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NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND: DOSTOEVSKY'S RADICAL CHALLENGE TO THE BYRONIC TRADITION IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

While Fyodor Dostoevsky's debt to writers such as Alexander Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol has been well studied, his complex attitude toward Mikhail Lermontov has received much less attention. For much of his life, Dostoevsky viewed Lermontov with a certain degree of mistrustful appreciation. He admired the writer's talents (particularly in poetry), but he was put off by what he saw as a streak of nastiness he instilled in his character Grigory Pechorin from *A Hero of Our Time* (1841), as well as the fawning imitation this figure inspired in Russian society after publication of the novel. Although one can find scattered references to Lermontov in Dostoevsky's work, it is in his *Notes from the Underground* (1864) that Dostoevsky created his most fascinating engagement with the Pechorin prototype, albeit in a subtle, almost hidden fashion. Once we become aware of the Pechorin subtext, however, we may be surprised by the extent to which it suffuses the entire portrait of Dostoevsky's famous narrator-protagonist. Over the course of the novel, and particularly in its second half, Dostoevsky showed how his tortured protagonist of the 1860s would emulate (consciously or unconsciously), and then fail at the very activities in which his 1840s predecessor had such memorable (if lamentable) success. These episodes range from the character's self-conscious relationships with a single friend and multiple adversaries to his conflicted and cruel treatment of a trusting woman. Through his use of the pervasive Pechorin echoes, Dostoevsky strove to debunk the previous generation's intense (and misguided, in Dostoevsky's view) fascination with Romantic hero archetype popularized by Lord Byron and embodied in the figure of Grigory Pechorin. In this fashion Dostoevsky remade one of the most distinctive heroes in Russian literature into a scandalous anti-hero.

Keywords

Dostoevsky, Lermontov, Romanticism, Byron, anti-hero

Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) is full of allusions and references to nineteenth-century Russian literature and culture. The central figure of the tale has been linked to Nikolai Gogol's Akaky Akakievich (especially with his fixation on renovating the coat he plans to wear to confront his nemesis, the officer who disrespected him) as well as to the utilitarian theories on human behavior articulated by Nikolai Chernyshevsky in *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy* (see especially Joseph Frank's writings on the subject). Yet as I take a close look at the *Notes*, I detect signs of engagement with a very different figure in Russian literature: Grigory Pechorin in Mikhail Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time* (1841).

For much of his life, Dostoevsky viewed Lermontov with a certain degree of mistrustful appreciation. He admired the writer's talents (particularly in poetry), but he was put off by what he saw as a streak of nastiness he instilled in his character Pechorin as well as the fawning imitation this figure inspired in Russian society after publication of the novel. We see the positive element in Dostoevsky's evaluation of Lermontov in a late entry in his *Diary of a Writer* (December 1877): "Lermontov, of course, was a Byronist, but his great, original poetic power made him a Byronist of a particular kind—a kind of mocking, capricious, and fastidious Byronist, eternally disbelieving even in his own inspiration and in his own Byronism."[1] (II, 1253). But the *Diary of a Writer* (in February 1876) also records Dostoevsky's critical appraisal: "there was a time when we would go so far as to idealize certain nasty types who appeared among our literary characters and who were largely borrowed from

[1] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary, Vol. 2 (1877-1881)*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 343

foreign literatures […] Just recall: what a crowd of Pechorins we had who did so many nasty things in real life after they read *A Hero of Our Time*."[2]

References to Pechorin and Lermontov also appear in Dostoevsky's fiction, as for example in *The Devils*, where the first mention of Lermontov's famous protagonist is uttered by the boorish buffoon Captain Lebyadkin who speaks of spoiled gentlemen like Nikolai Stavrogin: "These landowners with their little wings, like cupids of old, these lady-killers *à la* Pechorin!"[3],

But it is in *Notes from the Underground* that Dostoevsky created his most fascinating engagement with the Pechorin prototype, albeit in a subtle, almost hidden fashion. Once we become aware of the Pechorin subtext, however, we may be surprised by the extent to which it suffuses the entire portrait of Dostoevsky's famous narrator-protagonist. Over the course of the novel, and particularly in its second half, Dostoevsky showed how his tortured protagonist of the 1860s would emulate (consciously or unconsciously), and then fail at the very activities in which his 1840s predecessor had such memorable (if lamentable) success. Through his use of the pervasive Pechorin echoes, Dostoevsky strove to debunk the previous generation's intense (and misguided, in Dostoevsky's view) fascination with Romantic hero archetype embodied by Grigory Pechorin.

