deception; this dynamic could benefit from a book-length consideration. Also, the dialectic between Romanticism and anti-Romanticism in Lermontov is an interesting angle remaining relatively unexplored, at least in the West; it offers an excellent opportunity for considering the inability of the superfluous man to adopt a consistent idiom, whether positive or negative. Such a consideration might also spark a more just recognition of the importance of Lermontov's later work, in spite of his relatively under-developed prose style. Lastly, neither Pushkin nor Griboedov has received the attention he deserves in Western criticism, with the latter being at times entirely overlooked in studies of the superfluous man. It would perhaps undercut the

common tendency to misrepresent the character type's significance if Chatsky were given more recognition as a foundational figure in the Russian literary tradition.

Lastly, it would be worthwhile to acknowledge that the indispensable efforts of translators such as Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky and critics such as Nancy Anderson, W. J. Leatherbarrow, and Joseph Frank are finally making possible a wider acquaintance in the West with the beauty, subtlety, and complexity in the Russian canon. One can reasonably hope that their efforts will continue to encourage more Western scholars to master the Russian language in order to engage directly both these works and the scholarship surrounding them, with the dual result of contributing to Russian criticism and increasing the non-Russian-speaker's access to the Russian critical tradition. It would be worthwhile, for instance, to make the complete work of such foundational critics as Apollon Grigoriev available in English and French, at the very least, as well as to promote a healthier dialogue between Western and Russian contemporary scholars. Such efforts might effectively combat the marginalization of Russian studies in the West, as well as increase the scope of those studies both inside and outside the Russian academy, promoting what can only be a healthier and more holistic appreciation of its creative achievements and critical practice.

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