

Pechorin; or, No Time for Heroes

1.

When getting a 19th-century-book recommendation at the age of 15 by an earnest, bearded father, who would impress Russian house guests with quotes of *Evgeny Onegin* and amuse them with allusions on *Vojna i Mir* („I understand myself as a very tolerant person: the spectrum of characters I can accept in friends ranges from Knjez Andrei to Pierre Bezukhov”), one would not implicitly expect to find something of interest in there; the word *hero* in the title alone would raise expectations of meaningfulness, pathos and patina: by no means something that one would willingly read - if it wasn't to impress some Russian *krasavica*. But one's expectations couldn't have been more off the base.

When rereading a decade later the novel's Romantic dimension of the movements of individuals in time, the segregation of society into aristocracy and indign, the question of pride, corporative morals and duels would still be of interest and the accurate pinpointing of the essence of the character of Caucasian women to such a degree that it is still as valid almost two centuries later would still be as impressive, but there was another level that would resonate more with my mindset at the time: the question of the *lisnyih celovek* (or *superfluous man*).

2.

When analysing the character of Pechorin, another more universal dimension becomes apparent under this Shakespearean-Romantic tale of intrigue and love: we are dealing with a person caught between his idea(l)s and the limited possibilities of his time. Having said that, there is nothing pathetic about Pechorin: he is an anti-Werther, someone whose feeling of discomfort and alienation in time and society does not come from omphaloskepsis and overanalysing his own role in society, but from a wider examination of society as a whole. Pechorin-Lermontov can see the need of a radical change, but understands (or has experienced) that the critical mass of people who have the same understanding has not been reached and will not be reached during his lifetime.

In a time without what Lew Gumiliev calls *passionarnost* (something that was present during the times of Atatürk but was not at the late times of the Roman Empire) a hero is a superfluous character. And while one swallow does not make a springtime, the lone swallow will most probably find a way to entertain itself between the shambles of the Caucasus and the salons of Petersburg. Pechorin is somewhere between *Byronic hero* and *decadent*, but still bearing a revolutionary momentum within him, which will be lost on the way to the decadent, who can no longer imagine a possible change in society and puts all his efforts in decorating the present form of it in beautiful, oriental, exotic ornament.

With Pechorin, there is no escapism, no Romantic descent into artificial paradises or religion. His melancholy is not a pose, not an air, not an attitude and no unique selling proposition for the ladies. This is a person who has analysed and experienced the limits of his century and came to his conclusions... Is this even a time for heroes? Let's hear the man himself: *How can I tell? ...Are there not many people who, in beginning life, think to end it like Lord Byron or Alexander the Great, and, nevertheless, remain Titular Councillors all their days?*

3.

With my latest reading of *Geroy nashego vremeni*, another poetological dimension of the novel opened up for me. I felt that in the same manner as Pechorin would surpass Werther in content, Lermontov would have surpassed Goethe and the other Romantics in form, and he

would have transcended all his predecessors: Beginning with the structure, which shows some similarities to Romantic novels but breaks the limits of epistolary novels, diaries and traditional narration in favour of a multi-perspective, self-reflexive, self-referential allusive form evocating Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*.

But where Diderot's novel seems more like an etude, an exercise in style that expands the boundaries, Lermontov takes his new-found material to form a compact genuine piece of art. There is something magical about the structure, about the places where things happen and about the stories being told: For readers of *Geroy nashego vremeni*, some constellations, some locations, some names will forever be Lermontov's.

Lermontov's reduced style, at moments even elliptic, abandons the burden of past Mannerism. His writing is *dressed in accordance with the strict rules of the best taste - nothing superfluous*. This style allows him to portray genuine interpersonal relationships as ambivalent and complex as they are, instead of transforming them to a courtly paper theatre. He even exceeds predecessors at their pet issue with his genuine descriptions of nature, and of the hill people's connection to nature that an estranged early Romantic from Jena fails to put down in his writing.

The clash with precedent forms of literature is also reflected within the interaction of the novels' characters: Maksim Maksimych, a Balzaco-Maupassantian tradition narrator full of moral comments, high-reflexions, phraseology and Mannerism, who in his narration even versifies prose songs; Grushnitsky, the effusive Romantic, transfigured and transfiguring; and Pechorin the modern approach to literature, who will later tout for the attention of the princess, the readers and the audience, and overcome the others: the princess can no longer have any interest in limp Grushnitsky after being acquainted with Pechorin.

But can this modern approach to literature fulfil what it promised? Can it do what traditional narration and literature cannot do? Is he sincere, is he meaningful, does he know the answers to the reader's epistemological and ontological crisis? Let us again hear the man himself: "*Princess,*" I said, "*you know that I have been making fun of you?... You must despise me.*" (...) "*So you see, yourself,*" I said in as firm a voice as I could command, and with a forced smile (...).

Aleksandar Vadim