Dostoevsky's technique here is analogous to the way he later debunked the Romantic image of the devil as a charismatic figure in literature by introducing the figure as a shabby hanger-on who humiliates Ivan in Book Eleven of *The Brothers Karamazov*, as Robert Belknap pointed out so brilliantly in his *The Genesis of* The Brothers Karamazov.

To validate this claim, I will begin by listing a series of parallels between characters and events in *A Hero of Our Time* and *Notes from the Underground*, and through this method show how Dostoevsky attempted to tarnish an archetype of the late Romantic period in Russian prose. I take as my starting point my perception that both characters are stimulated by a basic sense of insecurity and self-dislike that manifests itself in hostility toward others, which, in turn, actually causes the others to dislike the central characters, thus confirming their insecurity and self-dislike. Pechorin articulates this complex in plain language in his journal in "Princess Mary": "I sometimes despise myself—perhaps that's why I despise others. I've lost my capacity for noble impulses, for I'm afraid of making a fool of myself."[4] The Underground Man's admission is characteristically more verbose (and obscure) in his recollections in Part II: "I often looked at myself with a sort of furious dissatisfaction which verged on loathing, and for that reason I could not help attributing my own views to other people […] I need hardly say that I hated all my colleagues at the office, one and all, and that I despised them all […] I was also morbidly afraid of appearing ridiculous."[5]

Both characters are extremely sensitive to the way they are perceived by others, and they resent the success that others seem to possess or display. Lermontov illustrates this through the central rivalry between Pechorin and Grushnitsky. For example, Pechorin draws attention to several aspects of Grushnitsky's behavior that he finds annoying. Among these are Grushnitsky's use of clothing to make an impression, as for instance, when he wears a regular soldier's coat, as if he were a Guards officer who has been demoted to the ranks, while in reality he is still just a Cadet (72). A second characteristic, as Pechorin puts it, is that the greatest pleasure for people like Grushnitsky "is to create an effect" (72). Likewise, Grushnitsky is "one of those people who have a fine phrase ready for every occasion in life" (72). What is more, Grushnitsky has spent much time "trying to convince others that he's not of this world and that fate has some mysterious sufferings in store for him" (73). Thus, Pechorin imagines him talking to a young woman on the eve of his departure to the Caucasus and saying that he cannot tell her why he is leaving: "No, you mustn't know the reason. The shock would be too great for your pure heart" (73).

So these are the attributes which Pechorin seems to find contemptible. But when we look closely at Pechorin himself, what do we find? He too likes to put on a costume to make an impression: "I've been told that on horseback and in Circassian dress I look more like a Kabardian than many Kabardians themselves. Indeed, when it comes to this noble warrior's dress, I'm quite a dandy" (90). And he is happy to create an effect when he, dressed in his Circassian outfit, dashes out of a shrub on his horse to startle Mary and Grushnitsky while they are engaged in quiet conversation (91). We note too that in another scene, Pechorin, like Grushnitsky, is able to come out with "one of those stock phrases which everyone must have ready for such occasions" (96). And finally, Pechorin is also prone to explaining to others what a misfit he is in this world. This he does to Maxim Maximych in "Bela," the first section of *A Hero of Our Time* (34), and he makes a similar declaration to Mary in "Princess Mary" (106). Indeed, just as he imagines Grushnitsky telling a young woman on the eve of his departure that he cannot reveal what is in

[2] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary, Vol. 1 (1873-1876)*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 1253. Dostoevsky made similar, albeit milder, comments in 1861 in his "Riad statei o russkoi literature"; see Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh*, vol. 18 (Leningrad: "Nauka," 1978), 59.

[3] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Devils*, trans. Michael Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108.

[4] Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. Paul Foote (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 123. All further citations from this text will be indicated with a parenthetical reference containing the page number.

[5] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. David Magarshack, in *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (New York: Perennial Library, 1968), 298 and 299. All further citations from this text will be indicated with a parenthetical reference containing the page number.

his soul, he actually says to Mary "There's no reason for you to know what's been going on in my heart. You'll never know, and so much the better for you. Good-bye!" (114).

While Pechorin might want a reader to believe that he—Pechorin—is an authentically blighted soul and that Grushnitsky is simply a Romantic poseur, Lermontov's handling of the pair and of Pechorin's conduct raises a reasonable doubt in the reader's mind: isn't Pechorin the one who is desperate for the attention Grushnitsky garners, especially when it comes to Princess Mary herself. (Indeed, it is Grushnitsky's initial success with Mary that impels Pechorin to try to impress her as well).

In Dostoevsky's hands, this complex blend of envy and disdain that Pechorin displays toward Grushnitsky is instilled into the Underground Man's relationship with one of his old acquaintances, the former schoolmate named Zverkov, though in Dostoevsky's work, the mix of emotions seems even more bitter and degraded. The Underground Man writes of his former schoolmates that "[n]o doubt they regarded me as some sort of common fly" (314), whereas Zverkov had been "a favorite with everybody" (315). Toward the end of "Princess Mary," Pechorin laments the fact that a group of his acquaintances had rallied around Grushnitsky and turned on him. As he put it: "I went home, stirred by two quite different emotions. The first was sorrow. Why do they all hate me? I thought. What cause have they? […] Or am I one of those people the very sight of whom arouses hostility? And I felt my heart slowly filling with venomous spite" (122). The Underground Man experiences a similar bifurcation of feeling when he attends Zverkov's farewell party: on the one hand, he rudely insults Zverkov and longs to "show them I could do without them" (330); on the other hand, "how I longed—oh, how I longed at that moment to be reconciled to them!" (331).

Yet while Dostoevsky establishes certain clear parallels between his protagonist's relationship with others and Lermontov's, he consistently finds ways to make his own character's actions seem more petty or ridiculous. Take, for example the theme of dueling, an activity through which both protagonists envision upholding their honor and reputation. In Lermontov's text, Pechorin emerges victorious from his fatal duel with Grushnitsky, whereas the Underground Man can only fantasize about a triumph, and even his fantasies are shaped by a prior literary model, Alexander Pushkin's short story "The Shot," which the Underground Man tellingly misidentifies as "Silvio, confusing one of the characters with the title of the story itself. Irina Reyfman analyzes the Underground Man's reflections on dueling and his incessant self-consciousness and insecurity about coming off as ridiculous and inadequate. She comments: "Literature, which seems to be his main source of knowledge of the honor code, does not prepare him either for formal dueling or for the hand-to-hand combat sometimes required of a Russian duelist."[6] Indeed, if the literary duels may have contained elements of courage or bravado in Pushkin's "The Shot" and Lermontov's *Hero of our Time*, Dostoevsky's treatment of the Underground Man's fantasies shows how farcical and futile this mode of conduct appears years later. Kate Holland surveys the distance between the Romantic terrain of "The Shot" and *Masquerade* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, and she concludes: "Pushkin's and Lermontov's ambiguous slaps and deferred shots herald a sense of semiotic uncertainty that by the time of *Notes from Underground* has become era-defining, and that helps to explain how the Romantic fantasist of Part II became the hyperconscious protagonist of Part I."[7]

Another way Dostoevsky seeks to tarnish the Lermontov subtext as refracted through the Underground Man's actions arises in aspects of his handling of the relationship between the protagonist and women in the work. While Lermontov has his Pechorin begin pursuing a woman—the virginal Princess Mary—in part because Grushnitsky was romantically drawn to in her, Dostoevsky has his protagonist decide to go to a cheap brothel because that is where Zverkov and his companions were headed after the farewell party.

Once we recognize the parallels in the situation, we find further similarities. Pechorin's ensuing flirtation with Mary combines a mix of motives: a desire to spite Grushnitsky, a possible enjoyment of the pursuit as a kind of game, a craving for power (see 102-103), and yes, perhaps even some genuine feeling ("What does it mean? Can I be in love?" [117]). In *Notes from the* Underground, the Underground Man's subsequent interaction with Liza similarly reveals a combination of feelings, though the feeling of spite comes to the fore. Because the Underground Man feels spite toward Zverkov and the others, he decides to vent his "vicious spite" on Liza (349). Then again, he likes the "sporting" aspect of the interaction (344, 353), and there is even an element of "genuine feeling" in him too (359). He later reflects: "I was speaking sincerely last night. I remember there was some genuine feeling in me as well" (359).

In each set of relationships we can find elements of compassion, particularly in the way the female character regards the male protagonist. After delivering his set piece on how his upbringing turned him into a "moral cripple," Pechorin writes of Mary: "Sympathy, that feeling which preys so easily on women, had sunk its claws into her innocent heart" (106). Similarly, after the Underground Man delivers his pathetic monologue about his sense of humiliation and shame, she hastens to embrace and console him, for, as he puts it: "Liza, humiliated

[6] Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 215.

[7] Kate Holland, "The Poetics of the Slap: Dostoevsky's Disintegrating Duel Plot, in *Dostoevsky at 200: The Novel in Modernity*, edited by Katherine Bowers and Kate Holland (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 28.

and crushed by me, understood much more than I imagined. She understood from all this what a woman who loves sincerely always understands, first of all, namely, that I was unhappy" (371).

And the denouements of these relationships exhibit strong parallels. In both cases, the male protagonist treat the women who have come to love them with rude behavior. Pechorin goes to Mary and tells her he was "making sport" of her (146), thus ensuring that she would stop loving him. The Underground Man's treatment of Liza is even worse. After he has sex with her, it becomes clear to her that he does not love her, but he tries to reinforce his sense of superiority over her by pressing money into her hands, thereby underscoring that she is merely a prostitute in his eyes. She, in contrast, demonstrates her own sense of self-worth by placing the money on the table and leaving.

At this point in *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky picks up on a different plot strand from a *Hero of Our Time*, and models his hero's response to Liza's departure on a different scene from the earlier novel, the departure of Vera, Pechorin's long-time lover, from Kislovodsk after her husband's discovery of their affair. When Pechorin learns of Vera's departure, he gallops off in pursuit on horseback. Unable to reach her because the horse gives out under him, he collapses on the ground and weeps unconsolably (144). Yet then, in a remarkable shift of emotions, he begins to rationalize his failure and imply that it is all for the best: "What more did I want? To see her again? For what? Wasn't it all over between us? One painful farewell kiss would add nothing to my memories and would only make parting more difficult" (144). In the analogous scene from *Notes from the Underground*, after Liza has been insulted by the Underground Man's "bookish" (374) and boorish behavior, she leaves his apartment, and, a moment later, realizing that she had rejected his attempt to humiliate her, the Underground Man rushes after her. Unable to find her, he too begins to rationalize his failure: "why was I running after her? Why? To fall on my knees before her, to sob with remorse, to kiss her feet, to beseech her to forgive me? […] Would I not hate her fiercely tomorrow perhaps just because I had been kissing her feet today? Could I make her happy? […] And will it not be better […] that she should now carry that insult away with her forever? What is an insult but a sort of purification?" (376).

The endings of both works expand outward to larger (and somewhat cynical) ruminations on human nature and destiny. Pechorin reflects on the concept of predestination and concludes: "How can one not be a fatalist after this? Yet who really knows if he believes a thing or not? How often our beliefs are mere illusions or mental aberrations. I prefer to doubt everything" (157). The Underground Man is even more pessimistic. Declaring that we "find it hard to be men, men of *real* flesh and blood, *our own* flesh and blood […] We are stillborn […] Soon we shall invent some way of being somehow or other being begotten by an idea" (377).

The final set of links between the Lermontov and Dostoevsky's works grade into the metaliterary, delving into the question of what makes a "hero." Pechorin asserts that Grushnitsky's ambition is to become "the hero of a novel" (73). Not long thereafter, Pechorin's friend Dr. Warner tells him that Princess Mary evidently saw Pechorin "as the hero of some novel in the modern taste" (81). And of course, Lermontov entitled his novel about Pechorin as *A Hero of Our Time*, later proclaiming in his preface that the main character is "a portrait of the vices of our whole generation in their ultimate development" (4). Dostoevsky, in turn, seems very aware of this statement, and in his own introductory note to his novel states that although the main character is fictitious, "[n]evertheless, such persons as the author of such memoirs not only may, but must, exist in our society" (263). However, the character he created, the Underground Man himself, is a major departure from the literary tradition that preceded him. As he puts it: "A novel must have a hero, and here I seemed to have *deliberately* gathered together all the characteristics of an anti-hero" (376). There could hardly be a clearer statement of Dostoevsky's intention in creating his protagonist in *Notes from the Underground*. He has seized upon one of the most dashing, colorful, and compelling figures in the first half of the nineteenth century and transformed him into a stunted, resentful, tormented, but equally memorable "hero" of his time, a hero who can only merit the title of "antihero." In so doing, Dostoevsky attempts to put a nail in the coffin of that major trend in Russian literature—the Russian version of the Byronic hero as depicted in a whole host of works by major authors, including Pushkin, Alexander Bestuzhev (Marlynsky), and of course, Lermontov himself..

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